

Whose child now?

Fifteen years of
working to prevent the
sexual exploitation of
children in the UK

**Believe in
children**



Barnardo's





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Foreword



There is no more important work than our work to rescue children from sexual abuse by adults. There is no area of our work which I admire more. No area which moves me more.

Recently I spent a night with colleagues from one of the services mentioned in this publication. I met children and young people who were in extreme danger. They weren't angels, but their lives had descended into such depths that they could be manipulated by predatory adults to sell themselves for paltry sums. There was a quiet and profound despair

about them. But I also saw and met children and young people who, with Barnardo's help, had begun to climb out of the abyss and who were sorting out their lives. With somewhere safe to live, assistance with finding a job and long-term support from Barnardo's, they were beginning to believe that 'things were going to be alright.'

We shouldn't have to do this work. But men are not going to stop the predatory sexual abuse of children. We shall not stop trying to thwart such men and help their victims escape from their clutches.

Martin Narey

Martin Narey
Chief Executive, Barnardo's

Introduction

Dr Thomas Barnardo shocked the Victorian establishment by seeking to help those on whom polite society had turned its back: children forced into so-called prostitution, in the backstreets of London.

At the time he wrote: 'The very saddest of all the child rescue cases which come into my hands are concerned with the saving of young girls from conditions of very grave, often very imminent moral peril; and yet alas, these are by no means few in number.' (Thomas Barnardo, 1889)

Some 120 years later, in 1998, the charity he founded would again raise the controversial issue of 'child prostitution' with the publication of the report *Whose daughter next? Children abused through prostitution*. Revealing some of the sophisticated grooming techniques that predatory adults were using to exploit vulnerable children, this report did not make for comfortable reading. Despite this, there were those who still subscribed to the idea that these children had consented to their own abuse, and

others who simply didn't believe that children could be exploited in this way. The report divided public opinion and marked the beginning of a campaign that would continue until the present day, resulting in the introduction of new Government legislation, important changes to policy and guidance and, for Barnardo's, the creation of new sexual exploitation services.

In 1994, Barnardo's established its first sexual exploitation project in Bradford. Today we have 21 projects supporting children and young people under the age of 18 throughout the UK, and we continue to work hard to turn around the lives of thousands of sexually exploited children.

Fifteen years on, this report explores the continuing hidden nature of the problem and describes what Barnardo's is doing today, while suggesting what action still remains to be taken to further protect exploited children and young people.

Sadly, once again, this report may not make comfortable reading.

The history of Barnardo’s work with sexually exploited children

On 16 July 1998 Barnardo’s issued a press release stating: ‘Men across the country are selling, controlling and abusing children without fear of prosecution.’ These words launched Barnardo’s report *Whose daughter next? Children abused through prostitution*, which was based on the work of the first Barnardo’s sexual exploitation service to open its doors in 1994.

The report exposed a hidden world of highly vulnerable children and young people, exploding the myth that girls could be consenting prostitutes, walking the streets at night and ‘choosing their way of life’. The report showed that, typically, these girls were hidden in bedsits and flats, moved from town to town and often considered their ‘abuser’ to be their boyfriend.

Early information to emerge from this work also indicated a strong correlation with children who were reported missing on a regular basis. A total of 38 out of the 45 young women profiled in 1995 had, at some time in their lives, been reported as a missing person¹. Establishing ‘missing’ as a key indicator of risk for sexual exploitation has become an important feature of Barnardo’s subsequent work.

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 (covering England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2008) was an important milestone in the Barnardo’s campaign to protect sexually exploited children. It introduced

- a raft of new offences that recognised the grooming, coercion and control of children, including:
- S.14 Arranging or facilitating a child sex offence (child under 16)
 - S.15 Meeting a child following sexual grooming (child under 16)
 - S.47 Paying for the sexual services of a child
 - S.48 Causing or inciting child prostitution or pornography
 - S.49 Controlling a child prostitute or a child involved in pornography
 - S.50 Arranging or facilitating child prostitution or pornography
 - S.57,58,59 Trafficking into, within or out of the UK for sexual exploitation.

These offences attract penalties ranging between seven years and life imprisonment, depending on the age of the child and the nature of the offence. In Scotland, similar legislation was introduced in the Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005 and Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009.

