Safe accommodation for sexually exploited and trafficked young people

Briefing Paper
Accommodation Project - July 2011
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Introduction

Barely any research has been conducted into the provision of safe accommodation for sexually exploited or trafficked young people (Brodie *et al*, 2011). The understanding generated from the experience of the Barnardo's Safe Accommodation Project will therefore be a very useful contribution to this field. This briefing paper considers the factors that will contribute to effective and safe accommodation by summarising key messages from literature related to sexually exploited and trafficked young people, as well as the provision of specialist foster care for vulnerable young people in general. Much of the research considered the needs of just one group and is presented as such, but on reading could apply equally to both sexually exploited and trafficked young people (e.g., the need for a care plan that anticipates the risk of going missing). However it is important to also recognise the different needs across and within these groups, and I have attempted to draw attention to this where possible. A 'trafficked' child in this context refers only to those who have been trafficked into the UK from abroad.

Key messages

1. Professionals and carers should involve young people in their own care and empower those who have experienced exploitation and control. This involves recognising diverse needs and seeing the agency of the young person as a resource, rather than a problem.
2. Carers need to be trained to understand the complexities of young people's experience, to recognise barriers to effective care, and be given practical ways to keep young people safe.
3. Complex needs will require a holistic 'team around the child' approach that offers services flexibly and builds upon the safety of the placement to help young people access opportunities that will enable their recovery.
4. Sexually exploited and trafficked young people need a detailed care plan to mitigate the risks of going missing and to keep them physically safe. Carers should build trust with the young person, help them to keep themselves safe, monitor their relationships and try to understand and address the reasons they go missing.
5. Sexually exploited and trafficked young people need stability in their relationships, which can be threatened with multiple moves. Continuity of care should therefore be prioritised in planning a placement.
6. Therapeutic interventions should be holistic, pro-active and build on the young person's resilience and strengths.

1. **Professionals and carers should involve young people in their own care and empower those who have experienced exploitation and control. This involves recognising diverse needs and seeing the agency of the young person as a resource, rather than a problem.**

There is a well documented tension between child protection and child participation agendas when it comes to keeping sexually exploited young people safe (Warrington, 2010). Young people who have been sexually exploited or trafficked are undoubtedly victims. However services need to recognise and build on the resilience that has enabled young people to survive in order to sustain positive outcomes in the long term (Gosdziak, 2008; Gosdziak *et al.*, 2006). This involves drawing on a variety of services to meet the young person's wider needs, rather than purely a narrow child protection response (Pearce, 2006).

'Participation' can be resource intensive, and it can be easy to under-estimate the ability of sexually exploited young people to be involved in decision making (Warrington, 2010). But it may, in part, be a need for control and autonomy that leads young people in care to engage in exploitative relationships. Understanding this can help practitioners respond positively to their needs (Coy, 2009). Barriers should therefore be overcome to enable those who have experienced severe disempowerment to be empowered and heard (Warrington, 2010), and young people should be seen as 'agents of change' (Blagbrough, 2008). Through exerting control over their environment young people develop resilience, self-esteem, self-efficacy and acquire new skills - all of which then assist in their recovery (Newman & Blackburn, 2002; Scott & Harper, 2005; Brown, 2006).

Young people value flexible services that take account of their opinions and feelings, and ask them what level of service they are able to manage (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). When asked, young people involved in sexual exploitation have advised professionals to work at the pace of the young person, to work with their understanding of their own situation, and to involve them instead of telling them what to do or who not to associate with (Brown, 2006).

Although they may have suffered similar kinds of exploitation, each child is unique and assessments will need to account for diverse needs, within and across trafficked and sexually exploited groups (Pearce, 2009). For example within the sexually exploited group services should take into account factors that may be more relevant to minority ethnic young people including 'intergenerational conflict', 'culture clash' and 'dual identity' (Ward & Patel, 2006).

The single most important factor about which young people feel unheard is choice of placement (McLeod, 2007), and a significant element of placement stability is the young person's commitment to the placement and motivation to make it succeed (Morgan, 2007). Specialist foster placements for sexually exploited children are more likely to break down if the child does not want to be placed with a family, and are more likely to be successful where the carer works in partnership with the child, rather than as an 'expert' (Walker *et al.*, 2000). Fostering services should therefore be sensitive to requests from young people to not be accommodated with someone who, through their gender or ethnicity, represents those who may have abused them (Pearce *et al.*, 2009). Further considerations of the cultural needs of trafficked children should include the implications of possibly being recognised and of shame or stigma as a result of being exploited by members of their own community (Walker & Ishola, 2011).

