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Review of the Wales Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Statutory Guidance

Executive Summary

1. Aims and methodology

- 1.1 In January 2017, Welsh Government commissioned a review of the Wales Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Statutory guidance, embedded definition and associated SERAF (Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework) protocol.
- 1.2 The aim of the review was to understand how the guidance (including the embedded definition and SERAF) is working in practice, and to identify ways in which it could be improved to ensure it is fit for purpose across all sectors.
- 1.3 The research was designed as a qualitative inquiry incorporating the following:
 - I. A desk-based review bringing together information from the relevant academic and policy/ practice literatures to inform the analyses and conclusions.
 - II. 21 focus groups and six interviews with professional stakeholders working in the area of CSE, from across the key fields of health, policing, education, the third sector and social care, including those operating at senior and frontline levels across Wales.
 - III. Two focus groups incorporating the use of creative methods with care-experienced young adults. Their involvement was not to comment on awareness of the guidance but to explore broader aspects such as risk and vulnerabilities, assessment and responses.
- 1.4 Discussion in focus groups and interviews centred on: the definition of CSE and how well CSE is understood; identification of CSE, assessment and referral; responses to CSE; multi-agency working.
- 1.5 Two stakeholder workshops were also held – one with professionals and one with care-experienced young people – to share emerging findings and to discuss and debate some of the key recommendations emerging from the review. This also provided a form of analytical rigour to the research.

2. Key findings from the literature

Definition and understanding

- 2.1 Although the term 'Child Sexual Exploitation' has existed in UK policy making for nearly a decade, and in research and campaigning for much longer, there is still variance in how it is defined.
- 2.2 Whilst there is an increasing awareness of CSE within professional contexts, and amongst the general public, there is evidence to suggest this understanding is limited. There are some common misconceptions and misunderstandings surrounding CSE which are evident across the research literature. Central to understanding CSE are the concepts of consent and agency, exchange and power.

Assessment

- 2.3 Since the introduction of CSE into policy there have been many developments in terms of assessment tools, most notably the development of the SERAF tool itself. CSE-specific assessment tools were originally created due to a lack of awareness of CSE and the hidden nature of the abuse. Assessment tools could bring together concerns that were not explained through existing social care related mechanisms, whilst also facilitating people to 'think CSE'.
- 2.4 While Wales has a nationally-used assessment tool in the SERAF, the rest of the UK does not have unified national tools in place. In England, there are many different risk assessment protocols, but, unlike Wales, these are not tied to national guidance. There is limited evaluative research on the use of assessment protocols.

Prevention, intervention and prosecution

- 2.5 Prevention efforts related to CSE can be viewed in two ways: larger scale efforts to prevent CSE by awareness-raising and education at a population level; and individual efforts to prevent CSE in cases where a child or young person is particularly vulnerable.
- 2.6 Intervention strategies take many forms. The key messages from the literature are focussed mainly on direct work with children and young people, and the need to provide supportive, consistent, durable relationships for children and young people. There has been significant success reported with specialist foster placements for extremely high-risk CSE-experienced and/or trafficked young people. There is also research on successes with harm-reduction approaches to CSE. In general, however, there is limited evidence around interventions for CSE.
- 2.7 There is no specific offence of CSE as defined in policy, so prosecutions must happen under various related offences. Ultimately, police need to work within existing guidelines in order to respond to CSE and for the most part these guidelines are not purpose-built.

3. Key findings from the research

- 3.1 The overarching finding is the view held by participants across all sectors that knowledge and understanding surrounding CSE, including how to respond, has progressed to such an extent since the current Wales guidance, definition, and associated protocol were developed, that they are no longer 'fit for purpose'. Amendments and additions are clearly needed. Participants also referred to other policy and practice developments in the broader social care context in Wales and made reference to the recently changed CSE guidance in England. CSE guidance needs to be updated in line with these developments.
- 3.2 There were also strong views about where the guidance and protocol are working well. Participants talked about the CSE protocol and guidance as something that had been needed, and has seen positive change in practice and in terms of raising awareness of CSE. It was in the spirit of the need

to build on this good practice in Wales that many of the focus group discussions and interviews were framed. A key theme that threads throughout this review is despite the development of local protocols there is a need for renewed consistency – across geography and across sectors – indicating an appetite to ensure the continuation of an All Wales approach.

