



# Building a Bridge of Trust

The role of peer education in tackling Child Sexual Exploitation

2016

**straight  
talking**  
peer education



## Introduction

I'm delighted to introduce this report on 'Building a Bridge of Trust' at a time when the issue of Child Sexual Exploitation has become such an important subject for us all. Recent high profile cases and subsequent media coverage have reinforced the need for a holistic solution to what has become an important issue nationally. There is a responsibility on us all to have greater awareness and understanding, ensuring that the vulnerable in our society are safe from exploitation. It is not just the role of social care professionals, health professionals, the police and teachers; it falls to us all. The challenge on professionals is to ensure that there is greater awareness of the issue, at risk people are identified quickly and appropriate intervention is taken to prevent exploitation. Young people who have experienced Child Sexual Exploitation need appropriate care and support. With public sector budgets continually under greater pressure against the backdrop of risk around Child Sexual Exploitation, it is falling to Public Sector organisations to find more innovative and cost effective ways to carefully manage such an important issue. Greater partnership working is one of those solutions.

Clearly, greater awareness and understanding is the preventative part of addressing the issue. Peer Education is a proven and tested model that engages young people in a structured and informative way. It is a helpful tool to raise awareness and understanding of Child Sexual Exploitation amongst young people in a way that they understand; in their way and in their setting. It uses trained and experienced young people to deliver important messages in a style that engages and delivers results. Straight Talking has been delivering peer education (for almost 18 years) in schools and other educational settings. We understand what is important to young people and what makes a difference. Peers have the credibility that is crucial to them being listened to and their advice heeded. In my role as Head of Change and Programme Management for Westminster City Council, I recognise the importance of effective education and safeguarding.

***We all have a responsibility to protect the most vulnerable in our society.***

Peter Glynne  
Head of Change and Programme Management  
Chair of Straight Talking Peer Education



## 1. An uncomfortable issue

Recent high profile cases of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), such as Rotherham, Oxfordshire, Rochdale, Derby, Oldham and Bristol, have brought home the need, particularly for children's social care and local police services, to urgently understand what is happening in their areas. Responsible local authorities, worried by what might be happening in their own towns and cities, are working with colleagues from the police and other agencies, including the voluntary and community sectors, to understand the true scale of the problem in their towns and cities, and to ensure an effective and shared strategy is in place to address it. This is a key question facing every Chief Executive.

*“The overall failings were those of a lack of knowledge and understanding around a concept (of CSE) that few understood and where few knew how it could be tackled, but also of organisational weaknesses which prevented the true picture from being seen.”<sup>1</sup>*

### 1.1 Understanding the scale and nature of Child Sexual Exploitation

#### A Definition of CSE

*“Child Sexual Exploitation is a form of abuse. It involves children and young people being forced or manipulated into sexual activity in exchange for something – money, gifts or accommodation or less tangible goods such as affection or status. The sexual activity and exchange may be seen as consensual, but are based on an imbalance of power which severely limits victims' options.”*

Learning from these appalling cases shows that the very nature of this crime means that many victims may not even feel they are being exploited (particularly at first) and, for those that do, many are too afraid or ashamed to come forward and/or do not trust the authorities to take them seriously, keep them safe and deal with the perpetrators effectively.

*“No one knows the true scale of sexual exploitation in Rotherham over the years.”<sup>1</sup>*

***“...young people told us they would be reluctant to come forward for help because they would feel ashamed or afraid.”<sup>1</sup>***

So, it is probable that, in a high proportion of cases, victims are unlikely to come forward of their own volition, and although it is hoped that recent coverage of successful convictions will in time rebuild trust in the police and care services, it seems fair to say that there currently exists a significant trust gap between victims and the statutory services that are there to protect them.

To bridge this trust gap, to engage effectively with victims and potential victims, first requires an understanding of who they are.

*A recent report by the NSPCC<sup>2</sup> found that 40% of girls surveyed in England felt they had been coerced into sex. It was the highest rate of the five European countries surveyed.*

<sup>1</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997 - 2013 Alexis Jay OBE August 2014

<sup>2</sup> [www.nspcc.org.uk/fighting-for-childhood/news-opinion/40-percent-teenage-girls-pressured-into-sex/](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/fighting-for-childhood/news-opinion/40-percent-teenage-girls-pressured-into-sex/) [Accessed 9 October 2015].