2. **Carers need to be trained to understand the complexities of young people's experience, to recognise barriers to effective care, and be given practical ways to keep them safe.**

Carers need to be trained to understand the complexities, experiences and perspectives of the sexually exploited young people they care for. This means having access to all relevant information (e.g. a full case history including episodes of abuse and abusing) that will enable them to properly understand and respond to the young person's needs through a safe care plan (Farmer & Pollock, 2003; Farmer, 2004). Training should cover unhelpful adult reactions to sexual abuse or hypersexualised behaviour e.g. avoidance/denial/minimisation/normalisation/ helplessness (Farmer, 2004), and strategies to notice and address these. It could also reflect on gendered discourses around sexual exploitation in particular (e.g. challenging ideas around girls 'provocative behaviour') and create a culture that addresses the issues of sexual exploitation frankly and openly (Barter, 2006; Coy, 2008). Similarly, training should acknowledge that a lack of general public awareness combined with a culture of disbelief and concerns about age and immigration status can create a 'wall of silence' around trafficked children (Pearce *et al.*, 2009). A key role for carers is therefore to believe the young person's story (Fursland, 2009).

When training carers, attachment theory has been useful in guiding support for foster children who have experienced abuse or neglect through increasing carers' empathy and improving attachment relationships (Golding, 2003; Polansky *et al.*, 2006; British Psychological Society, 2006). It may also be useful to use notions of risk and resilience to underpin a holistic approach to addressing the child's needs.

Carers will need training in a range of practical strategies to keep young people safe from traffickers, exploiters and other risky peers/adults (Pearce *et al.*, 2009), as well as to understand the reasons why a child would run away to rejoin these exploiting them and reject a 'safe' placement (Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, 2010)

Foster placements with young people are more likely to succeed where social workers provide useful support to foster carers, and where carers have good social support networks (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). More specifically a designated key-worker has an important role to play in ensuring that the carer and all professionals involved in a placement understand the complexities involved when understanding and managing a trafficking case (Pearce *et al.*, 2009). In an evaluated specialist placement scheme, foster carers who were retained and showed strong commitment to the whole three years of the scheme valued high levels of payment, 24-hour availability of support and access to a wide amount and range of training (Walker *et al.*, 2000). Finally, foster carers need to have enough time to commit to developing a trusting relationship with a trafficked or exploited child to withstand the inevitable disruptions that will occur as the child or young person settles (Pearce *et al*, 2009).

3. Complex needs will require a holistic 'team around the child' approach that offers services flexibly and builds upon the safety of the placement to help young people access opportunities that will enable their recovery.

Children abused through sexual exploitation have complex needs that cannot be met by one agency (Cusick, 2002; Swann & Balding, 2002; Pearce *et al.*, 2003; Melrose, 2003; Hester & Westmarland, 2004; Pearce, 2006). Professionals that may have a key support role include health workers, drug action teams, education, YOTs, and the Police (Jago & Pearce, 2008). In addition, effective specialist foster placements are characterised by support from social workers and education and psychological services (Walker *et al.*, 2000). However, it is the right combination for each young person that matters, rather than an optimal number of partners (Melrose, 2003). In an evaluation of specialist foster placements, social workers, carers and staff agreed that monthly meetings for key professionals, carers and the young person were "...crucial to effective co-operation and planning" (Walker, *et al.*, *ibid* p 8).

Similarly, it is recommended that specialist provision for trafficked children should employ trained carers who liaise with a designated key-worker (accountable to the Local Children's Safeguarding Board), and who are supported by a multidisciplinary team, including child protection services, health and a designated police contact (Pearce *et al.*, 2009). Victims of trafficking will often be traumatised and experience a range of physical and mental health problems including anxiety, hostility, and depression (Zimmerman *et al.*, 2006). A full list of agencies that may need to be involved can be found in Appendix 5 of the London Safeguarding Trafficked Children Toolkit (2009).

