

It was Hard to Escape: Safeguarding Children at Risk from Child Exploitation

First National Review completed by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel

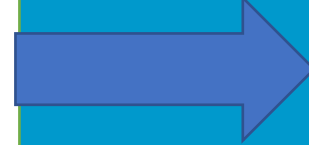
Background

This review asked two connected questions:

1. Do adolescents in need of state protection from criminal exploitation get the help they need, when they need it?
2. How can the services designed to keep adolescents safe from criminal exploitation, and the way those services work together, be improved to prevent further harm?

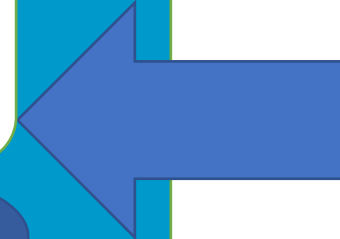
The review found that in relation to question one the answer was 'not always', although there is a lot of good practice to build upon. In relation to question two, the review found a number of ways in which services could be improved, including working more effectively with families and responding in a timely way to when children are likely to be at their most vulnerable.

The focus of this review was the service response to those young people who had already been drawn into criminal exploitation and where high levels of risk of serious harm had been identified.



Findings

- **Ethnicity and gender appear to be factors** The review found that boys from black and minority ethnic backgrounds appear to be more vulnerable to harm from criminal exploitation. In the cohort of 21 children, 15 were from a black or minority ethnic background and all of them were male. This is a serious concern
 - **Known risk factors around vulnerability do not always act as predictors** The common indicators of vulnerability were not present in the lives of many of the children who were the subject of these criminal exploitation cases (the major exception is exclusion from school). For example, only two of the 21 children were looked after by the local authority and the remainder all lived at home with parents or extended family.
 - **Exclusion from mainstream school is seen as a trigger point for risk of serious harm** Seventeen of the children who died or experienced serious harm had been permanently excluded from mainstream education. Permanent exclusion was identified by practitioners and family members as a trigger for a significant escalation of risk.
 - **Effective practice is not widely known about or used** Even when local areas and practitioners know the children at risk of being drawn into criminal exploitation, many are not confident about what they can do to help them. There are a number of different approaches being taken across the country but little reliable evidence of what works, and no central point where effective evidence is evaluated and disseminated.
 - **Trusted relationships with children are important** We believe that building a trusted relationship between children and practitioners is essential to effective communication and risk management¹. Establishing such relationships takes time and skill. Above all, persistence, tenacity, creativity, and the ability to respond quickly are key qualities required of practitioners.
- Responding to the 'critical moment'** There are critical moments in children's lives when a decisive response is necessary to make a difference to their long-term outcomes. Professionals told us that this is likely to include: the point at which they are excluded from school, when they are physically injured, when they are arrested.
- **Parental engagement is nearly always a protective factor** Parents and extended family members need effective support in helping them manage risk from outside the home. This is skilled work and requires building good relationships with parents. A number of parents we spoke to felt blamed and therefore alienated from attempts by services to help.
 - **Moving children and families works for a short period but is not effective as a long-term strategy** Moving children or whole families out of the area provides a breathing space and immediate safety but was not effective as a medium- or longer-term strategy. There must be a clear and consistent plan for supporting the child and managing risk in the new location
 - **More priority should be given to disrupting perpetrator activity** At the local level, there was little information or working knowledge among safeguarding partnerships of what intervention strategies were being taken against the perpetrators of criminal exploitation.
 - **The National Referral Mechanism (NRM)¹ is not well understood and is inconsistently used** Young people who are being criminally exploited are often referred to the NRM in the hope that it will give them protection. The review found that the NRM's original purpose does not always fit well with the circumstances of this group of children and that understanding and use of the NRM was patchy.
 - **Comprehensive risk management arrangements can make a difference** Evidence from the cases reviewed suggested that an intensive risk management plan which includes control measures such as electronic tags, within the context of a good relationship with the child and with parental support, can be effective in reducing risk



Conclusions and recommendations

The Panel believes there are some clear indicators of a service response which has the potential to reduce the risk of harm to this group of children. Based on the learning from the review, the report outlines a practice framework that should provide a more comprehensive approach at the point when a child has been identified as being at risk of criminal exploitation.



There were 3 further National recommendations from this review which focus on:

1. a review of Working Together 2018 to reflect the specific circumstances of this group of children who are at risk of criminal exploitation
2. a review of the use of the National Referral Mechanism
3. data collection to improve local and national understanding of prevalence, characteristics, and service response

There were a number of key learning points for local agencies which focus on:

1. understanding the nature and scale of the problem and identifying children engaged with and at risk from criminal exploitation
2. tailored support for front line staff
3. service design and practice development
4. quality assurance

Pan-Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership



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