

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

along the journey from victims to survivors

May 2016

Children's Rights along the Journey from Victims to Survivors: The UK Focus Groups

A brief review of the findings from focus groups with professionals working with child victims of sexual offences in the UK

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This document is an output from the UKIERI (UK India Education and Research Initiative) project funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), the Foreign and Commonwealth office, British Council Division, Ministry of Human Resource Development- Government of India, Department of Science and Technology-Government of India, The Scottish Government, Department of Learning-Northern Ireland, and Welsh Assembly, for the benefit of the India Higher and Further Education Sector and the UK Higher and Further Education Sector. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the funding bodies.

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1.0 Background to the focus groups – the project

These focus groups were conducted as part of a project funded under the UK-India Education Research Initiative (UKIERI) programme, and involved a team from the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in the UK working together with a team based at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tamil Nadu, India.

The project aims to examine the implementation and enforceability of children's rights in relation to criminal justice system responses to child victims of sexual offences in India and the UK, and aims to devise, identify and develop a framework for legislation and good practice to translate these rights into enforceable obligations. The publications from the project are available on the project website

<http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/explore/projects/childrens-rights-along-the-journey-from-victims-to-survivors.php>

2.0 Methodology

The qualitative research involved three focus groups with representative stakeholders and two interviews with relevant professionals with experience of working with child victims or young people, some of the professionals also having experience of working with perpetrators. The groups included representatives of both local and national organisations and agencies, including third sector organisations. The focus group discussions were guided by a set of outline questions for discussion (Appendix 1), which were informed by a review of the UK literature and informal meetings with stakeholders including representative of local and national statutory and non-statutory organisations, and individuals involved in child protection. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and then the content analysed and coded manually in order to identify key thematic findings.

3.0 Findings

There was consensus among participants around many of the core themes, such as education and awareness, the need for improved services, and concerns around the court system, combined with some very specific concerns around young people's vulnerability and the abuse of young males.

3.1 Education and Awareness

The focus group participants discussed current Levels of awareness of sexual abuse and exploitation, and the extent and adequacy of education and training to raise awareness and understanding, amongst children, potential perpetrators and the general public. The stakeholders identified the need to challenge the stigma around child sexual exploitation and to challenge stereotypes which blame victims:

“children are still blamed, you know ‘they’re the ones putting themselves at risk, they’re the ones wearing miniskirts, they’re the ones going online’ and therefore it must be their fault somehow.”

3.1.1 Education and Awareness for Children

The majority of participant stakeholders believed children's current levels of awareness of possible victimisation to be good, reflecting educational initiatives and programmes, and leading to a higher level of awareness of the nature of abuse than in previous decades:

"I think awareness is really good ...the playing field...even a couple ...of years ago, it's drastically changed... we've had a huge turn to the positive... we've really raised awareness"

Professionals in the focus groups believe children at much younger ages should be made aware of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

"I think the younger the better, I know people don't like the idea of the sex education but I think looking at healthy relationships and safe touching and what is right and wrong and trusted adults that you can speak to I think that's a good way to go forward."

"I think five and six year olds are far more aware than everybody gives them credit for and I think that kids talk together far more than they talk to adults because it's like keeping secrets, if one child just says to another 'does your mummy do this?' you know and the other child so says 'no I've been told that's not right' that would just open up so many more doors. It really would and morning school clubs, after school clubs, all that, you can get little snippets in, you know, 'this isn't right' and I think that it does need to go younger and more hard hitting".

".....awareness has got to be from the start, I mean, at five or six you know, let your kids know he shouldn't be touching you there and you shouldn't be letting me and if he does it's wrong. You know, if you have those thoughts and you want to touch that young baby then you need to speak to someone because that is wrong."

Although progress has been made, the participants expressed concerns that there are still misconceptions, and areas worthy of further educational initiatives, especially those focused on children during the early years stages of their education:

"a lot of people are still under the misconception that rape often happens in the dead of night by a stranger and it doesn't. It's very rare – it does happen, but it's not very common at all."