Statistics on crime under the Sexual Offences Act 2003

Despite the introduction of new offences across the UK addressing sexual exploitation and trafficking, Barnardo’s is concerned at the low prosecution and conviction rates for these crimes (see below) and feels that this constitutes an ongoing failure to adequately protect young people from this form of abuse. These figures for 2007 are the most recently available figures.

Table – Offenders found guilty at all courts or cautioned for indictable sexual offences relating to child sexual exploitation in England and Wales, 2007.

Offence	Total proceeded against	Total found guilty	Total number of sentences
Abuse of children through prostitution and pornography	43	27	25
Trafficking* for sexual exploitation <small>*(includes offences against adults)</small>	25	15	15

1 Barnardo’s (1998) *Whose daughter next? Children abused through prostitution*, p29. Barnardo’s, Barkingside.

The situation now

How big is the problem of child sexual exploitation?

It is very difficult to say how many children and young people are being sexually exploited across the UK, because the issue is difficult to identify and there is no system in place for recording cases centrally. Our research in 2005² estimated that 1,000 children were at risk of sexual exploitation in London alone. Barnardo’s is currently undertaking further research to establish a figure for the prevalence of this issue across the UK. In the meantime, our previous research has shown that where specialist sexual exploitation services exist, the issue is more likely to be identified and recorded.

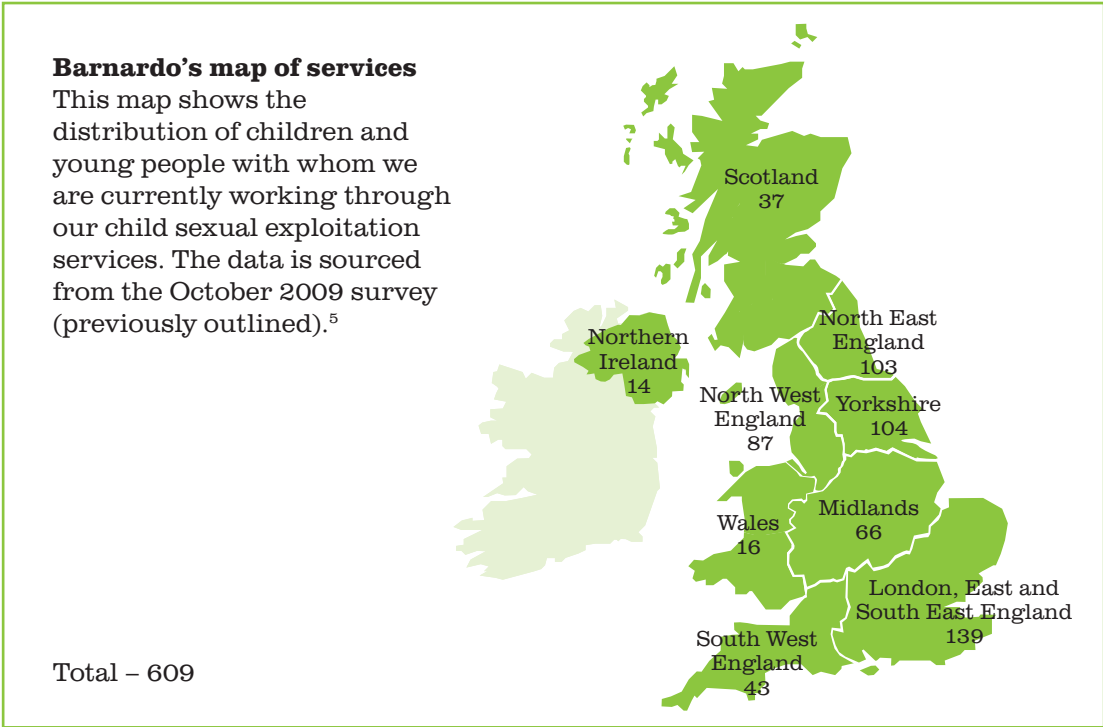
A snapshot survey of Barnardo’s sexual exploitation services (undertaken in October 2009) identified that we are currently supporting more than 600 children and young people through direct work.

Local authority and trust responses to child sexual exploitation

Across the UK there are 209 local authorities and trusts with responsibility for producing Children and Young People Plans (CYPPs)³. Information supplied by the National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People (NWG) in October 2009 suggests that as few as 40 of these⁴ (fewer than 20 per cent) may have any specialist service to meet the needs of this vulnerable group. These figures also indicate that Barnardo’s is working with 50 per cent of the local authorities which provide any service.

What is Barnardo’s doing to support children and young people at risk?

