

[Type text]



## **Child Sexual Exploitation in Luton: A Scoping Study**

**Professor Margaret Melrose**

**Dr. Isabelle Brodie**

**Dr. Lorena Arocha**

**with Dr. Lucie Shuker**

**Institute of Applied Social Research**

**University of Bedfordshire**

**September 2013**

**FINAL REPORT**

[Type text]

## **Introduction**

In July 2012 Professor Margaret Melrose and Dr. Lucie Shuker successfully obtained funding from the University of Bedfordshire to conduct a small piece of research in relation to child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Luton. Given that this was a small-scale research project the aims of the study were necessarily limited. These were to scope practitioners' understandings and awareness of the problem of CSE in Luton and to attempt to identify, from practitioners' experience and knowledge, what the scale of the problem in the area might be. To achieve these aims a mixed methods approach, which would enable the research team to optimise the amount and quality of the data gathered in a relatively short time frame, was adopted.

Initially the research team hosted two seminars at the University of Bedfordshire. This enabled the research team to maximise the number and spread of practitioners from different agencies who could be accessed in a short period of time and thereby to gather data from a variety of perspectives. The seminars involved a series of short presentations, drawing on data gathered from national research studies, with roundtable discussions following each short presentation. These discussions encouraged seminar participants to relate national data to the local context. Each seminar group was organised into three tables with approximately seven participants at each table, one researcher facilitating the discussion and one research assistant taking contemporaneous notes at each table.

The data generated through the seminars were supplemented by follow-up, face-to-face in-depth interviews with a proportion of practitioners who had attended them and who agreed to be interviewed.

This report discusses the key findings from the research based on seminar notes and individual interviews. It describes what practitioners told us about the training they had received in relation to CSE and their awareness of, and ability to identify, cases of child sexual exploitation; what participants knew about the nature and scale of problem of CSE in Luton; how participants experienced working with other agencies (including issues of information sharing and confidentiality) and how participants perceived activities in relation to disruption and prosecution of those involved in exploiting children and young people. Based on the evidence generated from this research the report suggests what further work might need to be done to improve the response to the problem of CSE in Luton and highlights the key messages to emerge from the research.

## **Background**

In 2009 the Government produced updated guidance in relation to safeguarding children and young people who are at risk or experiencing child sexual exploitation (CSE) (DCSF, 2009). This guidance recommended that all local authorities and local safeguarding children's boards (LSCBs) should assume that CSE was a concern in their area and suggested

[Type text]

a two-pronged approach to tackling the issue. Under this approach measures to respond proactively to prevent CSE and to protect the young people concerned were deemed necessary as were actions to disrupt the activities and bring prosecutions against those involved in exploiting children and young people. It was recommended that these actions should be developed simultaneously. Recognising the issue of cross-local-authority-border migration of young people who are involved in or at risk of CSE as well as those involved in exploiting them the guidance also recommended that local authorities should work with neighbouring authorities to develop responses and share information that would safeguard children and allow prosecutions to be brought against those involved in exploiting them. The guidance also recommended that each Local Safeguarding Children Board should establish a specialist CSE sub-group and appoint a CSE coordinator to collate information centrally and to ensure that agencies were working effectively together to tackle CSE.

In 2009 a specialist CSE task and finish group was established in Luton amid concerns amongst professionals that little was known about CSE in the area and consequently that little was being done to respond effectively to it. This group was disbanded in 2010.

Subsequently, national research published in 2011 found that across England only a quarter of Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs) had implemented the DCSF guidance of 2009 (Jago et. al., 2011). In response, and as a result of historical disclosures of sexual exploitation made by women entering adult services, the Luton LSCB along with Bedford Borough and Mid Beds LSCBs established a pan-Bedfordshire specialist CSE 'task and finish' group in 2012. Since it was established this group has undertaken important work to ensure that the Department for Children, Schools and Families guidance of 2009 is implemented across Bedfordshire (DCSF, 2009). The specialist CSE task and finish group has to date:

- Established a joint protocol ensuring that cases of CSE are identified and referred to appropriate agencies
- Provided training to a number of professionals from a variety of agencies and organisations
- Developed a Risk Assessment tool indicating appropriate responses and referrals for young people with identified levels of risk
- Established a SERAC (Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Conference) into which professionals may refer young people about whom they have concerns. The SERAC, Chaired by the police, represents a multi-agency forum for sharing concerns about young people and the adults known to be abusing them. The SERAC was established in March 2013 and by August 2013 had received 40 referrals averaging approximately seven referrals per month (none of whom were repeat referrals)
- Established a Central Intelligence Bureau (CIB) into which practitioners may input any intelligence or information regarding concerns they might have for any young person who they consider to be at risk or involved in CSE

[Type text]

These developments suggest that in Luton appropriate processes have been established to identify and respond to young people who are at risk or who are being sexually exploited and mechanisms to gather evidence and information about those involved in exploiting them are available. The findings from the research described in this report suggest how the work might be further developed from the stable base that has been established.

### **The Research**

The developments described above indicate that the research has been conducted during a period of significant change in relation to child sexual exploitation work in Luton. The work described above has begun to establish new systems and processes for responding to this issue and it would therefore be unrealistic at this stage to expect that all practitioners are aware of the changes that have been taking place. These new systems and processes will, in all likelihood, take time to become embedded and for practitioners to become familiar with them.

