

PRESS RELEASE



Today (24/03) sees the publication of the serious case review (SCR) for Operation Brooke, a large-scale police investigation into the sexual exploitation of children in Bristol which began in May 2013.

At the conclusion of two trials at Bristol Crown Court in November 2014, thirteen offenders were sentenced for a total of 116 years.

During the course of the investigation a serious case review was commissioned by Bristol Local Children's Safeguarding Board and another unnamed LCSB to learn from the multi-agency handling of the case – the report is available here <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/policies-plans-strategies/bscb-serious-case-reviews>.

In considering our police response, the reviewers recognised the success of the major police investigation once it was underway, but identified some shortcomings in the early handling of aspects of victim disclosures where signs of child sexual exploitation were taken to be under-age sexual activity and the intelligence picture was not joined up.

T/Assistant Chief Constable Kay Wozniak said: "Others have already paid tribute to these young victims but I want to add my voice to theirs. The courage and bravery they showed was remarkable. We should not lose sight of how difficult it must have been for them to speak out and live through their ordeal once again in court.

"Their voices come through loud and clear. We should listen hard to what they have to say – ask, and ask again. Don't take no for an answer, and don't make judgements about what you see on the surface. Look beyond and see the vulnerable child beneath who needs our help.

"We've learnt a great deal in the last four years about child sexual exploitation and child abuse. Now we're much better able to spot the links, join up the intelligence and, alongside our partners, see a fuller picture. But we're not complacent. Serious case reviews such as these are enormously valuable and we'll continue to learn as long as there's more we can do to put a halt to exploitation."

If you suspect a child or young person may be at risk, or have any information relating to child sexual exploitation, please contact us.

We would prefer to speak to you on the phone (by calling us on 101) or in person. However, if contacting us online is the safest way for you to get in touch, you can complete our secure online reporting form.

Important: If you know or suspect a child or young person is in immediate danger, you should dial 999 straight away.

NSPCC

The NSPCC provide a wide range of services for both children, young people and adults, including national helplines staffed by trained helpline counsellors for 24/7 help and advice.

0800 1111 (ChildLine)

0808 800 5000 (Support for parents and carers)

<http://www.nspcc.org.uk>

Barnardo's

Children's charity Barnardo's support children, young people and families affected by issues such as sexual exploitation and domestic abuse.

BASE (Barnardo's Against Sexual Exploitation) is a Barnardo's project in Bristol which supports victims of child sexual exploitation.

<http://www.barnardos.org.uk>

CEOP safety centre

Over half of sexual exploitation happens online. If someone has acted inappropriately online towards you, a child or young person, or someone you know, find out what to do, and how to report it to police, by visiting the CEOP safety centre.

<http://ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>



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Statement

0117 922 2650  @BristolCouncil

24 March 2016

Operation Brooke Serious Case Review

John Readman, Strategic Director for People, Bristol City Council said,

“This truly awful case highlights how children can become subjected to sexual exploitation far too easily. All Bristol City Council staff working in this area take their responsibilities very, very seriously so it has been particularly valuable to hear the victims voices in the Serious Case Review report. We are sorry for their experiences and their voices will help guide us and our colleagues in partner agencies on how we support victims and hopefully help us all spot the signs of a child being sexually exploited much earlier in future. Our aim is to work with children and families to prevent it happening.

“I am also grateful to both Safeguarding Children Boards for this very thorough report and its clear recommendations. We have not waited to act on these and many of the suggested improvements are already in place.

“Much of what is identified has already been addressed by the implementation of the Bristol Safeguarding Children Board Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Strategy and our continuing work with Barnardo’s BASE service and Bristol-based sexual health service 4YP.

“Many of the report findings focus on wider issues with national guidance and systems of responding to CSE concerns. Whilst the report does point to issues with identifying the signs of CSE, this is an area we have identified for improvement and have already taken steps to increase training offered by specialists from Barnardo’s and 4YP as well as our own social workers. Our work also extends into schools to ensure that teachers and school staff are equipped with the tools they need to better respond to the concerns of CSE.

“Social workers and other professionals in the city worked to the highest professional standards on this case and we are grateful to have such a dedicated team serving the people of Bristol. The 2014 Ofsted thematic inspection into local authority responses to CSE praised our social workers’ persistence and ‘don’t give up approach’. This praise was bolstered by encouraging feedback from children and young people in Bristol, saying they felt listened to and were positive about the support they receive.