Barnardo’s has 21 services across the UK providing specialist support to children who are sexually exploited or at risk. Many of these sit alongside services for children who go missing, because we recognise that running away on a regular basis can often be a sign of sexual exploitation.



2 Harper, Z and Scott, S (2005) *Meeting the needs of sexually exploited young people in London*. Barnardo’s, Barkingside.
3 This figure is comprised of 150 local authorities in England, 22 in Wales and 32 in Scotland and five trusts in Northern Ireland.
4 Source: National Working Group (NWG), October 2009. NWG is an umbrella membership organisation for services working to support sexually exploited children and young people.
5 These figures do not indicate prevalence of child sexual exploitation across the UK.

The Barnardo’s way of working

Barnardo’s services aim to prevent sexual exploitation while increasing the protection of these vulnerable young people and supporting them to escape exploitation. In addition to direct work with young people, services carry out a range of activities including educational work in schools and other settings, training for other agencies and involvement in multi-agency partnerships.

Our services all use a similar model of support for young people. We describe this as the four A’s model, providing:

- access
- attention
- assertive outreach and
- advocacy for young people in need.

Access

Our services provide a friendly and welcoming environment for young people. They usually provide a kitchen area, showers and washing facilities, a comfortable lounge space and counselling rooms. The larger services may have additional onsite resources, such as fitness equipment, art/activities rooms, a sexual health nurse’s room and outside space, including a garden.

Children and young people can refer directly to our services without having to go through another agency. Information and freephone numbers are distributed in areas local to our projects. Other organisations also refer children and young people to us and we work with these agencies to ensure that they can identify the signs of sexual exploitation and respond accordingly.

We make sure that we are open and honest with children and young people so that they feel confident to talk in a safe and private environment.

Attention

Our services recognise that often children and young people really need positive and consistent attention from adults and this is central to the support we provide. We

do this by giving them a key worker who stays with them throughout their time with the service. This person is able to build trust with the young person over a period of time. Through developing this safe, secure relationship we can then help them look at the difficulties they are experiencing in their lives.

Through a range of one-to-one work and counselling, drop-in support and groupwork activities we are eventually able to help the young person stabilise their life and eventually to leave the situation in which they are being exploited.

Assertive outreach

Many services use a method called ‘assertive outreach’ to engage the young person and help them to accept support. This involves our staff going out on the streets and touring the areas the young people frequent. Staff use a range of techniques, such as frequent text messaging or mobile calls, and home visits in order to stay in contact. The persistence of workers in following up on young people, including those who show little interest, is eventually understood and appreciated as being genuine concern for their well-being. It also signals to the young person that the worker is trustworthy and will not let them down.

Advocacy and links to other services

For many of these young people, everyday life is often chaotic. They might find it difficult to attend appointments with agencies that are trying to support them, such as children’s services, police, health or housing. Barnardo’s services help them to get access to the services they need, keep appointments and advocate for them when relationships with other services break down. We also work with other professionals to increase their understanding of the pressures in young people’s lives. A range of services are necessary to help build a protective network around the young person and Barnardo’s advocacy often makes an immediate difference in helping young people get the help and support they need.

The links between going missing and sexual exploitation

We know from our services that a common feature of child sexual exploitation is running away. In the snapshot survey (October 2009), our services reported that of the 609 children and young people we were supporting at the time, 55 per cent⁶ went missing on a regular basis.

The involvement of children and young people in sexual exploitation does not occur overnight. They may become more vulnerable if they are spending a lot of time away from home, from their care placement or from school because they are running away. National research⁷ estimates that around 100,000 young people under the age of 16 run away from home or care across the UK each year. Although many of these young people will stay with family or friends, others will find themselves in far riskier situations. It is thought that around one in six will sleep rough and one in 12 will come to some harm while they are away⁸.

Unhappy, lonely, young people are flattered and seduced by the attention of streetwise adults, who will appear to sympathize with their situation. In short, they become highly vulnerable to the well-rehearsed grooming techniques of abusing adults.

Each time a young person is reported missing, the police assess their level of risk. If a young person goes missing regularly, there is a danger that professionals become complacent, believing the young person will return as usual or that the young person can somehow manage, or has become more resilient to the risks they face. A recent study⁹ found that just over 12 per cent of local authorities in England had specific services targeted at young people who run away. Barnardo’s believes that, despite

new guidance and targets focused on local authority services to this group, more could be done to monitor and respond to runaway incidents on a local basis.