Research suggests that where social workers are pro-active in arranging services for young people, foster placements for young people are more likely to succeed (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). And although some young people may be cynical, disappointed and rejecting of services (Pearce, 2006), Brodie *et al.,* (*ibid*) report that they value services that recognise the importance of education, training and employment, their health needs and the links they have with their families and carers. They conclude that successful multi-agency work for young people demonstrates flexibility, responsiveness, signposting to other services, and an informal approach to service delivery.

Education is particularly important in this context. A lack of available school placements contributes significant stress within a placement, so it is vital that school placements are planned, achieved and supported, and that part-time tuition is provided for young people who are waiting for school provision (Walker *et al.*, 2000).

Finally, a successful multi-agency response is the result of recognising the role of protective factors that include friendship networks, hobbies, and educational opportunities, that build resilience and function to replace risky activities (Gilligan, 2000; Jago & Pearce, 2008). Where young people have experienced constrained choice, it is necessary to provide more and better choices for them (Harper & Scott, 2005). Protective factors for trafficked children include a sense of physical and emotional safety, positive relationships with peers, aspirations, interests and activities, role modelling/mentoring, and personal safety skills (Walker & Ishola, 2011).

Crucially though, education, positive peer groups and activities outside placement are ultimately built on the physical safety of the placement itself (Pearce *et al.*, 2009).

4. **Sexually exploited and trafficked young people need a detailed care plan to mitigate the risks of going missing and to keep them physically safe. Carers should build trust with the young person, help them to keep themselves safe, monitor their relationships and try to understand and address the reasons they go missing.**

<u>Sexually exploited young people</u>

One piece of research suggests that the most effective foster placements for sexually exploited children are out-of-authority where they are forced to break their links with pimps/clients (Farmer and Pollock, 2003). These researchers argue that it is impossible to modify negative behaviour unless it is no longer being strongly reinforced elsewhere. However, this is in contrast to recommendations by other researchers (e.g. Cregan, Scott & Smith, 2005) so should be balanced against a child's need for relational security from adults they already know.

Children who have persistently gone missing in the past are less likely to form a positive attachment to their current carers and are more likely to experience problems in their placements (Biehal & Wade, 2000). Awareness of the child's previous patterns of absconding may therefore direct carers toward more intensive strategies to address this early in the placement. Therapeutic interventions with sexually exploited children should also address the underlying reasons or anxieties that cause them to go missing early in their placements (Walker *et al.*, 2000)

In their study of effective care for sexually abused and exploited young people, Farmer and Pollock (2003) describe a range of strategies that carers employed to monitor and protect young people from putting themselves in risky situations outside the home. These included giving children lifts to their evening engagements, monitoring contacts and intervening if relationships were made that looked likely to be harmful as well as going out to look for children who did not return home on time. Carers provided clear boundaries for behaviour, including rules about the times the young people were to be home. They conclude that young people need to be taught how to keep themselves safe when out on their own, especially at night and be given the direct message that their safety matters to carers - since most of the children had not had the experience of being protected by parent figures. Where a parent or sibling is actively involved in sexual exploitation, contact with them is likely to lead to such involvement for the child. These links therefore need careful monitoring, and potentially curtailment (Whitaker *et al.*, 1998; Farmer & Pollock, 2003).

Where young people have a history of abusing others they will require close supervision in the home, including rules about being alone with other children. Some carers use listening devices or alarm systems to ensure children don't leave their bedroom at night. If a young person requires this high level of supervision then help in identifying suitable babysitters is an area that should be considered before a placement is made (Farmer & Pollock, 2003).

<u>Trafficked young people</u>

Practitioners feel that securing a trafficked child or young person in a physically safe environment is of utmost significance (Pearce *et al.*, 2009). They suggest that an initial placement should be one unknown to traffickers, beyond the local authority responsible for the child, and far enough away that a child could not easily return to traffickers – even by train (Pearce *et al.*, 2009; Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, 2010; Walker & Ishola, 2011). This

location should be secret and kept from any alleged friends or family until a full risk assessment has taken place (DCSF, 2009), and there should be strict rules on visits from outsiders (Council of Europe, 2005). Consideration should be given to the child's knowledge of the area/culture/language/currency/food and whether they have local connections they won't admit to (Walker & Ishola, 2011). Accommodation that is safe and secure should also be appropriate to the developmental need, cultural, linguistic, religious background, and individual emotional, social, educational needs of trafficked young people (Gozdziak & Bump, 2008).

