

## **Serious Case Review into Child Sexual Exploitation in Oxfordshire**

### **from the experiences of the children involved**

The Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board (OSCB) today published the independent serious case review (SCR) into the services provided to the Oxfordshire victims of the seven men, who following Operation Bullfinch, were convicted of 59 offences of child sexual exploitation in 2013.

The OSCB is made up of 40 different representatives from organisations working with children and young people, for example the County and District Councils, the Police, Health services, Education and voluntary organisations. It is the OSCB's job to ensure the safeguarding of children in Oxfordshire is working well.

A Serious Case Review takes place after any child abuse case where the child dies or is seriously injured and it must be led by someone who is independent of the organisations and services involved.

This SCR looked at sexual exploitation of children within Oxfordshire. Sexual exploitation can involve demanding sexual favours for drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and other presents. Or it may be having sex for money with several adults. Children feel they must have sex because an adult gives them something, or because they feel threatened.

This review includes the experiences of victims and their families and its purpose is to make sure that there is learning from what has happened and that improvements are made and can make a difference for children and young people.

The Independent Chair of the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board, Maggie Blyth said: "What happened to the victims is deeply disturbing.... The OSCB would like to pay tribute to the victims and parents who contributed so much to this Review. As the new Independent Chair of the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board, I will do everything in my power to ensure the programme of change continues and agencies are evidencing what they are doing to safeguard children here in Oxfordshire. I am deeply saddened and shocked by what happened to these children."

The review looks at events that happened between 2005 until 2012.

#### **What the children and families told the review**

The children were groomed by their abusers and were given alcohol and drugs, gifts and attention, and led to believe that the men were their boyfriends. They were forced to have sex and were physically assaulted, threatened, drugged, raped, trafficked and sold for sex. They were pulled into a frightening world where they felt unable to escape. Some parents and carers raised concerns. Sometimes their concerns were not given the weight they deserved and sometimes no action was taken by professionals.

## **What the review found**

Between 2005 – 2010 there was almost no understanding of child sexual exploitation in Oxfordshire and little action to stop street grooming. Despite the efforts of some front line staff working with children individually, there were repeated missed opportunities and many mistakes were made.

### **The review shows that the child sexual exploitation across Oxfordshire from 2005-2010 could have been identified or prevented earlier.**

This review highlights failings of the OSCB and its member agencies to recognise that group child sexual exploitation was happening in Oxfordshire before Operation Bullfinch in 2011.

Some of the important findings from the report are:

- Child exploitation and street grooming were not understood
- The behaviour of the girls was seen by some of the people working with them those of young adults rather than children, and therefore assumed they had control of their actions
- Language was used which appeared to partly blame victims
- What happened to the girls was not recognised as being as terrible as it was, as they were seen to be consenting, or bringing problems upon themselves.
- The girls were often hostile to and dismissive of staff because they were afraid.
- Social workers, police officers, health staff and teachers not knowing that the children were victims of child sexual exploitation by groups of men or what action to take
- There was not enough use of the law to disrupt the abuse by the men involved
- Accounts not being believed or being thought to be exaggerations
- Not enough linking up of different investigations and different cases to see patterns which would have shown that this was abuse by a group of men
- There was not enough being done about children missing from school and children were in danger in the daytime
- There were expectations that victims needed to make police statements and stand by them and without them cases could not get to court
- There were weaknesses in organisations in Oxfordshire which stopped them from seeing the whole picture and information about worrying cases was not reported to the top of organisations
- The OSCB in Oxfordshire did not recognise and take action on some of the early warning signs

The report found that professionals did not deliberately neglect children or ignore clear signs of child sexual exploitation. They were not afraid to act because the abusers were from minority ethnic groups and they might be accused of racism. Abuse was not understood, the fact that the

children were not able to make their own decisions was not recognised, and connections were not made between cases.

The report also found that whilst much should have been better, professionals working with the girls' families over many years, worked relentlessly (if not always effectively) to fulfill their duties to them. When those staff on the ground started to meet and make links in late 2010 the true picture of the awful abuse began to take shape.

From the start of Operation Bullfinch in 2011, organisations in Oxfordshire have worked well together to fight Child Sexual Exploitation.

The joint work of the police, managers from the Children's Social Care and other agencies resulted in the criminal prosecutions of the offenders as part of Operation Bullfinch.

### **Learning from the review**

Some of the learning points in the review include:

- Professionals needed to be more curious and look behind the children's behaviour to understand what is happening to them
- Day-to-day processes in child protection needed to be stronger
- Awareness and understanding of street grooming and exploitation needs to be thorough across all organisations
- Organisations' combined response to child sexual exploitation needs to be co-ordinated and effective

### **Learning for professionals from the children and families about staff attitudes**

- However difficult they may appear, children need to be treated as children
- Ask if they are ok
- Be polite and kind
- Start with the basic assumption that what the child says is to be believed
- Don't make snide remarks to possible victims (however they behave) which undermine them more
- It is important that, just as the victims are not blamed for their exploitation, parents are not blamed for their children's exploitation
- Drug and alcohol use and sexual activity at a very young age are not normal and need to be challenged
- Signs of physical harm must always be investigated
- If you have any suspicions that a child may be being abused, do not be frightened to ask them about it ... and keep asking
- Go with your instincts if something seems wrong

- Children do not go missing on numerous occasions without there being a reason. That reason must be explored rigorously
- Be aware that being more 'professional' in your manner might make it less likely that the victims will feel able to talk openly

The Review outlines sixty different learning points for agencies and professionals, and thirteen recommendations for the OSCB. It also makes recommendations to the government. The review recognises that agencies have been willing to be open about the past and where things should have been better.

There has already been a huge amount of learning in Oxfordshire.

Parents, young people, staff and political leaders have been trained to spot the signs of CSE and who to talk to about any concerns. Professionals are more able to recognise and understand CSE and are working well together to prevent and disrupt those who are exploiting children and families. The multi-agency child sexual exploitation team, Kingfisher, continues to support young people at risk of exploitation. More men have been brought to justice with convictions for these crimes.

If you would like more information about the learning and what other actions have been taken there is another document published today 'Child Sexual Exploitation in Oxfordshire: Agency Learning and Action'.

**For confidential advice and support for yourself or a friend, please call the Kingfisher confidential helpline number on 01865 335276.**

Kingfisher Team has a [leaflet for children and young people](#)