Trafficking within the UK for child sexual exploitation

It has become apparent from our work with children using our services that some young people are moved around the UK, or from town to town, by adults for child sexual exploitation. The UK Action Plan on Tackling Human Trafficking recognises this as a form of child trafficking and the UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC) is working to raise awareness of this form of child abuse, which is identified in some cases as serious organised crime. Section 58 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 specifies that trafficking within the UK for sexual exploitation is an offence punishable by up to 14 years’ imprisonment. However, the true extent of this crime has been difficult to measure because victims are frequently too afraid or feel too ashamed to make a formal complaint, or have been groomed not to recognise themselves as the victim.

Sometimes a child or young person that a service has been working with goes missing regularly and for several days at a time. In these cases, workers are alert to the possibility that the young person might have been taken away to other towns or locations as part of the exploitation. Our services have become increasingly concerned about this activity, especially where there appears to be a number of adults involved in a network and the exploitation is planned and organised. Fifteen of our 21 services across the UK have encountered cases like these, and we are currently working with approximately 90 young people who appear to be involved in this form of child sexual exploitation (see project profiles).

6 Number = 337. Figures drawn from a survey of Barnardo’s services in October 2009.
7 The Children’s Society’s *Still Running II* (2005).
8 Ibid.
9 Evans, K; Houghton-Brown, M; and Rees, G (2007) *Stepping up: the future of runaways services*. The Children’s Society, London.

Barnardo’s services and the children and young people who use them

Over the following pages we hear from the people on the front line of our services. Our service managers describe the work they undertake with sexually exploited children on a daily basis. We also hear from the young people themselves, who give honest and insightful accounts of their lives and experiences. In many of the accounts from practitioners and the young people alike, the themes of going missing and organised forms of sexual exploitation or trafficking occur repeatedly.

England – SECOS

Barnardo’s SECOS Service aims to identify, support and assist young people at risk of sexual exploitation. The service takes referrals from police and social services for three different types of support: working with children missing from home, intensive direct work with sexually exploited children and outreach support for young people on the streets.

The outreach team is on the streets of a Northern town from 6pm-11pm most evenings, checking parks and places where young people hang out to ensure that children are safe. They visit local known bed and breakfasts, hostels and unsupported accommodation to check for vulnerable children and young people in need of support.

The project is currently working with 48 young people between the ages of 14 and 18. Of this group, 17 were identified via the project’s work with children who had run away from home, and at least 10 were known to have been ‘trafficked’, or moved from one place to another for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Children’s Service Manager Wendy Shepherd

‘The children we work with feel a terrible sense of shame. They’ve been forced to

do awful things by the adults who groom and control them – yet somehow society blames them. A child cannot consent to their own abuse.

‘A frightening number of the children who go missing repeatedly are found to have been sexually exploited. The risk factor is huge and largely ignored. If we could identify these children, and the abusing adults who encourage them to run away, earlier, we could significantly reduce the number of children being exposed to these horrific risks.

‘I believe that sexual exploitation is becoming more organised; the criminals who abuse are more sophisticated. There are networks of older men grooming and trafficking children within the UK. Many of these networks are hidden behind a legitimate taxi business or pizza bar – but it’s a growing phenomenon and it’s extremely difficult to police while the legal emphasis is still on the child to make a complaint.

‘It’s time we started using every aspect of the law to prosecute these men. How can it be right for a 25-year-old to have sex with a 13 or 14-year-old girl? This is abuse and we have a duty to protect these vulnerable children.’

Imogen’s story

‘It’s really hard to talk out about girls being trafficked in this country; no one wants to believe it.’

Born into a family who found it difficult to cope, Imogen was taken into care shortly after her 12th birthday.

‘The girls in the home were all a bit older than me and were going out with older men. At first I just tagged along,’ Imogen says.

Isolated and lonely, she soon became dependent on her new friends. The group would regularly go missing – running away to the boyfriends’ flats and houses. To a 12-year-old it all seemed very exciting.

‘They gave me drink and smokes – it was a laugh. Then one man started to take a special interest in me. He was much older, he was protective – I felt looked after, wanted, loved even. He gave me everything I wanted and when I was 13 he handed over the keys to a flat and said “It’s yours, use it when you need it”.’

For a young girl with no family support and little self-esteem it seemed like a dream come true, but before long it was ‘payback’ time. Imogen suspected that her ‘boyfriend’ was involved with other girls, but one night he asked her to dress up because they were going to a party.