There is clear evidence that, despite the high level of security used as part of a child's safety plan, traffickers regularly find ways to make contact. Nevertheless a combination of secure arrangements and intensive therapeutic care can enable adults to engage effectively and build trust with young people in order to reduce 'missing' incidences (Operation Newbridge Review Team, 2010). If they do go missing, foster carers should have useful information that can help in trying to find them (e.g. what the child may have been worried about, any behavioural changes leading up to the disappearance as well as information about cars or persons the child may have left with). In one particular case, a foster care placement was successful in averting a child from initially running away and when she did run away the information given by the carer was crucial in finding her again (Kapoor, 2007).

Evidence suggests that trafficked young people are less likely to go missing from a foster placement if the carer is present full time, i.e. 24-hour support (Pearce *et al*., 2009), and this is recommended practice if the risk of going missing is high (Walker & Ishola, 2011). The London Safeguarding Children's Toolkit (2009) recommends that all placements should be given a copy of their guidance in light of the high risk of trafficked young people going missing. This, along with the 'Harrow Good Practice Guidance for Trafficked Children in Care' can be obtained from http://www.londonscb.gov.uk/trafficking/. Trafficked young people are more likely to need high levels of control over their movement and freedoms early on in a placement. These are viewed as proportionate to safeguard young people against the determination of the traffickers to recover them. Areas covered in the Harrow best practice guidance include:

- Restricting a child's right to use the telephone, as well as travel documents/passes and money
- Giving the child information about where they are staying
- Accompanying the child outdoors and monitoring their movements
- Monitoring signs of risk, including people loitering/cars waiting outside the house or telephone enquiries
- Contact/links with own cultural group and with relatives in or outside the UK
- Tracing family and repatriation

Crucially, a child's care plan must include a risk assessment and a contingency plan if the child goes missing. A contingency plan could include contact details of agencies that should be notified if a potentially trafficked young person goes missing including the police and the UKBA (DCSF, 2009). Carers have a key role to play in monitoring risks and developing (along with children's social care and the police), a 'missing route map' as part of the risk assessment – which identifies routes the child may take if they were to go missing from the placement (Walker & Ishola, 2011).

These practical measures should be taken alongside attempts by professionals and carers to establish trusting relationships with young people, which will enable them to accept help. Consideration should be given to gaining the young person's consent where safety strategies are likely to be experienced as controlling. Practically carers and professionals need to have time to build such trust, avoid passing judgement where a young person remains mistrustful, use reflective dialogue that helps young people find their own voice, and be consistent (Barnardo's, 2009). Carers need to be sensitive to the possibility that the child is suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, and that random things may trigger fear or panic (Fursland, 2009).

5. Sexually exploited and trafficked young people need stability in their relationships, which can be threatened with multiple moves. Continuity of care should therefore be prioritised in planning a placement

<u>Sexually exploited young people</u>

Adult women involved in prostitution attribute an inability to form bonds with professionals to changes in carers when they were younger (Coy, 2009). Similarly, Schofield and Brown (1999) identify a lack of self-efficacy and self-worth, absence of trust, and anxiety-dominated relationships as the result of insecure and unsettled care in a sample of adolescent girls. They conclude that, in contrast, a 'secure base' cultivates inner strengths. This is supported by an Australian study of care leavers in which fewer care placements was strongly and positively associated with higher perceived emotional security, which in turn was associated with lower transience, higher levels of ongoing support and more positive overall outcomes (Cashmore & Paxman, 2006).

Coy (2009) argues that such a base can enable young women to resist the pull of sexually exploitative adults. Cregan, Scott and Smith (2005) agree that continuity of care is essential as the vulnerability of these young people often leads to multiple placements and interventions, which can be destabilising. Their research with exploited young women in secure accommodation indicates that the preferred model of care is one where support is provided at the highest degree of relational security possible with the lowest level of physical security needed. Safe accommodation should therefore initially be a family home, and then within the community and only when absolutely necessary, outside the community.

Good practice in supporting sexually exploited young people occurs where carers/professionals 'hold' the child through transitions, and support 'attachment'. Practically this means professionals/carers continuing relationships with young people even when things are difficult. It is consistent and persistent attention from a specific worker that "...enables the development of a protective, supportive relationship within which a young person feels safe enough to examine their lives and start to make changes" (Firmin, 2008, p. 6). The implication here is that where a placement outside the young person's community is necessary, an adult they already know and trust should continue to support them. Similarly Cregan *et al.*, (2005) argue that where possible, parents should be actively involved in discussions about interventions so that if a placement is disrupted, it is possible to provide some continuity for the child. Therapeutic interventions will be considered further in section 6.