In all 43 practitioners from a range of statutory and voluntary organisations attended the two seminars hosted by the research team from the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire. There was a good response to the invitation to attend and during the seminars participants were generally keen to contribute. Representatives from the following agencies and services attended the seminars:

- Police
- Social Care
- Health
- Housing
- Youth Services
- Youth Offending Services
- Drug Services
- Azalea
- SNAP
- Education Services
- Brook (Sexual Health Services)

The seminars consisted of short presentations followed by opportunities for focused discussions in relation to particular questions in small groups. Discussions were recorded via contemporaneous note-taking and covered topics such as:

- Whether the practitioner had attended or delivered training in relation to CSE
- Practitioners' understandings of risk factors that may indicate that a young person is at risk of CSE
- How the Risk Assessment tool developed by LSCB specialist sub-group for CSE might enhance the ability of practitioners to identify young people at risk

[Type text]

- Patterns and types of CSE identified in Luton
- Responses to CSE in Luton and any difficulties or obstacles with current responses
- Activity in relation to disruption and prosecution

In addition to the seminars, the research team conducted follow-up, in-depth, one-to-one, face-to-face interviews with 18 practitioners who attended the seminars and who expressed a wish to be involved in follow-up interviews. These included practitioners from a range of services in both voluntary and statutory sectors. The general themes identified in seminar discussions were broadly replicated in follow-up interviews and form the main headings for the discussion in this report.

Following the seminars an evaluation form was also electronically distributed to all participants to explore how helpful they had found the seminars. Unfortunately only two practitioners completed these and this data is not therefore included in this report. Workbooks were also completed by practitioners during each of the seminars but in most cases these were not completed in full and the data generated through them was therefore rather limited. Where possible, however, data derived from the workbooks has been incorporated into this report.

## **Training and Awareness of Child Sexual Exploitation**

### **Training**

There were generally high levels of awareness of CSE amongst practitioners. This is positive and indicates that there is a body of knowledge and good practice which can be built on. At the same time, however, there are some gaps in who has or has not received training.

Approximately a third of practitioners who attended the seminars had not received any training on CSE and prior to attending the seminars hosted at UoB, a number of practitioners were not aware of the Risk Assessment (RA) Tool, the Protocol that has been developed by the Pan-Bedfordshire Specialist CSE Task and Finish group nor the LSCB website from which these documents could be downloaded (all seminar attendees were provided with a copy of the RA tool during the seminars and subsequently the RA tool and the newly developed local protocol was distributed to all attendees).

Whether training had been received (and therefore levels of awareness of CSE) varied across agencies (and particularly across the voluntary/statutory divide). It was particularly notable that those working as part of the Youth Offending Team had not received training in relation to CSE. This was also the case with some people working in youth services, organisations providing housing support and/or support to vulnerable tenants (e.g. Penrose/Luton Community Housing/Hostels) (although some of these practitioners had

[Type text]

received 'general' safeguarding training, the specific issue of CSE had not been addressed as part of that). A lack of specialist training in relation to CSE was also highlighted in relation members of the police service who have responsibility for assessing information about CSE provided to the CIB. When explaining how the CIB process works a police officer told us:

*'Once the CIB gets a piece of information, they assess the information, look at the risk factors and determine whether there is a need for an action, which could be reactive or proactive. This depends entirely on the content of the information that is passed on. We have a 24/7 bureau that deals with it, that would assess that.'*

*Interviewer: Have these officers received any specific training on CSE, to be able to assess that information?*

*Interviewee: They have not had any particular training on CSE. They have a general understanding'.*

The research team consider this particularly worrying given that youth workers, Youth Offending Service workers, housing support workers and those working in hostels are highly likely to be coming across vulnerable young people in the course of the their work. Furthermore, if police officers assessing information in relation to CSE via the CIB process do not have a specialist understanding of issues related to CSE, or what indicators might suggest a young person is at risk or involved, their assessment of that information is very likely to be flawed and is highly probable that significant information may be overlooked as 'insignificant'.

Given that training on CSE is available via the LSCB, and has been for some time, (and that it is free to access for voluntary or charitable organisations) the fact that a third of seminar attendees (from both voluntary and statutory agencies) had not accessed this training raises a number of questions. In some cases, there may be 'gate-keeping' by managers and senior managers who may not consider that the issue of CSE is something their employees need to be trained to identify or work with. This might mean that available training opportunities are not cascaded down to less senior staff and/or that they may not sanction the release of their staff for such training. There may be a lack of recognition in relation to how CSE actually relates to the work or client group that some practitioners are working with. If someone is employed by an agency that provides housing support, for example, the immediate focus of concern would relate to responding to issues related to housing need and there may be a lack of recognition of other issues that may be affecting clients or how CSE may relate to homelessness or housing need. Similarly, if someone works for a youth justice agency/youth offending team there may be little recognition of the ways in which certain offending behaviours may indicate, or be related to, risk of or involvement in sexual exploitation. Recent research, for example, has shown that youth justice workers may be completely unaware that girls with extensive offending careers may be involved in sexual exploitation and that 'many girls use crime as a means to escape their exploiters or as a cry

[Type text]

for help' (Phoenix, 2012:1). This might mean that practitioners in such agencies do not seek out or check for training opportunities in relation to CSE. Additionally, there may be issues in relation to when available training is timetabled, especially for school staff.