Professionals within the focus groups had concerns that child sexual abuse and exploitation is often more nuanced and complex than is commonly portrayed, involving a range of methods and perpetrators:

"equally somebody can be offended against maybe on a few occasions, if they were absolutely so unlucky enough for that to happen, by maybe three different people in different scenarios. You know I don't think there is any why or where for it. I don't think there is a set pattern".

“one of the biggest things you have got at the moment is this finally being recognised, peer exploitation and peer abuse because there are young people who will groom other young people or will groom situations and will purposefully exploit you know peers, in all sorts of different ways.....with online worlds it is so much easier now, but you have got that and you have got all the other different models and different way that it can happen, and kind of makes it more complex because again people are starting to understand one type of abuse...”

3.1.2 Education, Awareness and Attitudes to Perpetrators

Educating potential perpetrators was also recognised as important, and there was an expressed desire from some participants to extend and expand existing work on harmful sexual behaviours:

“I think there is a need for work with perpetrators. And you all may not agree but I think you can change a perpetrator’s attitudes and beliefs. However you cannot change someone’s sexuality and that’s the difficulty”.

The diversity and variety of sexual offences involving children and young people, which can include contact and non-contact offences of widely varying seriousness, was highlighted, combined with reflection on the diversity and variety of perpetrators, in terms of harmful behaviours, risk and dangerousness:

“.... I think you have got a variety of perpetrators.....opportunistic....especially with younger teenagers, and those are the ones that you can challenge those views and educate”

Alongside considering children as victims, the professional stakeholders explored issues relating to children and young people as perpetrators, and commented on sex offenders more broadly. There was a perceived difference between young offenders who display negative attitudes, who were seen as potentially amenable to preventive interventions, and more serious, committed repeat offenders:

“.....one group that worries me is the younger teens who express negative views to girls in general but they can be maybe challenged” but then you have the ones that will do anything to get close to a child.....”

The view that sex offenders can be treated, or prevented from reoffending, was presented in counterpoint to perceived current negative societal attitudes that do not consider sex offenders as amenable to change, nor deserving of the opportunity to change:

“people have gone to the doctors and said ‘give me more hormones, don’t let me have these feelings’..... Anybody deserves a second chance, anybody, and there are horrific crimes that have gone on, where you can say ‘but not them’..... but if those people are willing to change and they really are and they are really trying, I think that society itself needs to back that.”

3.1.3 Education for the Public

Awareness of child sexual exploitation is improving and a number of targeted programmes have been developed, such as that established in Lancashire by the Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board and Lancashire County Council:

"...the idea is to equip and prepare the schools so they are able to respond better and know where to go and how to support children and in each school they are identifying one child sexual exploitation champion so somebody who will be the person everybody else can go to and who knows whom to contact within the police and who to contact within social care. So I know that at the moment there is about 400 and odd identified champions across Lancashire'

High-profile cases in the news media have been significant in raising visibility and awareness, and a number of participants highlighted these cases as prompting an increase in the number of referrals, one participant referring to these cases as a 'trigger'.

In some areas, including Blackpool, taxi drivers are given training on sexual exploitation awareness, and the local authority is exploring the possibility of training hoteliers to recognise the signs of child sexual exploitation, and educating them on how to proceed:

".....I do still think it could be better though because.....it needs to go further afield and I think it needs to be made more nationally known. I think there are many, many people that don't know that this goes on, and they wouldn't give it a second thought. They think 'oh no not me, not my family', well you need to wise up because it can be anybody. I think we need to keep plugging away at it and not stop for one minute.

3.2 Children and Young Peoples' Vulnerability

A theme underpinning all the groups was the perception that certain children and young people are vulnerable to abuse or exploitation, due to the familial or social circumstances and environments in which they find themselves. Dysfunctional and unstable family situations were identified as environments in which children could be abused without children being able to disclose or challenge the abuse, in the absence of a responsible and protective parent or caregiver, where "they don't have those protection barriers."