## 1.2 Who are the vulnerable?

In Rotherham, children affected by sexual exploitation were previously known to services in just over a third of cases, because of child protection and child neglect. There was a history of domestic violence in 46% of cases. Truancy and school refusal were recorded in 63% of cases and 63% of children had been reported missing more than once.

*“Every single day, there are large numbers of young people that have gone missing from care, that are at risk of abuse...”*

*“We still haven't solved the key issues of how to protect vulnerable young people who are unfortunately determined to put themselves at risk who don't understand the degrees to which they are making themselves vulnerable.”*

Sir Peter Fahey, Chief Constable Greater Manchester Police, Today Programme, BBC Radio 4, March 2015.

There were also a number of common themes. Almost 50% of children who were victims of CSE or at risk had misused alcohol or other substances (typically as part of the grooming process), a third had mental health issues (also often as a result of their abuse) and two thirds had emotional health difficulties. Some 20% had issues with parental addiction and over a third of parents had mental health issues.

In Oxfordshire: *“Most of the victims had experienced parental domestic violence at home or in their birth families. Police attended one family for domestic abuse 74 times in one two-year period. There was considerable experience of family instability. Two children were removed from their homes for their own protection long before the CSE. One of these had experienced three different LAC placements and a broken-down adoption placement in another part of the country before the age of ten.”*

So, a significant proportion of victims and potential victims are likely to be in care and many more had (or should have had) contact with statutory agencies, and most over a long period of time, often during the period of exploitation. So how do we use this contact, and create additional opportunities for contact, to recognise when there is a problem and create a bridge of trust to engage with the children to help them escape this exploitation and support them to recover? As one victim in Rotherham put it: *“If a perpetrator can spot the vulnerable children, why can't professionals?”* With a massive increase in awareness, a paradigm shift to these children being seen as victims rather than simply 'troubled children', it is hoped that many more victims and potential victims are identified much earlier.

The challenge remains, particularly in times of severe financial constraint in public services generally and social care especially, to have cost effective systems, interventions and responses in place to minimise the risk of CSE occurring in the first place, deal with it when it does occur and provide effective support for the victims and their families for as long as it is required.

The next section explores some of the lessons from recent CSE cases.

*“The victims were not able to cooperate with the authorities for three main reasons. Firstly, for a while, they felt they were getting something of what they wanted from the perpetrators. Secondly, they were groomed into a misplaced sense of loyalty to their abusers. Thirdly, they were trapped by fear of punishment by the perpetrators, and by the cycle of having to repay, through sex, the cost of drink, drugs and so on into which they had been skilfully led.”<sup>3</sup>*



*A recent report by the NSPCC found that 40% of girls surveyed in England felt they had been coerced into sex. It was the highest rate of the five European countries surveyed.*



## 2. Learning from the past

This section uses some of the lessons from recent CSE cases to explore how we can get better at raising awareness of CSE and understanding what is happening in our own areas.

*“Young people themselves hold the information about what is happening to them.”<sup>4</sup>*

### 2.1 Engaging with victims and those at risk

It may seem obvious that we must listen to victims, but case after case reveals that this has not been happening. Until recently (and sadly still in some cases) many victims were thought of as contributors to their own situation, voluntarily agreeing to sex with much older men and abusing drugs and alcohol through choice. With victims feeling unable or unwilling to engage with statutory services - and those services historically placing little or no credence on any testimony that was forthcoming - there remains a real gap of trust between the two.

*All we need to do is listen.”<sup>4</sup>*

#### So how do we bridge this gap?

#### Risky Business

The Risky Business project in Rotherham was the subject of its own chapter in the Inquiry report, and is worth exploring here.

Risky Business comprised a small team of youth workers and was set up in 1997 following local concerns about young people being abused through prostitution. Funded by the council, it worked with children and young people aged between 11 and 25 to:

*“The Risky Business project was the first public service in Rotherham to identify and support young people involved in Child Sexual Exploitation.”<sup>5</sup>*

- offer advice and information to young people in relation to sexual health, accommodation, drugs and alcohol, parenting and budgeting, eating disorders, self-harm and abuse; and to promote their self-esteem and self-assertiveness.
- offer training in sexual exploitation, abuse and related matters to schools and to agencies and individuals working with young people.