Furthermore, our data suggest that training is being delivered by different providers from both the statutory and voluntary sector organisations both internally (within their own organisations) and externally (to wider bodies of practitioners). A practitioner from a voluntary sector service told us, for example,

*'We have been thinking about our work with staff in hostels [...]. We are going to be focusing more on the most vulnerable groups, so professional training with foster carers and so on. We'll also be covering boys, HIV and Aids, FGM, an introduction to contraception. Professionals are asking for more training on online abuse, grooming and self-harm'*

And an interviewee from a statutory sector agency said,

*'We provide education within schools. We are discussing doing presentations to parents, including teachers and support staff in schools too. We know that it is very difficult for young people to recognise that they are being exploited, so it is not necessarily to provide awareness to children only, but also to teachers and support staff who can recognise the signs. This has not been done yet'.*

This suggests that training is potentially being duplicated across different agencies as well as via training delivered by the LSCB. If this is the case it suggests not only unnecessary expenditure of already constrained resources but also that practitioners may be experiencing 'training-fatigue' and/or that the surfeit of training available may be making overwhelming demands on their time. In order to avoid this, the research team would suggest that it may be helpful for the LSCB Task and Finish Group to develop a database through which training delivered by different providers to different groups might be collated. Training can then be coordinated to ensure that training opportunities are not being duplicated and to make sure that streamlined training packages can be delivered to all practitioners who are likely to be coming into contact with young people who may be at risk or involved in CSE. All 'frontline' staff, from both voluntary and statutory sector organisations who are likely to be in contact with vulnerable young people, should receive training to enable them to recognise the risk indicators associated with CSE, to implement the Risk Assessment tool effectively and to be aware of the Pan-Beds CSE Protocol.

### **Awareness of CSE**

The research team has also identified confusion amongst some practitioners in relation to what 'child sexual exploitation' actually is and a tendency for practitioners to conflate 'child sexual exploitation' with 'more traditional' forms of child sexual abuse (familial and/or extra-familial).

[Type text]

This tendency has been noted in previous research (see e.g. Melrose, 2012; Melrose, 2013 forthcoming; Asquith and Turner, 2008) and in the research presently being conducted in Luton is evidenced particularly in interview transcripts where, when asked to talk about their role and experience of working with child sexual exploitation many interviewees initially cite cases of (usually familial) child sexual abuse. One interviewee, for example, cited an instance of sibling abuse with which she had been involved. When asked if she considered this to be an instance of 'child sexual exploitation' she replied 'Well yes, because it is still exploitative'. Another practitioner related a case in which she had recently been involved. She said,

*'The one I've been most involved in has involved exploitation under threat. It seems to feature 'If I'm not doing it to you, I'll do it to your friends' – so the girl is trying to protect other people. In this case, the young woman went to the police a year ago and they investigated but nothing happened. She was raped by one man, but there were two men in the car that was picking her up. In another case I was working on, the girl really wanted a boyfriend and was meeting up with men online and having sex with the promise of a relationship'*

The examples cited above are undoubtedly abusive but whether they constitute instances of 'child sexual exploitation' is open to debate (Melrose, 2012). The conflation of different forms of child sexual abuse with child sexual exploitation and confusion in relation to what child sexual exploitation actually is, or what it means, presents particular challenges in relation to trying to identify the scale of CSE in the area and for example, the types of cases that might be referred in to the SERAC process. While CSE is a form of child abuse, there is clearly some work to do to enable practitioners to disentangle the specific issue of child sexual exploitation (and the risk factors associated with it) from the broader issue of child sexual abuse more generally.

### **The Nature of the Problem in Luton**

Many participants were of the view that CSE is a significant problem in Luton and as one interviewee told us, 40 young people had been referred to the SERAC between March 2013, when the SERAC process was established, and the beginning of August 2013 when the participant was interviewed. Most of the young people involved appear to be aged between 13 and 17 years old and most are white British. Instances of young women from 'Asian' backgrounds have, however, also been identified as have young women from Eastern European backgrounds (particularly Polish).

The exploitation taking place appeared to be rather 'random' and ad-hoc rather than organised groups of perpetrators. As one practitioner explained:

*'I haven't really seen any evidence about more organised grooming – though in the hostels they talk about people driving up and down outside'.*

[Type text]

A number of practitioners also suggested that 'Asian' men (and younger men sometimes not much older than the young women they are involved with) are involved in exploiting young women. As one interviewee told us fairly explicitly,

*'I know it's all in the news, but Asian guys with white girls can be an issue'*

And another,

*'The majority are Asian men, but this we know only through the disclosures. There's peer-on-peer, the boyfriend model, and then you get the Black Caribbean boyfriend. Then we have the groups of Asian men. There is quite a high number of Asians in Luton anyway, so that could have something to do with it. The take-away, it was Asian men. The pizza place, it is Asian men. The taxi firms, they are predominantly run by Asian men. There have been some concerns with taxi firms'*

As the first interviewee points out, 'Asian men' exploiting 'white girls' has been 'all over the news' recently and as a result something of a stereotype may have developed that it is only 'Asian men' who are involved in the sexual exploitation of young women. However, other evidence (CEOP, 2011; Cockbain, 2013) suggests this is not the case and practitioners therefore need to be careful not to overlook the activities of indigenous or non-minority group men when they are considering a young person's risk of involvement in child sexual exploitation.

