



Bristol Safeguarding
Children Board

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Local Safeguarding Children Boards publish Operation Brooke Serious Case Review

A report from an independent review of Operation Brooke (a major criminal investigation in to Child Sexual Exploitation in the Bristol region) has been published today (24 March 2016) by the Boards responsible for overseeing child safeguarding.

Operation Brooke resulted in the convictions of 13 men for 42 child sexual exploitation offences, with combined prison sentences totalling 116 years.

Now an independent Serious Case Review (SCR) has looked at how agencies worked together before, during and after the investigation, establishing strengths and gaps in the multi agency responses to child sexual exploitation in order to learn and improve. It was commissioned by the Bristol Safeguarding Children Board along with a Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) from another area. The review has produced the report that is published today.

Both LSCB Independent Chairs have welcomed the report and have fully accepted the findings it has identified. Both Independent Chairs acknowledge the significant harm suffered by the children involved and recognise their bravery. They said: "This SCR was particularly complex due to the nature of the crimes and we would like to thank the victims who worked with us throughout the process. At the heart of this review is the testimony and experience of the children who were the victims of these crimes. We are profoundly indebted to them for the courage, resilience and wisdom they have shown in contributing to this review.

"They give clear advice for authorities, professionals and the wider community about how we can better prevent child sexual exploitation and respond to it effectively. Safeguarding is everybody's business, and we will be supporting a multi-agency campaign to raise further awareness amongst professionals and the public, particularly drawing on this advice from victims.

"Those working with children increasingly recognise that it can be very hard for young people to see themselves as victims and therefore have insight into what help they need. Professionals must ask the difficult questions, often many times and they must listen and act."

The SCR has seven formal findings highlighting six areas which can be improved both locally and nationally and one very important finding about a particular system of effective intervention.

These findings include:

- Identifying better ways of responding to the particular needs of adolescents;
- a confused and confusing national policy stance on adolescent sexual activity;
- a national child protection process designed more around abuse or neglect within a family and less suited to other circumstances;
- a focus on seeking to prevent victims associating with abusers but more needing to be done in terms of activity to disrupt or prevent perpetrators;
- the shortcomings in agencies recording systems that do not have capacity to reliably identify patterns in group or individual behaviour;
- relatively new CSE and Missing Children strategies take time to embed. Whilst there are examples of very good practice, strategic grasp of the issues is not yet always translated in the day to day work of all staff.

The SCR finding about a system of effective intervention commends and recognises the significance of the decision by the police to make Operation Brooke a major criminal investigation. This enabled the police to bring other senior leaders together in a 'Gold command' structure and deploy specialist technological and staff resource to the investigation. These were critical factors in the successful prosecution of the offenders and, importantly, in providing co-ordinated multi-agency care and support for the victims.

Sally Lewis OBE, Independent Chair of the Bristol Safeguarding Children Board: "It is reassuring that the review does not identify or suggest the kind of endemic failure to act which has been seen in other parts of the country. However there have been specific instances of shortcomings which I know have been given appropriate attention by each agency.

"The review identifies the challenge we face when children are groomed in such a way that they do not identify themselves as in danger; it highlights the need for professionals to have not only the appropriate knowledge and insights, but also the correct tools and approaches to support the children and intervene with perpetrators; and it demonstrates the importance of strong strategic and operational co-operation, across agencies, created in this instance by the formal structure of a major criminal investigation. Whilst it is impossible to eliminate risk entirely, these findings will help everyone tackle the complex issues that CSE present."

Both Independent Chairs of the LSCBs are clear that this review has generated important findings that will benefit all professional services and communities in safeguarding children. They recognised that agencies have already done much to respond to the issues raised during Operation Brooke, not waiting for this formal publication before taking action. These responses are set out in a detailed Action Plan, the implementation of which will be monitored by both LSCBs. A separate formal response by the Bristol Safeguarding Children Board has been published alongside the report today.

Anyone with concerns about CSE can contact the NSPCC to get advice.

ChildLine (for children and young people) - 0800 1111
NSPCC (for adults) - 0808 800 5000

To report a CSE-related crime:

- Call 101
- If a child is in immediate danger, please call 999
- If you don't want to speak directly to police, but want to give information anonymously you can call the charity Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111, or visit www.crimestoppers-uk.org

To find out more about reporting child abuse, including local authority contacts for your area, visit www.gov.uk/report-child-abuse.

ENDS

For media enquiries please contact:

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Barnardo's: Justin Guy, 07919 180482, justin.guy@barnardos.org.uk

NHS Bristol Clinical Commissioning Group: Kierstan Lowe, 0117 900 2549 incl. out of hours, Kierstan.Lowe@swcsu.nhs.uk

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Notes to Editors

1. All complainants in Operation Brooke have a right to lifelong anonymity per Section 1 of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1992 and therefore cannot be identified by any party. Nor may any information be published which could reasonably lead to their identification.
2. Witnesses who are under 18 have similar protection under Section 39 Children and Young People's Act.

In relation to three witnesses subject of orders under S39 until they are 18, the judge has given non-binding guidance that their names should not be published when they reach 18 given their close links to the complainants and the risk that the latter could be identified.

An additional direction was given by the judge in relation to further limitations as to what can be published about one of the witnesses whose particular circumstances make her more identifiable. Please refer to the court for details.

3. **In respect of the victims from the area outside Bristol:** During the course of hearings before His Honour Judge Roach on 2nd May 2014 and 14th July 2014 guidance was given by the Judge that that the publication of any information as to

where the children/young persons are from, any Council or Local Authority having responsibility for them and details of them as being siblings would identify the children and that therefore the press should not name any organisation or detail which could identify where the children come from.

Therefore if the press or any organisation or any individual were to publish such details they would be liable to prosecution by virtue of Section 1 of the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1992 which provides that no matter likely to lead members of the public to identify a person or the person against whom the offence is alleged to have been committed shall during the complainant's lifetime be published.

There was subsequent guidance given to the press by His Honour Judge Lambert at the hearing on 19 November 2014 indicating that press can state: the fact that the offence has occurred in Bristol, the fact that the victims come from an area outside Bristol, the young people were in the care of another Local Authority, the ages of the young person and that there were two sisters but not stating there were more than two.

Howard Phillips, Senior Crown Prosecutor at the Crown Prosecution Service says: "I would like to remind you of the statutory reporting restrictions (for youths/sex offences) that are in place in relation to this case. In particular, you need to be aware of the orders which protect the victims from being identified, either explicitly or through reporting information which could lead to their identity – for example there is a very real risk that naming the other council could lead to their identity.

"I cannot stress enough the importance of complying with these restrictions – they are in place to protect vulnerable victims and if those victims feel in any way at risk through the way the case is reported we will have failed them. Additionally further victims, either in this case or in other similar cases around the country, could be discouraged from giving evidence and that could result in offenders escaping justice. That's something none of us want.

"For details of these orders and other reporting restrictions which apply to this case, please contact the court."

4. The Operation Brooke Serious Case Review is available to download at <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/policies-plans-strategies/bscb-serious-case-reviews>.
5. The Bristol Safeguarding Children Board's full response to the review and its findings is also available to download at <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/policies-plans-strategies/bscb-serious-case-reviews>.