“Safeguarding is everybody’s business, particularly those who work with children and young people. We can never remove risk completely but sexual exploitation is an abhorrent crime and we are committed to working with our partners and families to prevent and tackle sexual exploitation in all its forms.”



Bristol NHS response to Serious Case Review into Child Sexual Exploitation

Responding on behalf of all NHS organisations in Bristol, Dr Maria Bredow, Consultant Paediatrician and Designated Doctor for Safeguarding Children in Bristol and South Gloucestershire said:

“Child sexual exploitation is a hidden evil in our society. Together we must be uncompromising in our approach to uncover this abuse, identify those at risk and help them break free of it.

“Children often don’t recognise that they are being exploited. Many believe they are in consensual loving relationships and do not realise they have been groomed. Others are terrified of the perpetrators who exert enormous control. These children will do all they can to hide the abuse; the perpetrators can make them feel totally isolated and unable to talk to family, friends or professionals.

“This means that identifying those at risk is difficult and complex. Healthcare professionals must pursue lines of enquiry that are emotionally challenging and uncomfortable. We need to enable professionals to “Think the unthinkable”, spot the signs and report them.

“Using the learning from this Serious Case Review, we are working with partner agencies including the police, social care, education and Barnardo’s, to develop ways of preventing and disrupting this abuse.

“We’re delivering additional training about ‘[Spotting the Signs](#)’ (*) of child sexual exploitation to staff working across GP surgeries, hospital trusts, emergency departments, mental and sexual health services.

“We have Named and Designated safeguarding doctors, nurses and other health professionals, available to give expert advice and support to any health worker needing help with complex cases, with specialist paediatricians on call 24/7 for serious or emergency cases.

“Local health centres all have a lead GP for child protection, available to advise colleagues. There are also specialist mental health nurses working with Barnardo’s to support the young victims of sexual exploitation, and Brook Sexual Health services provides drop in clinics in schools, and 1 to 1 counselling.

“Looking to the future, local health commissioners are putting in place more out-of-hours services, to ensure help is available at the times and in the places that the victims of sexual exploitation have asked for. For example, mental health services are piloting an all age street triage service and Off the Record, a counselling service for 11-18 year olds, has had its funding increased to support additional therapeutic capacity in the afternoons and evenings.

“Whilst all healthcare professionals take patient confidentiality extremely seriously, it is evident that confidentiality has to be broken when children are at risk of significant harm. This can be a very difficult judgement to make when victims won’t or can’t share all the information with you. Logging and sharing information is paramount but, again, good judgement is critical. We are raising awareness across the health sector and prompting discussions about difficult decisions around confidentiality.

“As the brave young people who took part in this review have reiterated, we need to think the unthinkable, listen to a young person’s health request but look beyond it. This Serious Case Review is exceptional in that it allows the voices of the children who were the victims of sexual exploitation to be heard loud and clear. They tell us to “Ask. Ask again. Listen. And Act”. We are working very hard to do just that.”

STATEMENT FROM THE OTHER AUTHORITY

We are very sorry about what happened to the victims in this case and from the moment the abuse came to light we wanted to make sure that we did everything possible to learn from what took place.

The Serious Case Review has shown that our staff did their best to work with and help the victims, but they were sometimes prevented from intervening effectively because of failings both in the way some of our services and systems were designed, and in the way some organisations, including us, worked together and shared information.

It is also clear that in our case specifically, we had some way to go at the time to make sure the work we had already done to educate staff about Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) was effective right across the council.

We did not wait for the Serious Case Review to be published to address this, and our staff are now much better able to recognise typical signs of CSE and robustly act to help prevent it. We continue to work to educate parents, teachers and others about the signs to watch for.

However, the biggest challenge remains, which is to help children themselves recognise more quickly that they are either in danger of being abused and exploited, or that it is happening to them at all. They also need to feel confident they are able to report it to a trusted adult.

It is important to remember that the perpetrators are always extremely devious and manipulative, and disrupting their activities is a constant battle for everyone who works in child protection.

The victims in this case showed a great deal of courage and strength to give evidence in the subsequent criminal trials, but every professional who works to protect children is acutely aware that victims must be spared that ordeal as far as is possible, and that remains our focus.