In seminar discussions, via a geographical mapping exercise, a number of locations or 'hotspots', were consistently identified as of particular concern by practitioners across the two seminar groups. These areas of concern were also identified by participants in follow-up interviews. These locations included:

- Brantwood Road/Downs Road (Hostels)(Downs Road - drug related)
- Dunstable Road (Hostels/Mother and Baby Unit)
- Dallow Road
- Leagrave Road (Hostels/Residential Care Home)
- Bury Park (Taxi Firms & Take-Away outlets)
- Biscot Road/Cromwell Hill/Hightown (links with adult sex markets)
- Biscot/Dallow/Saints – concerns about how drug dealing links to fast-food outlets and potential CSE
- Birdsfoot Lane/Riddy Lane (Take-away opposite Icknield School)
- Back of the Galaxy Centre
- Town Centre
- Wardown Park/Manor Park (all parks were identified as problematic/areas of concern)
- Crawley Green Road/Hart Lane
- Salisbury Road (behind Unity House/opposite police station)

[Type text]

- Barnfield Skills Academy (young people targeted by business owners from High Town)
- VI form/Barnfield College (hair and beauty students targeted by young men purporting to be 'boyfriends')
- Dunstable College (links to Bury Park – particularly taxi firms)
- Stopsely/Putteridge/Wigmore Lane (behind ASDA)
- Hotels being used: Easy Hotel; Sunnyside Guest House; Black Cat; Comfort Hotel (Local Authority uses these places to house vulnerable young people) but there are also concerns that men may be taking young people vulnerable to CSE to these locations

The research team would suggest that outreach workers (particularly from youth services) are deployed to undertake outreach in these areas, to identify vulnerable young people and to make appropriate referrals. They would also suggest that, in relation to hotels, training needs to be undertaken (possibly through licensing authorities) to remind proprietors and staff of their responsibilities and obligations in relation to young people who may be at risk of or involved in sexual exploitation.

Practitioners were aware of a variety of forms of CSE taking place in the area. These included:

- Groups of adults grooming young people
- Single adults grooming young people
- Peer-to-peer recruitment and exploitation
- Internet/mobile phone (text) grooming & sharing of sexualised images
- Gang related CSE
- Links with drug use/drug markets
- Links with adult sex markets
- Young women in 'relationships' with violent/controlling men who are much older than them
- Links to local businesses (taxi firms; take-aways)

There were mixed reports as to whether the young people concerned were in local authority care or living with parents. Some practitioners thought the majority of young people concerned were in care while others believed most of the young people were living in their families of origin. Most referrals to SERAC appear to concern young people who are in local authority care and young people who come from what one practitioner described as 'broken backgrounds'.

Almost without fail when practitioners discussed the issue of CSE they seemed to assume that this is an issue that relates to girls. In most cases seminar participants, and those involved in follow-up interviews, had to be specifically prompted to consider the issue of CSE in relation to boys and young men.

[Type text]

While it is true that girls appear to be at greater risk of CSE than boys (with the number of girls identified as involved or at risk outnumbering boys by approximately 5-1) it cannot necessarily be assumed this is simply because fewer boys are involved and a number of explanations for the apparent under-representation of boys have been suggested. This include that this apparent under-representation is an artefact of practitioners' ability to identify risk factors associated with girls rather than with boys; or the fact that many services are developed to respond to the needs of girls and young women involved rather than boys; or that young men tend to find it more difficult to disclose. It may also be the case that routes in for boys and young men differ from those for girls and young women. In previous research, for example, one practitioner suggested to one of the researchers involved in this project that homophobic bullying, which isolates young men from peers and sometimes families, can render boys and young men vulnerable to seeking solace in the company of older men who may initially befriend but eventually exploit them.

In this research one interviewee discussed the case of a young man who was considered to be putting himself at risk by drinking alcohol excessively and 'hanging around' in places where he was likely to meet older men who may take advantage of his youth and loneliness and eventually exploit him. When asked explicitly about whether she had come across cases of boys or young men being exploited one practitioner told us,

*'No, not exploitation – but we do have young men coming in who are exploring their sexuality and need more information'*

The notion that boys may be 'exploring their sexuality' seems to suggest that underlying this practitioner's understanding of male and female adolescent sexual behaviour is the idea that young men can be sexually active and exploratory without necessarily putting themselves at risk while for girls, 'exploring their sexuality' is an activity that would instantly lead to them to be considered to be 'at risk'. It may be this double standard of adolescent sexuality that prevents the identification of boys and young men who are at risk of CSE.