Children in care were described as particularly at risk of repeat victimisation, lacking 'protection barriers', with criticism being levelled at social care services which were characterised as "(letting) people down again and again and again". Where children have been taken into care, or moved in order to escape the abuse, the abuse may not end as the child or young person may still be "creeping back" to their previous town and experience continued abuse, even in care homes, where "they know how many hours they are allowed out before the police get called'."

Sexual exploitation and grooming may not be recognised by children and young people themselves, and professionals in contact with the children become of central importance in recognising signs of abuse and exploitation:

"They don't come up and say "hey, I'm being sexually exploited"...they might come forward and say...it might be the classic symptoms, they stop attending school, all their achievement goes down, their relationship with parents is poor because they're always out and about, they're getting gifts that they can't account for, money they can't account for, and there's lots of questioning going on there."

Young people may blame themselves, especially if they have consumed alcohol or drugs, and this self-blame can be encouraged by abusers who, as one professional put it, "get into their heads" and "they prey on the guilt." Young people may lack the assertiveness to stand up to an abuser, and may be afraid:

"Some young people we speak to, there's also that confidence issue... If you get a 15 year old girl and she says 'well, it wasn't rape but I didn't say no', she might be too scared...they're not not-consenting, but they're not consenting either... They haven't put up a fight, they just allowed it to happen, but it might have been a total confidence issue...How's she going to say no? Particularly after she's had a drink, and feels that she has allowed herself into that situation... And she might not even think she's a victim, there's a balance of power going on that we need to be very aware of and educate young women and young men that they can say no, that it's OK to say no..."

Individuals may also be scared to come forward about the abuse or exploitation, and the professionals discussed how after reporting young people may withdraw their allegations. When a child or young person has been abused, they may not know whom they can trust:

"when it comes to sexual exploitation, because a child that has been groomed in the whole process of coming through with the disclosure will at times either through fear for all sorts of different reasons withdraw, say it again and then say it slightly different and that's all part of being groomed and coming to the point of, 'do I trust these people enough to disclose or not? Or did I say too much that I shouldn't have? Or I'm too scared to say anything, should I go ahead with this?' And that's one of the issues.

"Some older teenagers have maybe reported that something has happened maybe in a social environment and they have reported it, and then they have started to back off when the police have really got involved..... Whether that's fear or embarrassment or whatever or if it's because of the questioning I don't know. But that happens."

The research suggests that when a child or young person has been abused or exploited, factors such as alcohol, drugs and mental health are all interlinked, and can be used as part of a process of psychological and emotional manipulation by abusers:

“Once alcohol or a smoke is introduced, your mind is distorted anyway and your memory...if you're twelve or thirteen and someone touches you and you have had a drink or whatever and they tell you they haven't... you're going to believe that, 'well actually that guy's alright, you know?'”

When a child or young person has been exploited or abused and statutory services become involved then there may be a gap in longer term service provision, and when a young person turns sixteen years of age then problems of consent come into play:

“Over 16 is a real challenge because the whole concept of consent comes in and although you have still got safeguarding that applies 'till 18 years old you've got consent, so it depends on the circumstances. So we have got some 16-17 year olds that are supported and the cases are still taken forward to court. But it's the majority of them aren't, as people say 'well there is nothing we can do about it.' So it's a real issue.”

“16-17 year olds won't report sexual attacks or abuse because they won't be believed or nothing will get done about it because you know they must have consented and therefore it's their fault, therefore nothing is going to happen, and yes it's a real challenge”.

Particular challenges emerge when the young person reaches the age of eighteen:

“you don't stop being vulnerable once you turn eighteen... once you turn 17-18 all services withdraw and you're an adult but yet all the abuse that has been going on and progress we have finally started to make, even those cases when you have got lots of services involved at 16-17, and then the magic night comes and surely you must be able to look after yourself because you're an adult now.”

3.3 Victimisation of Boys and Young Men

The stakeholders identified the particular challenges posed when boys and young men experience sexual victimisation:

“People will consider a whole range of possibilities for a boy's behaviour but not include the possibility that they could have been groomed or that there could be sexual abuse and that's why for a long time a lot of disclosures for boys tended to be historic disclosure because it took a lot of time for them to get to a point of disclosure.”