Imogen was taken to London, miles away from her home. She was told to have sex with different ‘friends’. It was a pattern that would soon become all too familiar.

‘I didn’t have any choice – I felt so guilty. Eventually, he’d take me all over the country: Leeds, Bradford, Manchester, London. He’d take me to hotels, some nights two or three.

I never saw any money change hands. Some men asked ‘How old is she?’ Some asked ‘Have you got any younger?’ They were really sick,’ she explains.

Imogen was 13 years old, yet no one questioned her age. Her ‘boyfriend’ was organised. Delivering young girls around the country to abusing men was just business, and he was well practised at this lucrative business...

‘I wanted to escape, but he just controlled me. It was a mental thing – I was terrified,’ she said.

But Imogen’s luck was about to change. Her ‘boyfriend’ was arrested and it gave her the opportunity to escape and make contact with Barnardo’s. With our support, over a long period of time, she went back to school and then on to university – her life has completely turned around.



Wales – SERAF

Barnardo’s Seraf Service was set up in 2006, following the launch of the research *Out of sight, out of mind*¹⁰, which identified the need for a sexual exploitation service in Wales. The project aims to raise awareness of the issue by working with professionals to provide specialist training to aid identification of those at risk and to work with children who have been sexually exploited, focusing on their needs and helping them to understand that they were groomed and abused, in order to keep them safe in the future.

Children’s Service Manager Jan Coles
‘Going missing is a major risk factor for our children and young people. To give a rough estimate of the size of the problem, we’re currently working with 32 young people – 18 of whom have regularly gone missing. This is how it works: a young person goes missing, they’re found or go home. The first time this happens, everyone is alerted, it’s taken seriously. The second time, the response will be

scaled down and so on. Yet these children are at serious risk – in order to protect them we have to fundamentally change our response.

‘Another key issue for us is children being moved from town to town, or trafficked, by abusing adults. We see the same story repeating itself, time after time. A girl will be offered a lift on the street by a bloke in a car, or a friend will take the young girl to a ‘boyfriend’s’ flat. The girl will then be groomed, driven around from place to place and sexually exploited. Taking the definition of trafficking from the Sexual Offences Act ‘moved for the purpose of sexual exploitation’, I’m confident that at least 11 of our young people have been moved around in this way.

‘Yet, for some reason society is still refusing to see what is happening; we are still attributing blame to the young person and we are still allowing the real criminals to go free. You only have to look at the prosecution figures to prove that.’



10 Coles, J (2005) *Out of sight: child sexual exploitation*. Barnardo’s Cymru, Cardiff.

Susan’s story
Susan has always had a fairly chaotic lifestyle and found it difficult to settle in school, but her life fell apart at age 13, when her mother died.

‘I didn’t get along with my Dad and I hated school, so I just moved out. No one seemed to notice. I suppose I wasn’t important. I got into drinking – it helped me forget,’ Susan says.

Susan quickly developed a history of going missing and was introduced to a friend’s dad, who offered her a place to stay for the night and what seemed like an endless supply of alcohol. The man was 43.

‘He paid for all my drink. I suppose he did it to keep me quiet. Soon I didn’t care about anything. He got what he wanted and he wanted to use me. I drank more and more to block it out,’ she continues.

Fast developing a serious drink problem, being kept secretly in a flat by a violent, abusing man and with no one to confide in, Susan’s life began slipping away. At the height of the abuse, Susan was drinking up to three bottles of spirits and several cans of strong lager every single day. She was 13.

Then one day, Susan was taken to a ‘friend’s flat’ and was ordered to sleep with other men. She refused, but her

resistance was futile and she was beaten until she ‘did what she was told’.

Dependent on alcohol, self-harming and with nowhere to go, Susan felt trapped. But by a strange twist of fate, her abuser was arrested, which thankfully delivered her directly into the hands of the police. Social services would later put her in touch with Barnardo’s.

‘If it hadn’t been for that, I think that I’d probably be dead by now. No, I’d definitely be dead. The Barnardo’s

‘The Barnardo’s people just talked to me, they were the first ones to ever take any real notice, the first ones to care.’

people just talked to me, they were the first ones to ever take any real notice, the first ones to care,’ says Susan.