Across seminar groups and in follow-up interviews many practitioners signalled that issues related to information and communications technologies (ICTs) (mobile phones, internet, blackberries, online gaming, social networking sites and so on) are an enormous issue amongst many of the young people they are working with (both male and female). One practitioner said,

*'They definitely always, always, always talk about pictures of naked girls. With the 14-17 year olds, I've had some very interesting conversations about legality and child pornography – I think they see it as the norm'.*

Young people are vulnerable to being groomed online and according to some interviewees many of the young people they work with are engaging in risky behaviour online – for example, posting sexualised images of themselves on social networking sites and/or

[Type text]

exchanging sexualised images of themselves amongst peer groups. As a review of the sexualisation of young people found, many young people today are involved in producing and distributing pornographic images of themselves with little thought for the consequences of this activity (Papadopoulos, 2012). Because of the extensive nature of this activity practitioners have suggested that parents desperately need training in relation to the risks presented by these technologies as their children are usually three steps ahead of them (and in some cases three steps ahead of practitioners) in understanding how to use them.

Given the evidence presented above the research team would recommend that prevention work, to raise awareness of the risks posed by online activity, should be undertaken in schools/colleges. However, there is also a clear need for parents/carers to be made aware of these risks and in some instances for practitioners to be made aware of them. General awareness-raising in relation to CSE amongst parents and in the wider community, to identify risks within the local community, may also pay potential dividends. Given the wide-ranging nature of the issue in Luton, it is important that strategies to address CSE combine targeted work with specific groups as well as more general awareness-raising and information sharing and monitoring.

The research team recognises that the current educational policy landscape, with increasing variability in types of educational provision and increasing numbers of schools becoming independent or opting out of local authority control, may make the task of engaging schools to safeguard children from sexual exploitation more difficult. Many schools may be reluctant to acknowledge this issue or to accept that there may be a problem in the school as this may have an impact on parents choosing to send their child to a particular school or not and/or league table positions. While this may be understandable the research team would recommend that every effort is made to engage schools to undertake preventative work with young people (whether or not a specific problem has been identified in the school). At the very minimum, we would suggest that it is essential that all safeguarding leads in schools should have specialist training in issues related to CSE.

## **Working Together, Multi-Agency Work and Information Sharing**

### **Multi-Agency Working**

Particular difficulties were identified across the voluntary/statutory sectors with practitioners from voluntary sector organisations sometimes expressing the view that they were considered 'lesser' partners in multi-agency partnership working. Many (unqualified) practitioners also expressed the view that their opinions and any information they might have to share were undervalued relative to professionally qualified colleagues and

[Type text]

consequently may not be taken seriously when they are trying to report concerns about young people they are working with.

The research team identified what they describe as an 'insider/outsider' dynamic in relation to the inclusion of all agencies in work around CSE. This 'insider/outsider' dynamic tends to impede multi-agency approaches and means that opportunities to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation are not optimised.

Those in the 'insider' group tended to come from statutory services (and usually be professionally qualified), and/or had been involved in the establishment of the SERAC process and/or some were involved in the work of the specialist Task and Finish group. These participants tended to know who they should talk to with any concerns, were familiar with referral pathways and confident in using the Risk Assessment tool and generally did not perceive any difficulties with multi-agency work. When asked about any challenges she had experienced in partnership working one practitioner from a statutory organisation (who is involved in the SERAC process) said she had experienced,

*'No challenges really; everyone has worked very well together around it'*

Another told us,

*'In terms of multiagency working, young people's services are quite good, both statutory and voluntary are good in sharing information'*

Such views were echoed by many practitioners from statutory services.

Representatives from other agencies, however, felt that that they were 'outside the loop' or were 'the last to know' if there were concerns about a child or young person they might be working with. This applied particularly to practitioners from voluntary sector agencies (Penrose, GreenHouse Mentoring, SNAP, Azalea). One practitioner from a voluntary sector organisation told us,

*'Statutory organisations tend not to share information with voluntary organisations'*

Another practitioner from a different voluntary sector agency echoed these sentiments and told us that she was largely unaware of other agencies and what they do and that she would not know who to go to (outside of her own agency) if she had any concerns that any of her clients were at risk or involved in CSE. Similar views were expressed by some practitioners in statutory services (School Nursing; Youth Offending Services). A participant from the school nursing service, for example, told us 'there are difficulties (in relation to working with other agencies) all the time' and 'this service is usually the last to know if there are concerns about a young person'.

This seems unfortunate given the importance of the direct work with young people that is being undertaken by many of these practitioners and steps might be taken to ensure that all agencies feel equally included in work around CSE and to make sure that all reported

[Type text]

concerns about young people are viewed with equal weight by those receiving the information.