“But you're right in what you're saying there is still a way to go and there is still a bit of stigma especially with lads, I can imagine it's extremely difficult for a lad to declare the abuse.”

“We forget there's a lot of same sex grooming as well, particularly, perhaps young boys with, perhaps, men...”

“We do work with a lot of boys but were always challenging the views around boys and we had a particular school where we were going to do some work

and we had two short films to show. One with a girl and one with a boy and teachers had asked to see the films first as this was the first time we had been into the school, and when they saw the boy they went, 'oh no you can't show that it would upset far too many people' and your just thinking you're just perpetuating that idea that it is ok to abuse boys because they will not come forward."

3.4 Disclosing Abuse and Exploitation

In child sexual abuse and exploitation cases many victims may not want to come forward or disclose the abuse:

"I bet if everybody had to tell the truth it would be remarkable to see how many people have experienced something as awful as that in their lives. And that is why statistics will never be 100% because there are millions of people who will never disclose."

"what might happen is that a young person might disclose to us, or we might have a lot of young people who are 'at risk of' ...and some of the young people who are "at risk of" might be victims, it's just that there is no disclosure..."

3.5 Children, Families and Caregivers

Children may receive little support from family members, which participants suggested may be due to a lack of understanding or unwillingness on the part of parents to accept what might have happened, especially if that threatens the stability of family relationships:

"..... a lot of the young people are in step-family situations and their mum is now happy and they don't want to say anything because that will upset the mother and upset the relationship if they say anything about being abused."

The issue of whom children can trust, and cases where '...step dad has abused them and the mum has sided with step dad' was identified by participants as a factor with which they were familiar, recounting cases where children had not been supported by their mother where their stepfather or her partner may be the alleged abuser: in such cases "they have to come with grandma or their foster parents' (Wendy, Witness Service). This situation, and the experiences of children, was a key concern for some participants, who identified the harm not just from the abuse but from being disbelieved and unsupported, often by a mother:

"You know that must be so terrifying for the child to think' not only is he doing this to me, but my mum isn't protecting me'."

Linked to the challenges of being disbelieved and unsupported, some participants who worked directly with children highlighted the collusion of some parents, who either view the exploitation and abuse as unproblematic, or who benefit from the situation by means of, in some cases, financial and other rewards:

"..... a young girl was working for free at a takeaway for her so-called boyfriend but was being passed around, but her parents thought it was OK, he was a nice man, they got free taxis, they got free takeaways and "what was (the) problem really?" ... it.....to them, their daughter is having a relationship with somebody older that takes care of them, that treats them. ..Is really nice to the family, is really pleasant, might slip them the odd tenner, and everybody's happy...."

Exploitation and abuse may be tacitly accepted by parents due to their own vulnerabilities, as in the case highlighted by one youth worker in which three children were being abused but the mother benefited financially in the context of her own substance dependency:

"they were doing errands and being sent to this older bloke's house and he was buying them things...and mum thought it was OK because she benefited from it, she got some of the money...mum was a very heavy drug user so for her to understand what was going on...her ultimate goal was she wanted money for drugs, and by them associating with this older man she got money for drugs....."

The professionals who participated believed that more support should be made available to parents who believe and want to support their children, as "there's all sorts of emotions going on there and they need some support as they are psychologically and emotionally affected". In addition, as one participant pointed out, "there is a better understanding by professionals so earlier referrals and people are becoming more confident about talking about it, but we're finding with parents there's still a stigma".

3.6 The Criminal Justice Process

The participants stressed that the court process has improved in its response to victims, particularly child victims and victims of sexual offences. Whereas ".....twenty odd years ago they wouldn't have had separate waiting areas even, they would have all been in the same corridor.....", now, "it's a bit more victim-centred rather than offender-centred". One participant referred to "the bad old days" when people "were just expected to turn up in court and give their evidence and whether that was a child or an adult it didn't really make too much of a difference really".