It operated on an outreach basis, bridging the gap between the young people and the statutory authorities and working with a large number of victims and those at risk. As the Inquiry reported: “...It started where the young person was; it concerned itself with the whole person and addressed any issues that the young person brought to the relationship; it did not prescribe or direct. Its methods were complementary to those of the statutory services. Its success depended upon the skills of the individual worker and the level of trust which young people were willing to commit to it. ...it was performing a function which services with statutory responsibilities could not fully replicate. Any semblance of the statutory worker had to be set aside in order to create and retain trust.”

Risky Business was highly valued by the police (who provided training on intelligence gathering to the team), schools (with a high demand for their training programmes), the council (who increased their core funding) pupils (who thought it was very good, particularly hearing first hand from a survivor) and victims (whom the 'Lessons Learned' independent review of 2010 reflected 'thought highly' of the service.)

<sup>4</sup> Real Voices - Child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester, Ann Coffey, MP October 2014

<sup>5</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997 - 2013 Alexis Jay OBE August 2014

However, the Inquiry also reported on the significant tensions between Risky Business and Children's Social Care, with the latter alleging exaggeration and unprofessional behaviour by the project – claims that were not supported by the Inquiry. These tensions were a particular cause of concern when Risky Business made referrals to social care: *"There were too many examples of young people who were properly referred by Risky Business to children's social care and who somehow fell through the net and were not treated with the priority that they deserved."*<sup>7</sup>

In summary, Risky Business comprised an effective and well thought of group of people who had developed trust with victims and those at risk but who were too often unable to bridge the gap between victims and statutory services due to misunderstanding, misconceptions, professional jealousy and poor management. *"It is doubtful whether its original ethos and style of working can survive this absorption into the statutory system, where it is firmly located in a child protection model. The grounds for the move included the belief that Risky Business lacked managerial and risk assessment skills, the rigour of case management supervision, procedures, risk management plans, defined roles and responsibilities, and office systems. All of which fails to recognise the quality of their work with individual children, and their distinctively different professional role, and entirely misses the point."*

In 2011 the project was incorporated into the council's Safeguarding Team and subsequently the CSE team.

As the Inquiry concludes: *"It is doubtful whether its original ethos and style of working can survive this absorption into the statutory system, where it is firmly located in a child protection model. The grounds for the move included the belief that Risky Business lacked managerial and risk assessment skills, the rigour of case management supervision, procedures, risk management plans, defined roles and responsibilities, and office systems. All of which fails to recognise the quality of their work with individual children, and their distinctively different professional role, and entirely misses the point."*<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2 Multi-agency working

*The third and final section of this report proposes a greater use of peer educators to engage and educate victims and those at risk*

In November 2012, Oxfordshire County Council, Children's Social Care and Thames Valley Police set up a special joint team called Kingfisher, with support from the local health service and other statutory and voluntary agencies, to prevent, protect and prosecute cases of Child Sexual Exploitation. This was recognised as good practice by the Local Government Association in March 2013. This will form the basis of a multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) - one of the recommendations of the Home Affairs Select Committee report<sup>8</sup> into child sexual exploitation.

Project Phoenix was set up to develop a cross-boundary multi-agency response to child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester, recognising not just the need for agencies within an area to work together but also to work together across authority boundaries – after all we know that many perpetrators deliberately move their victims across regions and the country to further sever links with family and friends and to avoid detection by statutory authorities.

<sup>7</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997 - 2013 Alexis Jay OBE August 2014

<sup>8</sup> Child sexual exploitation and the response to localised grooming, Home Affairs Select Committee, June 2013

### 3. Peer education - an alternative model of engagement for CSE

The third and final section of this report proposes a greater use of peer educators to engage and educate victims and those at risk; helping them to understand their options, their choices and their rights and referring them to appropriate services as part of a multi-agency approach.

Any successful approach to tackling CSE needs to raise awareness of the problem in their own area; so that it is seen as a problem and can be recognised by all concerned – victims, parents, schools, social workers, police, health workers; even taxi drivers and hotel workers. Similarly, decision-makers in all parts of the statutory sector need to understand the scale and the nature of the problem in their areas if they are to develop effective responses, including prevention and early intervention.

To achieve these desired outcomes requires a trusting relationship between victims and those at risk and those agencies that are charged with protecting them. Experience has shown that all too often this trust is not there, that there is in fact a gap of trust between the two 'sides'.