Despite the damage done to her health by the alcohol, Susan has made a good recovery and is no longer drinking. She has her own home – a supported housing flat – and is looking forward to starting college. Susan now realises that she was exploited and is helping other young people at the project to understand how abusing adults can groom and manipulate vulnerable girls and boys.

Northern Ireland –
SAFE CHOICES

The Safe Choices NI Service works with children and young people who go missing from care – either residential children’s homes, foster care or kinship care – with the aim of protecting them from sexual exploitation and harm.

This service began life as a sexual exploitation project, but was refocused, to reflect the high number of children attending the service who were habitually going missing from care and were at risk of sexual exploitation. More than 70 per cent of referrals to the original service were for looked after children.

The service provides risk assessment, information, advice, advocacy and support to children of all ages.

Children’s Service Manager
Jacqui Montgomery-Devlin

‘Soon after Barnardo’s started to work with children who were sexually exploited, we identified a strong link between going missing and vulnerability

to exploitation. What we didn’t realise at the time was just how important this would prove to be.

‘From our work in Northern Ireland, I would say that approximately 90 per cent of the children we see, who go missing on a regular basis, are being sexually exploited in some way. It is almost impossible to estimate the true extent of the problem; the children often have no choice over what they do, they are frequently controlled by a predatory adult and in most cases they have little or no means of escape. Violence or threats become a daily way of life. At the same time many young people do not recognise that they are being exploited due to the complex and manipulative nature of the situations.

‘The only possible way to help these children is to change our attitude to those who go missing. Children who disappear either from care, or family homes, even for short periods of time, need to be prioritised by the key agencies with responsibility for safeguarding them. We need to act now, before it’s too late.’



Rosie’s story

‘I felt about 90 years old. I was brought into a world of drugs and sex – things I knew nothing about. These men are evil; they just want to hurt children.’

Rosie never really knew her parents; she was fostered as a baby and told that her real mother was an alcoholic. By the age of 10 she had started going missing and her foster parents found it difficult to cope.

‘Looking back now, I didn’t realise how dangerous it was – anything could have happened to me. I started staying away for longer and getting in with the wrong crowd,’ explains Rosie.

“I felt isolated and scared. You just get trapped and there is nothing that you can do.”

Aged 12, she was moved to a children’s home. But things went from bad to worse. Rosie stopped going to school regularly, and became friendly with a group of children who would go missing for days on end. Worse still, the ‘friends’ were being targeted for exploitation.

‘There were men who would take us out. They would give us drink and then drugs. They’d get us to do things for them, you know. I see now that they used me, but I felt isolated and scared. You just get trapped and there is nothing that you can do,’ Rosie continues.

The men targeting the group of vulnerable teenagers were all in their 30s. Rosie was just 14. They knew how to work the system, so Rosie and her friends would go missing for just one or two days and would then be returned to the home. Because the children would regularly go missing, paperwork was completed and the police informed, but no one would really try to find out what was happening.

‘I wanted to escape, but I just didn’t know how. Men of this age (30s) who want to have sex with young 14-year-old girls are just paedophiles.’

Then one evening, Rosie saw a programme on the television about a new Barnardo’s service for sexually exploited young people. She called the helpline and next day made contact with the service manager.

‘Rosie turned up at the project with a black eye: she’d been heavily beaten,’ says Jacqui Montgomery-Devlin. ‘She looked so tiny and her face was drawn. Rosie had seen things and been forced to do things that no child should ever be put through.’

Today Rosie has just passed GCSEs in Maths and English and has applied for a college place to continue her studies. She’s moved away from the men who abused her and finally feels safe.

‘The best thing was just having someone to talk to,’ she says. ‘Thanks to the likes of Jacqui, I went back to college and have a place to live. My life is back on track.’



Scotland – SAFER CHOICES

The Safer Choices Service in Scotland aims to work directly with children at risk of sexual exploitation: providing counselling and one-to-one practical advice sessions, street work at night and preventative work in mainstream schools and children's units.

In 2007-08, the project worked with 138 young people, 58 per cent of whom had been missing.

Two-thirds of the children the project worked with were female, while 70 per cent of the young people were aged between 14 and 16. The youngest girl the project worked with was just 10 years old. They found her late at night, alone, in a red light district and immediately contacted the police. She was later assessed to be at risk of sexual exploitation and the project worked closely with her for some months.

Children's Service Manager Daljeet Dagon

'We work closely with the police and social work services, but often it's

our workers who will ask the children questions that others are either too scared or too embarrassed to ask. That's our job: it's what we're trained to do.