### **Information Sharing**

A number of difficulties with information sharing across agencies were also identified. Some of these related to difficulties with sharing between voluntary and statutory agencies, others related to sharing information between statutory services and some related to sharing information within agencies. Some research participants were of the view that some agencies used confidentiality policies to 'hide behind' and that they tend to use confidentiality policies and/or data protection legislation in order NOT to share information about vulnerable young people. Others were of the view that agencies that might know about young people being involved or at risk of CSE might not be raising it as an issue, there might be a reluctance to share information, and knowing who to share the information with might also be a problem. Some interviewees from a voluntary and a statutory sector service acknowledged that the policies of their agencies on confidentiality or data protection meant that they usually, or often, did not share information with other agencies either in relation to their clients or the cases they were dealing with. One practitioner from a voluntary agency, for example, told us,

*'In terms of sharing information locally, we don't tend to get involved, our position means we can't really get involved with SERAC and that kind of thing. In the past it has caused tensions, but things are a bit easier now'*

Practitioners from both voluntary and statutory sectors also expressed the view that 'information sharing' is a 'one way street' with information passed on (usually to police and/or social services) but then no feedback is received in relation to what has happened as a result of the information they have provided. A gap in information sharing between police and professionals was consistently identified as a concern amongst these practitioners. One interviewee from the police service admitted that feedback is not routinely given in relation to cases that might be referred to them:

*Q: Do officers provide feedback to those who have submitted information as I guess this is very important in ensuring professionals know what has happened to that information and to improve multiagency working?*

*A: No, they do not provide any feedback. Simply, they are very busy and do not have the capacity to provide feedback. It is about resources, cuts, austerity. It has a massive impact on multiagency working but it is very difficult. Bedford police has no CSE unit. Any CSE report is dealt with by a specialist team or an investigation or rape unit. What we are missing is the need for consistency with victims, you need a unit and multiagency working, otherwise it is a scattered approach but we make the best with what we have at the minute.*

[Type text]

Some practitioners expressed a concern that when information is passed on to the police or social services it does not always seem to go to the right team and suggested that having a named officer would make a positive difference. Previous research (e.g. Jago et. al. 2011) has identified a tendency for practitioners within the same organisation not to share information with members of other teams (this was highlighted particularly in relation to the police). One police officer interviewed for that research by one of the authors of this report said that public protection, safeguarding and community safety teams might not routinely share information with each other and that those investigating 'routine' crime who may incidentally come across evidence of CSE might not necessarily share that information with members of other teams or policing units.

Practitioners also expressed the view that very often police attitudes were 'problematic' because many remain unconvinced that there is a problem with CSE in Luton: these attitudes were described as 'endemic'. While it is acknowledged that police practice in relation to CSE has improved recently, and our interviewee from the police service told us that much had been done to raise awareness of CSE and to 'change people's conception of what CSE is' both within the police service and externally the research team would suggest that it would be helpful for all police to be trained in relation to CSE and systems for sharing information across policing teams might be improved.

The establishment of the SERAC process should ideally improve information sharing and multi-agency working, particularly between the police and social services. As one participant told us,

*'The objective of the SERAC was to improve multiagency working, to improve and develop it and hoping that this could lead to best practice that would allow for officers and social workers to be sitting in the same room and working together on CSE'*

While this may not represent the 'ideal type' of the co-located team (of police and social services workers located in the same office) identified by previous research as achieving the best outcomes in terms of successful prosecutions of those involved in exploiting young people (Jago et. al., 2011) it certainly does herald a significant step forward in terms of multi-agency working in Luton. However, it was also pointed out that the SERAC process 'depends on the good will of the individuals. SERAC is not a statutory requirement'. To ensure that processes for protecting young people from CSE and prosecuting those who may be involved in exploiting them the research team would suggest that the SERAC process might be more powerful (and therefore more successful in achieving its objectives) if it were put on a statutory footing.

The need for a dedicated support service for young people at risk/involved was identified by a number of practitioners (the research team believes that such a service is in the process of being developed). Many practitioners were unaware of where they might access one-to-one

[Type text]

support for the young people they were working with (and most were unaware that there are proposals afoot for the NSPCC to establish a specialist service in Luton: only one interviewee appeared to be aware of this). Many interviewees were unclear whether young people about whom they made referrals did in fact receive any specialist one-to-one support.

Some practitioners were also unsure about where they might log what they described as 'low-level' concerns: that is concerns that may not directly indicate that a young person is at risk or involved in CSE but circumstances that give the impression that 'something is not right' and that some investigation of the situation should take place. It is possible that this may be ameliorated by the introduction and widespread adoption of the Risk Assessment Tool and by ensuring that practitioners from all relevant front-line agencies receive training in risk factors that may indicate vulnerability to or involvement in CSE and/or by making all relevant practitioners aware that they are able to report such concerns to the Central Intelligence Bureau (CIB). This problem might alternatively be remedied by ensuring that there is one central database where all concerns reported in relation to CSE could be reported (currently separate databases are kept by, for example, the police and social care). The ideal provision would be a central database where all concerns can be recorded, collated and cross-referenced.

Some practitioners (particularly in voluntary sector organisations) expressed the view that even if they used the RA tool they may not necessarily be able to make a referral without consulting senior managers: the decision as to whether to refer a young person or not would normally be made by the senior manager rather than the practitioner working directly with the young person. In two instances practitioners have noted that even when risks to a young person are clearly identified senior managers may not make referrals because this might result in the service provider acquiring a poor reputation and/or drawing attention to itself to the extent that the service being provided might be called into question. Ultimately then, in these instances it was clearly indicated that the potential negative impact on the business would take precedent over concerns regarding safeguarding the young person. It should be noted, however, that both of these cases related to organisations in which the practitioners concerned had previously been employed. One was a private residential children's home (not in Luton) while the other was a hostel (in Luton). This clearly derives from the institutional culture in some organisations and some work with senior managers might be necessary to address this.