Definition and understanding

- 3.3 Basic knowledge and awareness of the CSE guidance and protocol was expressed by all participants in this research, although many had concerns about the lack of awareness or familiarity with the guidance amongst their colleagues.
- 3.4 The current definition of CSE used in Wales is not being used consistently. The data also evidences that there is a lack of clarity for practitioners about CSE, and the analysis suggests that practitioners are still uncertain about what constitutes CSE
- 3.5 Some participants raised concerns about connected other non-sexual forms of exploitation which occur to similarly vulnerable young people who are not easily recognised in the current definition. Guidance is needed about how work with these young people, as they do not fit easily into the CSE protocol as it stands currently.

Identification and assessment

- 3.6 There is confusion about the purpose and/or function of the risk assessment tool, and whether it is a screening/justification or formalised assessment tool. For some it is seen as a tool providing the means for drawing together concerns about a child or young person which, when brought together, indicate risk of being sexually exploited; others view it as a tool providing a definitive assessment of CSE. Regardless of this difference in approach, there was a strong view by the majority of participants that too much emphasis is being given to the CSE risk score, and the risks for a child or young person are not being assessed in conjunction with professional judgement.
- 3.7 The risks and vulnerabilities were described as needing to be updated and/or to reflect current knowledge on CSE. Participants across sectors raised the issue of too much weight being given to historical or more 'static' factors which will never change in any assessment.

Prevention, intervention and prosecution

- 3.8 It was evident from across the data that there have been developments in practice in terms of responding to CSE, across all sectors, since the guidance and protocol were introduced in 2009. There is evidence of pockets of excellent multi-agency working and social care learning and practice taking place in Wales, as well as evidence of practice being developed from knowledge exchange activities with professionals in England.
- 3.9 The importance of multi-agency and multi-sector working was a significant cross-cutting theme arising from the data, relating to almost every point made in terms of responding to CSE. This was particularly emphasised for education and youth services in terms of the role they play in wider prevention initiatives, but also through direct involvement in support work when intervening in CSE. This was also mentioned for health, and the role health practitioners can play in strategy meetings and outreach work. The role of policing in terms of prevention and intervention (as well as prosecution) needs to be recognised.
- 3.10 Participants raised the importance of the need to consider both therapeutic input and trauma-informed approaches to intervention, and that focussing on working with young people to educate them on positive relationships, whilst important, wasn't enough on its own.

Broader considerations

- 3.11 The need for more information on mechanisms for accountability and for ensuring the protocol is being followed across Wales was raised, alongside discussion about the need for transparency and to provide a mechanism for sharing best practice across Wales.
- 3.12 Whilst it is only one aspect of responding to CSE, managing and securing the safety of children and young people placed 'out of county', within and outside of Wales, as well as from England into Wales, featured as a significant theme. Concerns about this were raised in every focus group, across almost all sectors.
- 3.13 A particular theme discussed by participants was the involvement of children, young people and their families within the assessment process and in strategy meetings, although no consensus emerged.
- 3.14 Overwhelmingly, the responses from participants related to the desire to see changes in practice in order to inform better responses to, and outcomes for, children and young people in Wales. There was a strong message that any amendments, additions or alterations to the CSE guidance, embedded definition and protocol needed to translate across into changes in practice.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 The overarching conclusion from this review is that the CSE guidance, embedded definition and SERAF protocol are no longer fit for purpose. There is clear evidence indicating that the guidance and protocol should be updated to encompass new learning, reflect recent wider policy changes and to learn from recent developments in good practice across Wales. A related conclusion is the importance of these two documents for informing frontline and strategic practice and the need to keep a consistent all Wales approach. The analysis from the data, in combination with the literature review, suggests this is a key strength in terms of responding to CSE.
- 4.2 There is a strong desire to build on the excellent practice that exists in Wales, and for this practice to be embedded within guidance that becomes a 'live' document. It is important that new and emerging guidance is accessible to frontline and strategic professionals working across all agencies, informing good and consistent practice across the country in order to work towards better safeguarding and better outcomes for children and young people.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 The overarching recommendation from the review is that the Wales guidance, embedded definition and SERAF protocol should be updated to reflect knowledge that has emerged since they were produced, along with any developments in practice and multi-agency working in order to replicate these across all areas of Wales.
- 5.2 There are 26 separate recommendations within the report, related to: the definition; identification and assessment; responding to CSE; strategic considerations; involving children, young people and their families; and producing and launching the new guidance and protocol.

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Available at: <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/review-wales-safeguarding-children-young-people-sexual-exploitation/?lang=en>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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