*To achieve these desired outcomes requires a trusting relationship between victims and those at risk and those agencies that are charged with protecting them.*

**Creating a bridge of trust is vital.**

#### 3.1 Peer educators

It is already understood that adolescence commonly involves an increase in risk taking and rebellion against authority. Peer educators – people of similar ages, experiences and backgrounds to the victims and those at risk – can be valuable as they represent something very different from a teacher or other adult. They do not represent a person of authority telling them not to do something. This allows an additional channel of communication to be opened.

The use of peer educators has already proven successful in areas such as tackling substance abuse, gang membership and teenage pregnancy<sup>9</sup>. They have the credibility that is crucial to them being listened to and for their advice to be heeded. They can disseminate information and advice on how to avoid being the victim of CSE in a powerful and credible way, 'speaking the same language' and building trusting relationships with victims and potential victims. They can provide valuable insight and intelligence on what is happening 'on the ground', informing and being part of strategies for prevention and early intervention.

We believe that peer educators, working as part of a multi-agency approach, can build a bridge of trust between victims and statutory agencies and make a critical difference to the effectiveness of authorities in raising awareness and understanding and, critically, dealing with CSE and coercion in their area.

<sup>9</sup> Judy Orme Fenella Starkey, (1999), "Peer drug education: the way forward?", Health Education, Vol. 99 Iss 1 pp. 8 – 16

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*“Young people have increasingly identified school lessons as their main source of information about sex.”<sup>10</sup>*

### 3.2 Peer educators in the classroom

Straight Talking takes the strengths of this peer education approach and places it in the controlled environment of the classroom. We create the opportunity of contact by targeted working in schools with high truancy, low educational attainment, areas of high income and employment deprivation. We will also target young people who have disengaged from mainstream education i.e. Pupil Referral Units. However, we know that we cannot reach all 'at risk' children through such approaches and there is still a crucial role for outreach services.

### 3.3 Ensuring the quality and effectiveness of peer education

Research<sup>11</sup> has shown that there are challenges in ensuring peer educators are consistently effective. Straight Talking's experience of working with peer educators has revealed the importance of the right infrastructure and support to identify, employ, train and support these peers. Effective quality control, high quality and comprehensive training, a well-structured programme co-designed with and involving peers and strong evaluation to demonstrate the impact and value of the work are all key ingredients in ensuring that peer educators play a vital part in an area's strategy and plans to tackle Child Sexual Exploitation and coercion.

### 3.4 Conclusion

*We believe peer educators have a vital role to play in engaging with victims and those at risk*

It is clear from a review of CSE cases that there exists a gap of trust between victims and the statutory agencies charged with protecting them; we need to build a bridge of trust.

Non-statutory organisations, like Risky Business, have demonstrated that by reaching out to where the victims and those at risk are, without the 'baggage' associated with statutory agencies, they can build trust, enabling awareness of CSE to be raised where it matters and to identify and understand CSE in practice in their area. The reported failures to heed warnings and not take referrals seriously highlight the need for a change in approach from the statutory agencies themselves in how they engage and involve such organisations.

Strong inter-agency working, including the prompt sharing of information and intelligence, is a vital part of a successful approach to tackling CSE: raising awareness; identifying victims and those at risk; securing prosecutions of perpetrators, and; supporting the survivors. Ensuring the voices of victims and survivors are heard in these multi-agency forums, through the inclusion of local voluntary groups such as Risky Business and those involved in Kingfisher and Phoenix, is equally crucial in ensuring that the reality on the ground is well understood and that plans and actions are relevant, practical and most likely to succeed.

We believe peer educators have a vital role to play in engaging with victims and those at risk; raising awareness of the risks of CSE and coercion, helping to understand the scale and nature of the problem in an area and, crucially, building a much needed bridge of trust between victims and the statutory agencies charged with protecting them.

Since 1998, Straight Talking, a registered charity, has been delivering quality-controlled peer education in schools. The charity employs teenage mothers and young fathers to present the realities of early parenthood to pupils aged 13-17. Young parents experience high rates of abuse and many tell us that they have experienced CSE.

Comprehensively trained young parents bring their experiences and skills into the classroom and their powerful engagement is highly effective in giving pupils the information and tools they need to protect themselves in their community.



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### FURTHER ONLINE REFERENCES

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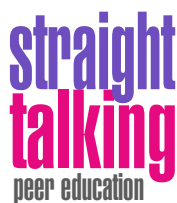
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