Practitioners have also expressed frustration that when they do report concerns or try to make referrals (particularly to social care) these often do not meet the thresholds required and the referral is not accepted. In these instances the practitioner who has initiated a referral is left 'holding' the case and the young person is left in the situation that is causing concern. The practitioners in these situations then do not know where to turn to get help or support for the young person.

[Type text]

Once they had been familiarised with it in the seminars, most participants considered that the RA tool was very helpful – they particularly liked being informed about ‘what should be done’ in relation to different concerns (but as indicated above, in some cases practitioners feel they would be unable to make referrals without permission of senior managers). A question of the cultural sensitivity of the RA tool was raised as a potential problem – for example, the emphasis on ‘sexualised dress’ would not relate to young women who might wear a hijab and different indicators might need to be developed to pick up young women at risk from these communities.

Prior to the introduction of the risk assessment tool most practitioners had not used any particular tool to assess the level of risk faced by the young people they are working with. A few agencies tended to employ the ‘Fraser’ competence test to assess young people’s ability to consent to sexual activity. While this may be a useful tool for assessing a young person’s ability to consent to sexual activity it would not necessarily indicate whether the sexual activity the young person is ‘consenting’ to is exploitative or not.

Many research participants acknowledged the negative impact of spending cuts and ‘austerity measures’ in being able to respond effectively to concerns about CSE: youth services and accommodation services were identified as at particular risk. The constraints on voluntary sector agencies (due to short-term funding) in being able to work in a long-term way with young people were considered problematic. Although Children’s Services are aware of the issue of CSE, the budgetary constraints in which they are currently working strains the services and limits the quality of the work that can be undertaken with any particular individual young person. Although all the 16+ team have received some training in relation to CSE, it was acknowledged that this did not enable the identification of young people at the early stages of risk.

**The research team would therefore recommend that training be delivered to children’s social care workers so that they are able to identify risks and vulnerable young people before they reach the 16+ team (as by this time behaviours may have become entrenched and more difficult to work with).**

Practitioners also recognised that the current economic climate in conjunction with reductions in welfare entitlements would, in all likelihood, exacerbate problems of poverty and deprivation in Luton. This context, they considered, is likely to increase the potential for CSE.

### **Disruption/Prosecution**

Most practitioners expressed the view that not enough was being done to disrupt the activities of those involved in exploiting young people and to prosecute those concerned. They considered that where a young person had disclosed information but nothing was done to disrupt/prosecute, this gave a very negative message to the young person and left them feeling that there was little point in making any disclosures as offenders ‘get away

[Type text]

with it anyway'. A case of a young person being groomed was cited – when the practitioner reported concerns the police took the view that no offence had been committed (the police concerned were from the Safeguarding Team). The practitioner was of the opinion that the police did not seem to know that they could disrupt this activity for example by issuing child abduction notices and other legal measures identified in DCSF guidance of 2009. It seems essential therefore that all police who may be involved in any work in relation to child sexual exploitation should be familiar with the legal remedies available to them to disrupt this activity in the absence of any complaint being made by the young person.

The 16+ team seems to have had more success in working with the police to achieve disruption (see point above about voluntary sector organisations feeling that their concerns are not necessarily taken seriously by statutory sector organisations).

Practitioners were not aware of any successful prosecutions that had been brought against perpetrators in Luton, although many expressed the view that they had provided information that should have enabled a prosecution to take place. When asked about prosecutions being achieved, one practitioner said, 'Well, it's a bit pathetic really isn't it?' When asked, the representative from the police service we spoke to was also unable point to any successful prosecutions. When questioned about why this might be so we were told,

*'It is down to the reluctance to report or young people not recognising that they are being abused and seeing it as something that is normal and not having boundaries. They may potentially be involved with drink and drugs, which make it a hindrance. I have proposed to have a single point of contact within each LA. Young people, as you know, are passed from social worker to social worker. When they have built trust, their social worker is changed and that trust disappears and relationships break down. We need a more streamlined process'*

Many practitioners also acknowledged difficulties with encouraging young people to disclose – particularly if CSE is gang related, as young people may fear that they will not be adequately protected after making such a disclosure (Beckett et.al., forthcoming). Difficulties with gaining evidence to prosecute successfully were also acknowledged.