In contrast now,

"... barristers, solicitors and judges are all getting training as well so they are starting to understand that victims of particularly child sexual exploitation aren't always consistent in what they say and sometimes some of the demeanour that they display is indicative of actual sexual abuse and is not indicative of what was previously thought to be telling lies.....".

The creation of the Witness Service was seen as a positive initiative, creating much more support for victims giving evidence, even though going to court may still involve lots of time spent waiting, and giving evidence is still stressful, although to some extent this could be an inescapable consequence of the adversarial justice process:

"I have also seen people give evidence in court who have been the victim and they are annihilated and it is dreadful. I don't go anymore because I can't

watch it, it's dreadful, it's like torturing them all over again. It's absolutely awful.I just think that if they had a different type of questioning then maybe that could happen, but I don't know what the answer would be, because of course they have to get to the truth."

In contrast, other victims may experience the court process as empowering:

"They come in and you can see the fear on their face and once they have done it and given evidence and then they leave after the support that we have given them, you can see the relief on their face and it's like 'oh, right. Great, it's finished'. You can see they are so happy that it is done. And they can start to move on. Before the case comes to court it's hanging over them. So when it's done it's a big relief."

Some participants expressed concerns that children's voices are not being heard, or listened to, sufficiently, and that sometimes measures which are ostensibly child-focused, such as the opportunity of children to give evidence via video-link, ignores the wishes of children who actually want to be in the courtroom to give their evidence:

" one of the biggest sort of complaints from the young people -or frustrations - was not being asked. So, either(it is) assumed that it is better for them not being in court....and, because they are children, parents get asked, and they don't get involved with the decision making.....that was their frustration - it wasn't that the measures weren't there, it was the fact that no one was asking them."

For some children and young people, although their evidence was being given via video link, they would have liked to be present in the court and to know whom was able to view their testimony. For some, giving evidence from behind a screen in the courtroom would have been preferable to being outside the courtroom with no knowledge of whom would be able to see and hear their evidence:

".....a lot of them, we find, don't want to be on the television screen. They don't want to be seen, and they would rather be in court and sat behind a screen ...but if they are under 14 then they are not allowed in the courtroom."

3.7 Funding & Resources

Participants acknowledged that crimes involving interpersonal violence and abuse were now attracting more funding and resources than in the past, and that police policy and practices have undergone a "massive change":

"Thirty odd years ago I was actually in the police myself, in the early 80s, and there wasn't a lot of support. I was only in for five years and the amount of interviews I went to with young people who were being sexually abused was unbelievable because there was only ever one police woman who covered sort of Preston up to Lancaster, and it wasn't taken seriously and to get anybody on board to do any arrests or anythingit was an absolute nightmare."

However, although in comparison with the situation thirty years ago there is more funding for victims, and a greater level of awareness of victims' needs, increasing demand for services, combined with recent cuts, means that resources are often either unavailable or under pressure. This was identified as a key issue emerging from the current 'austerity agenda, which has led to "not enough funding and too many caseloads":

"..... the current climate means that so many services, so many specialist services, the police and the local authorities are having to withdraw so many services and support, and ultimately it's the children that suffer the consequences."

Funding and resource challenges were common to all the organisations represented in the focus groups, both in the statutory and voluntary sectors including criminal justice agencies. Commenting on funding and resource cuts to the Crown Prosecution Service, for example, one professional took the view that the cuts mean that "they don't have enough time to refer people to the witness service and things get missed. Children in cases, witnesses don't get told that a case isn't happening, they get themselves ready thinking that their case starts next week and it gets cut, its adjourned for 6 months and not get told until the day before, stuff like that. Stuff that shouldn't happen, does happen."

Decreased funding and resources mean that organisational priorities have shifted, and these cuts were seen as causing particular difficulties in providing services for young adults aged 19-25, who, although they were in need of services, were not a priority as they were no longer minors, and this status means that they may 'fall through the net of available services and support.

