

Operation Brooke Serious Case Review

The Findings:

1. The multi-agency system is not set up to provide an effective response for adolescents (including those at risk of CSE) with a complexity of needs at the time and pace they need it, leaving children with a fragmented and reactive response to different aspects of their behaviour.
2. A confused and confusing stance in national policy about adolescent sexual activity, leaves professionals and managers struggling to recognise and distinguish between sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and/or underage sexual activity; this risks leaving some children at continued risk of exploitation in the mistaken belief they are involved in consensual activity.
3. The child protection process in England has primarily been designed for familial child abuse/neglect; in the absence of concerns about abuse or neglect by parents/carers, victims of sexual exploitation are likely to receive an inconsistent response to their safeguarding needs.
4. In cases involving sexual exploitation, there is a pattern of focusing primarily on trying to stop victims having further involvement with perpetrators, and less on the prevention of the abuse in the first place and the disrupting and prosecuting of perpetrators: this means victims often continue to be at ongoing risk of abuse by the same perpetrators.
5. Our current working methods and recording systems do not reliably identify patterns in individual and group behaviour. This reduces the chances of a timely response in the detection of victims and perpetrators of child sexual exploitation and leads to a more reactive rather than proactive approach.
6. The decision to make the investigation of these crimes into a complex investigation in May 2013 enabled the police to adequately resource an enquiry, which led to the successful prosecution of the offenders and the co-ordinated multi-agency support for the victims.
7. Locally LSCBs and the wider multi-agency partnership have collaborated to develop CSE/Missing strategy and action plans but these take time to embed so there is a disconnect between strategic understanding to drive improvement and the reality of the front line.

Messages for professionals from the children involved:

1. Recognise that it is very hard for us to see ourselves as victims and therefore to have any insight into what help we

need. When we are displaying difficult and challenging behaviour, we want professionals from all agencies to have a greater awareness of this, especially schools. "Don't just exclude us for not wearing the right uniform, help us if we are being bullied" We also want schools to know how to work better with parents especially when you are being bullied or having trouble making friends.

2. Know it is really embarrassing to talk about sexual things to adults, especially if those sexual experiences have hurt you. We want professionals, including sexual health nurses and GPs to ask us better questions, be more inquisitive and if necessary to examine us when we ask for morning after pills, or seem very young for contraception. We may have hidden bruises and marks, so do not take everything we say at face value. Don't get so hung up on confidentiality, sometimes you do need to share what we have said.
3. Understand that if we do talk about sex it is really important that you must not look embarrassed or go red, this just shuts us up. Your embarrassment stops children talking.
4. Some people became really important to us leading up to court and when the trial is over we miss them.
5. Be clear that it is so hard to say what is happening and we really worry it will get back to our families; we are also worried that we may get hurt by some of the people who did this if they found out I/we had told (an attempt to tell resulted in one child being gang raped).
6. It is difficult to trust teachers, as soon as you speak we worry they will ring our family and this will get back to the perpetrators. However we want teachers to notice behaviour changes, to try and talk to us and notice our unhappiness. Do not blame us or ignore us, but explore behavioural changes with us and sensitively involve our parents understanding risks for us.
7. Having BASE (Barnardo's CSE project) there was really good, we met others in the same situation and workers are kind and listened to us but also we did stuff, like cooking and making things, at CAMHS they just want us to talk about the past and that is too difficult. If you want us to share, do stuff with us; find places that are comfortable out of your offices, though not just McDonalds. The Barnardo's healthy relationships and risk awareness project was very good. All children at risk need a safe refuge to go to like BASE; this is very important.
8. If we go missing our families need advice quickly on what to do. If you don't trust us or don't believe what we say, follow us and check it out. Parents should not get angry if we go missing but try and make us feel loved and that we can tell them anything.

9. Think about whether social workers could be called something else as it does not describe their job very well. One child said social workers are, "suffocated by rules and professionalism". We wanted social workers to listen better, build relationships and find ways to connect with us. They wanted agencies to employ the right people. Also understand we are really scared of being taken into care, please support us better at home. Our Mums' need a separate social worker not the same one.
10. The public need to be aware of what can happen and report what they see, if children are in a hotel with a group of older males this is not normal, ring and tell the police.
11. Have services available on demand and at night, this is when we really need you, when you need support it can be really lonely at night. We need help over a long period of time as it takes time to build trust and confidence. Once we are over 18 we will still need help, and BASE are not allowed to stay with us: we may not be ready for adult services.
12. Passing on information makes us very anxious, so a lot of stuff does not get said. We know you need to do it, but it puts us in very risky situations if it gets passed around the community.