### **What More to Do?**

In their workbooks practitioners were given an opportunity to state three key areas that they felt could be prioritised for improvement within their agencies. This question elicited a range of responses but one of the most consistently identified areas for improvement was in relation to training and awareness raising. Most practitioners indicated that they would like more training. Also, consistently, practitioners identified a need for better communication between different agencies. Other suggestions included:

[Type text]

- Make it clear borough wide what tools are available and draw a strong picture of what is going on in Luton (in relation to young people who are at risk and work that is being undertaken to respond to those risks)
- More training in assessment of risk
- Keep asking/listening to young people
- Streamline transition from children's services to adult services
- Communication with other agencies to share ideas
- Communication can be improved greatly
- Better communication between voluntary and statutory organisations
- Recognising other agencies and taking their points of view seriously
- The referral process: clear information on who to contact/follow up work
- A service for young people who report matters of CSE
- CPS to work with LSCBs to ensure that prosecutions can be brought, young people can disclose safely and as vulnerable victims can be adequately and appropriately supported in any legal proceedings
- Police to improve prosecutions and levels of engagement
- Develop a database of what is in the area/what we can use/what they can offer (in relation to services that are available to support both practitioners and young people)
- Feedback from referrals
- A designated person for referrals and/or to discuss issues on an informal basis
- More inter-agency professionals meetings/communication
- More staffing – need more funding & more funds for diversion activities

Many of those who took part in the research requested information from the researchers about resources that may be available to enable them to develop their work within their own agencies. As there are now a number of resources available nationwide (including toolkits, documents, work developed directly from work with young people) it may be worth considering whether a centralised databank of available resources could be developed (perhaps on LSCB web site) and linked to the recently developed risk assessment tool and pan-Beds protocol.

[Type text]

### **Key Messages from this Research**

A number of important messages emerge from this small-scale piece of research.

There is a clear need for more training so that practitioners feel confident in undertaking risk assessments and so that they are clear about who, or where, they should refer on to. Practitioners need to be aware of what training is available and be clear about how the issue of CSE might relate to any work they are doing with vulnerable young people (whether it is in housing support, youth offending and so on).

A process for communicating what has happened in cases where a referral has been made should also be established (i.e. to keep the referrer up to date with progress in the case).

Information sharing needs to be improved particularly across the voluntary/statutory sector divide so that information sharing is experienced as a two-way process (rather than the one-way process as it is currently perceived). This will facilitate multi-agency working and will ensure that all partners involved in the multi-agency approach will feel equally valued. In some cases information sharing within agencies might also be improved.

Resources for developing this work are clearly an issue. Resources are required to:

- provide outreach to areas where young people are identified as at risk to identify young people and refer them to appropriate services/support
- support intensive (one-to-one) work with young people who are at risk and/or involved
- provide training to front-line practitioners (particularly to enable them to identify more confidently risks to young people and to use the Risk Assessment Tool)
- to develop preventative work in schools and communities
- to facilitate multi-agency working on this matter (this may be improved when the SERAC process has become embedded and all practitioners are aware of where to report their concerns)
- to gather essential evidence against those responsible for exploiting young people

Targeting offenders and bringing successful prosecutions will ensure that young people come forward with disclosures: where they see or perceive 'nothing happening' in relation to disclosures they make they lose confidence in the system and will not come forward. When young people do come forward there is a need to ensure that they are adequately protected during the process of making disclosures or providing information.

The LSCB specialist sub-group on CSE has developed a great deal of very useful work in relation to this issue. The challenge now is to let ALL practitioners know what tools are 'out

[Type text]

there' (i.e. the risk assessment tool and the new protocol) and provide them with training so that they can use these tools to support and protect the young people with whom they are working. Following government guidance (DCSF, 2009) the research team would also suggest the establishment of a permanent specialist sub-group on CSE where information can be shared and collated and where activities such as training development and provision can be co-ordinated. The research team would recommend that this group should be comprised of practitioners from across the voluntary and statutory sectors and to include at least one representative from each statutory service such as education, housing, health, youth services, youth offending, the police, social care and so on. Practitioners who are part of the specialist sub-group for CSE could then be tasked with cascading information within their organisations and ensuring that everyone in that organisation is aware of their responsibilities in relation to safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation.

## References

Asquith, S. and Turner, E. (2008) *Recovery and Reintegration of Children from the Effects of Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking*, Geneva, Oak Foundation Child Abuse Programme

Beckett, H. and Colleagues (forthcoming) *Young People, Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Violence in Gangs and Groups* (provisional title); Luton, University of Bedfordshire

CEOP (2011) *Out of Mind, Out of Sight: Breaking down the barriers to understanding child sexual exploitation*, London, CEOP

Cockbain, E. (2013) 'Grooming and the 'Asian Sex Gang Predator': The construction of a racial crime threat', *Race and Class*, **54**, 22-32

DCSF (2009) *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation*, London, Department for Children, Schools and Families

Jago, S., Arocha, L., Brodie, I., Melrose, M., Pearce, J. and Warrington, C. (2011) *What's Going On to Safeguard Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation? How local partnerships respond to child sexual exploitation*, Luton, University of Bedfordshire

Melrose, M. (2012) 'Twenty-First Century Party People: Sexual Exploitation in the New Millennium', *Child Abuse Review*, DOI: 10.1002/car2238

Melrose, M. (2013 forthcoming) 'Young People and Sexual Exploitation: A Critical Discourse Analysis', in M. Melrose and J. Pearce, (eds.) *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking*, Hampshire, Palgrave-Macmillan

Papadopoulos, L. (2010) *Sexualisation of Young People Review*, London, Home Office

[Type text]

Phoenix, J. (2012) *Out of Place: The Policing and Criminalisation of Sexually Exploited Girls and Young Women*, London, Howard League

**Prof M. Melrose, Dr. I. Brodie and Dr. L. Arocha**

September 2013