The combination of decreasing funding and increasing numbers of complaints of sexual offences, both recent and historical, poses challenges to the police, as they are at the forefront of hearing and investigating complaints:

"there are more and more reports coming in and less people to work with it...The fact is we are going to get more of this type of job: the people who are good at it now are getting closer to retirement and we may end up with too many jobs, not enough people, and the people that we get might not be as experienced, but that's a big challenge for us to get that balance right."

Alongside resources being limited, organisational staff may not have time to explain services available to victims in sufficient depth, a view expressed vociferously by an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) who felt strongly that her role was neither understood adequately by the police nor explained clearly to victims:

"..... it could just be coincidence but I have found a lot in the last sort of six months that CID are banging these referrals through and although I don't need to know the details I really don't I do need a bit of information at the bottom because I need to know, was this an acquaintance? Was it a family member? Was it historical? For when I am talking to the person, so that doesn't come through. And half the time I am finding that these clients are like a bit 'what, who are you?' I just think the police aren't telling them properly who I am".

3.8 Mental Health Services

A core theme expressed by the majority of professionals involved in the focus groups is that mental health services need to improve, one describing the services as “absolutely dreadful”, another referring to them as “really poor”.

“We have got to improve. Even though things are going well we still need to improve the service we offer to victims of sexual exploitation and grooming and abuse”.

“you have got the crisis team going ‘oh yes they have got three appointments this week’, ‘who are they seeing?’ They don’t know.....”.

“It’s really difficult for us to get a referral for CAMHS and for CAMHS to have an impact. I do not doubt that CAMHS will have an impact on some young people, but I struggle to see it...it can be difficult for young people to get support...we come across a lot of parents that really struggle to get support and referrals to places like CAMHS and counselling...”

Many participants expressed concerns about a perceived lack of awareness, on the part of mental health professionals, of the inter-relationship between experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation and substance abuse:

“I would really change mental health services because a lot of abuse that goes on, people will then go to a form of substance and become an addict and I’m sick of banging my head against the brick wall and them saying ‘do you know why they have mental health issues? Because they use substances’. Well actually, their mental health problems came before they used substances so please can you give some more help here.”

Concerns were also expressed about the processes and responses of mental health services:

“if you think about someone with mental health, your life can be chaotic really, you can’t deal with it...it’s too strict. If they don’t turn up to an appointment, they stop working with them: well, the whole point of having mental health is that you are chaotic...”

There are concerns that medical records and notes from therapeutic services, such as counselling notes, which are disclosable, may be sought by both prosecution and defence lawyers as part of the preparation for the court case, and there is a perception that some of these requests go against guidelines which indicate that such disclosure should only be requested for certain specific reasons. Participants expressed concerns about the appropriateness of these requests for disclosure on behalf of both prosecution and defence lawyers.

3.9 Multi-Agency Approaches

The focus group participants spoke about how multi- agency work is expanding, referring to examples of “a host” of multi-agency approaches and partnerships, such

as the MARAC processes for domestic violence, MAPPA arrangements for violent and sexual offenders, and statutory Safeguarding Boards.

"nationally now, there is an awful lot of multi-agency working, an awful lot, and we're making giant strides forward not just in policing, I'm talking about every agency, all the statutory agencies, third sector agencies, everybody's involved and it's getting better, it's getting much better'.

"some of the multi-agency teams we're part of have got drugs and alcohol they all have a nurse that will link up with different health services, sexual health or CAMHS if necessary, obviously CAMHS mental health, you have got some really good response however I think the challenge is the thresholds and waiting lists for everyone, but they do get involved a lot".

In some areas a weekly meeting takes place to discuss vulnerable people. As substance abuse and mental health issues can be contributing factors for a victim of child sexual exploitation, by agencies working together the victim may be able to access more services.

"it's about whatever their priority is at the time, whether it being the investigation, bullying in the school, falling out at home, or whatever, that's what we start with, you know bring in all the other agencies, because it's only when other issues are a bit more stable that we can start dealing with the actual consequences of abuse and get to a point where they are willing to engage with counselling and they are willing to engage with drugs and alcohol support or other services, so that element of working around other things that seem secondary for other people but usually are the priority for the child, that then enables them to move on to engage with other services."