'In Scotland, we are supporting more children within the family home these days. Our work is focused on the city centre, but we're becoming more and more aware of children being internally trafficked, or moved from one region to another for the purpose of sexual exploitation. In these cases, there is nearly always an abusing adult controlling a group of children – it's a common experience.

'It's difficult to get exact figures on this, because the prosecution rate against these abusing males is so low. But we are regularly meeting sexually exploited children, who know each other well despite the fact that they come from completely different areas of town. In fact, the only feature they have in common, the only thing that connects them, is the fact that they know the abuser. He will be the centre of the network. This is organised; this is carefully planned – it doesn't just happen by accident.'

Aisha's story

'I started going missing when I was 11 and I met this boy – he was 17. He forced me to do things I didn't want to do. I drank to block it out.'

Aisha was known to social work services all of her life and started having a drink problem when she was just 11 years old. Growing up against a chaotic background, where her mother was an alcoholic and in violent relationships, Aisha used alcohol to block out the world. Before long she began running away from home – not realising the danger at the time.

'No one really cared about me; I don't think they noticed if I didn't come home. I didn't like it when mum's 'boyfriend' was round, I suppose I got scared.

'So I started going missing for a few nights – I was 11. Then I met this boy. He was 17 and really paid me a lot of attention. He let me stay in his house and I thought he loved me. Then he forced me to have sex. I didn't want this to happen, I said no,' says Aisha.

Aisha's drink problems accelerated and her 'boyfriend' introduced her to drugs. Before long she had stopped attending school and was self harming by cutting herself. Eventually Aisha was placed in secure accommodation – but it was only a temporary measure.

The 'missing' episodes continued and when Aisha was 14 a friend introduced her to another older man. He was 35 years old and quickly realised Aisha's vulnerability.

'He'd pick me up and take me to loads of different places to meet his friends. Sometimes we'd go with other girls. At first it was all right,' Aisha says. Although she didn't know it, Aisha was

being groomed. After three months her new 'boyfriend' started getting violent: he would punch and kick her. Then he'd demand sex and didn't appear to care that he hurt her. Aisha couldn't make him stop.

Then one day she was taken to one of the 'regular flats' and he told her to have sex with his friends. Isolated

“I thought he loved me. Then he forced me to have sex. I didn't want this to happen, I said no.”

and frightened, Aisha said 'no way', but when her 'boyfriend' threatened to beat her, she was forced to do as she had been told. This was how the pattern of sexual exploitation started. It happened more and more, in different towns and different flats. Often, she was not alone; other girls were being 'used' too.

But Aisha's behaviour and constant missing episodes had raised concerns with social services and Barnardo's became involved. Within three months, her missing episodes had dropped from several episodes every week, to one or two per month. Gradually she came to realise that she was not to blame for her own abuse because there had been a complex process of grooming and sexual exploitation.

Today Aisha is 16 years old and back in education. She's stopped running away and self harming and has set herself goals in life. For many, these would seem small steps, but for Aisha, her life has been completely turned around.

What Barnardo's thinks should happen now

In 2009, new guidance was issued to local authorities in England and Wales to reflect the new Sexual Offences Act 2003 and to help them safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation. This describes the roles and responsibilities of the different organisations and individuals who work with children and young people and, in particular, the role of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) in leading this work. It says that all local authorities should be aware of sexual exploitation and should identify whether action needs to be taken locally to combat it.

Barnardo's welcomes this new guidance as a real step towards ending the sexual exploitation of children. However, we are also concerned that the guidance can only be as effective as its implementation at a local level. As described on page 7, information from the National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People (NWG), based upon known specialist services for child sexual exploitation, be these provided by statutory authorities (the police, health or children's services) or by an independent organisation such as Barnardo's, suggests that up to 80 per cent of local authorities across the UK currently have no targeted services for these children and young people.

Barnardo's calls for all local authorities and trusts with responsibility for children to take action on child sexual exploitation. This includes:

- undertaking a local risk assessment to ascertain if sexual exploitation is an issue in the authority's area
- where sexual exploitation is an issue, providing or funding specialist sexual exploitation services to support children and young people at risk
- ensuring that people working in services for children and young people are properly trained to recognise the signs and take action if they think a young person is at risk.



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Whose child now? Fifteen years of working to prevent the sexual exploitation of children in the UK

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Some images posed by models.
Names have been changed to protect identities.

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