However, when multiple agencies work with a child, this may be overwhelming and confusing:

"I have had a girl in care and everybody wanted a piece of her and it was too much for her."

"I feel like there (are) that many agencies working with the child; they don't know what going on and who's who..... so many.... (they need) just one person who can support them right the way through."

The participants explained that they endeavour "to stop families being overwhelmed by different agencies...but sometimes with the best will in the world there will be overlap, and then it's a question of who's best placed, who has time, capacity, or who has a relationship with that child and the family, that can do it better. They would choose who their lead professional was going to be."

"I think the team around the families is the way to be going, where all the agencies that are involved have to sit down and share information, because even for us, you know I am letting counsellors go in one to one with people not knowing...what their backgrounds is you know they might have been in trouble with the police, have aggressive behaviour that we are not aware of so it's

putting our counsellors in a vulnerable position as well because people aren't sharing information and helping that one person."

The focus group participants questioned whether there is sufficient sharing of intelligence and information between agencies, and whether reluctance to share information is due to being "scared to share" because of an over-cautious approach to data protection. This can mean that sometimes that professionals do not receive information which could help them to assist or protect a child, and a perception that signs of abuse could be missed, as in the example given by one participant:

"If you know if a 13- 14-15 year old girl is visiting the GUM clinic three-four times a year then somebody should be saying something.....the same with GPs."

4.0 Discussion and Conclusions

A majority of the focus group participants stressed that there have been significant improvements in education, awareness, policy and practice in relation to children and young people who are victims of sexual offences, and for some there was a profound expressed personal commitment to achieving the best possible outcomes for victims.

Overall, participants expressed positive views about progress which has been made in relation to appropriate awareness-raising and educational programmes, and in relation to police and criminal justice system responses, highlighting the importance of developing future programmes to work with potential perpetrators. However, resource constraints, especially in relation to mental health services for children and young people, combined with difficulties accessing adult services for young people after they reach adulthood, continue to pose frustrating challenges for professionals seeking to respond adequately to the needs of child victims of sexual offences. Multi-agency approaches were recognised as beneficial, but the professionals expressed concerns that children and young people themselves could be overwhelmed by the involvement of multiple professionals. As identified in other published research, there is a high level of unmet need for mental health services, and a need for more "safe places for children to go."

The nature of the research highlighted the need to conduct future research not simply 'on' and 'for' children, but with children as co-producers and co-researchers. The focus group discussions identified children as feeling that they were not consulted in relation to criminal justice processes, such as in relation to special measures in court proceedings, where assumptions were made as to what children would want, or would be in their best interests, rather than asking children what they would choose themselves. Future research, therefore, needs to be firmly sited within a child-centred methodology, so as to create effective responses to the sexual victimisation of children and young people.

Appendix 1

Questions for Child Sexual Abuse Focus Groups

1. Can you explain your role/the role of your organisation in responding to child sexual abuse?
2. What are the main activities/services provided by your organisation? Are any of these focused specifically for children who have been, or are being, abused sexually?
3. What happens if you become aware that a child has been abused sexually?
4. Can you explain the process when you become aware a child has been abused, or is currently experiencing abuse?
5. Are there any laws, or guidelines, you follow when you work with these children?
6. What are the main challenges, or difficulties, you experience when working with these children? Are there any particular examples where you think things have gone well for a child/children, or any examples where you don't think things went that well? What do you think are the most significant issues for the children themselves?
7. This project is focusing on identifying good practice in relation to children's rights where children have been sexually abused. Is there anything which you, or your organisation does, which you think is good practice which could be followed somewhere else? (ask them to explain what this is, and how it works).
8. Have you, or your colleagues in your organisation, had any specialist training to respond to child sexual abuse? If not, do you think this would be useful? What kind of training would you like? If you have had training, how useful was it? Are there any issues on which you would like further training?
9. If you had a magic wand, what would you like to change? What changes do you think would make the biggest difference for abused children? If you could only change one thing, what would it be? ("If the Prime Minister/Leader etc. was sitting here, what would you say to him/her?")