<u>Trafficked young people</u>

The same principle applies to trafficked young people, who should be allocated a key worker to help them settle into accommodation, access healthcare services and education and support them in meeting with the police where necessary. A secure relationship with a trusting adult is vital if a trafficked young person is to feel safe enough to begin to disclose their experience and receive therapeutic support. However if trust has been broken by abusing adults many times before, it may take some time for a positive relationship with a carer or key worker to develop (Pearce *et al.*, 2009). Continuity of care, as far as it is possible, is therefore necessary if this trust is to develop.

6. Therapeutic interventions should be holistic, pro-active and build on the young person's resilience and strengths.

<u>Sexually exploited young people</u>

Sexually exploited young people need services to be proactive in engaging with them. Assertive/therapeutic outreach means being persistent with, and not giving up on young people even when they refuse services (Pearce, 2003; Cregan, Scott & Smith, 2005). Support should be holistic, non-judgemental and based on harm reduction models rather than 'quick fixes'. This means both addressing immediate needs like homelessness, substance use and single parenthood, while also encouraging participation in wider activities that will raise self-esteem and children's ability to control their lives (Barnardo's, 2002). Therapeutic approaches should recognise and build on strengths and resilience factors (Merredew, 2010) and should include diversionary activities in which young women can see themselves as more than a sexualised identity. Where young people find one-to-one counselling sessions intimidating, therapeutic work may need to be creative and make use of less formal means of emotional support, like art (Coy, 2008).

It should not be assumed that young people have received counselling. In one study only 44% of young people in care who were known to have suffered sexual abuse had ever been provided with direct work which addressed this - even though their sexually risky behaviour was well-managed (Farmer & Pollock 2003; Farmer, 2004). Women involved in prostitution describe confusion at being placed into care in order to protect them, yet not being offered any therapeutic support to overcome the damaging effects of abuse (Coy, 2009). Farmer and Pollock (2003) and Farmer (2004) therefore argue for specialist therapeutic services that offer supervision, adequate sex education, modification of inappropriate sexual behaviour *and* therapeutic attention to needs that underlie that behaviour.

<u>Trafficked young people</u>

Trafficked children have often become resilient as a result of their traumatic experiences, and support services should recognise and build on these skills in order to promote long-term integration and independence (Barnardo's, 2009). The level of questioning children experience on arrival into the UK can lead to them finding it difficult to talk about their experiences (Operation Newbridge Review Team, 2010). Therefore young people should be offered alternatives to one-to-one counselling, including group peer support (Wirtz, 2009).

Therapeutic interventions may need to address signs of trauma, shame and stigma, and develop young people's ability to appropriately express emotions, solve problems, and respond to challenges. Children are likely to have normalised abusive relationships and will need support to understand what constitutes exploitation compared with appropriate behaviour. As part of this, professionals may therefore need to explore young people's perceptions regarding work and obligations to provide for family (Walker & Ishola, 2011).

Trafficked children should be supported by consistent workers after their arrival in the UK and once in a stable placement should receive an explanation of their choices and options, including free legal advice and being given the opportunity to apply for compensation from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (Wirtz, 2009; Pearce *et al*., 2009, ECPAT, 2010). They should be encouraged and enabled to act independently and make decisions; be given opportunities for political activism, strategic influence, self-advocacy and peer support around their experiences, and offered support to prepare them for independent adulthood (Wirtz, 2009).

A suitable package of support could include helping young people to: engage with education and health services; understand their own needs, integrate specialist support with everyday life; manage the emotional impact of disclosure of previous abuse; and, where possible, to disclose details that would help to prosecute those who trafficked them (Pearce *et al*., 2009). On this last point, trafficked young people (as well as those who have been sexually exploited) need to be fully informed about risks and proceedings before agreeing to testify against perpetrators (*ibid*) and police should train professionals about how to elicit and record sensitive information without jeopardising the child's safety (Gosdziak *et al*., 2006).

Draft model of safe accommodation for sexually exploited and trafficked young people
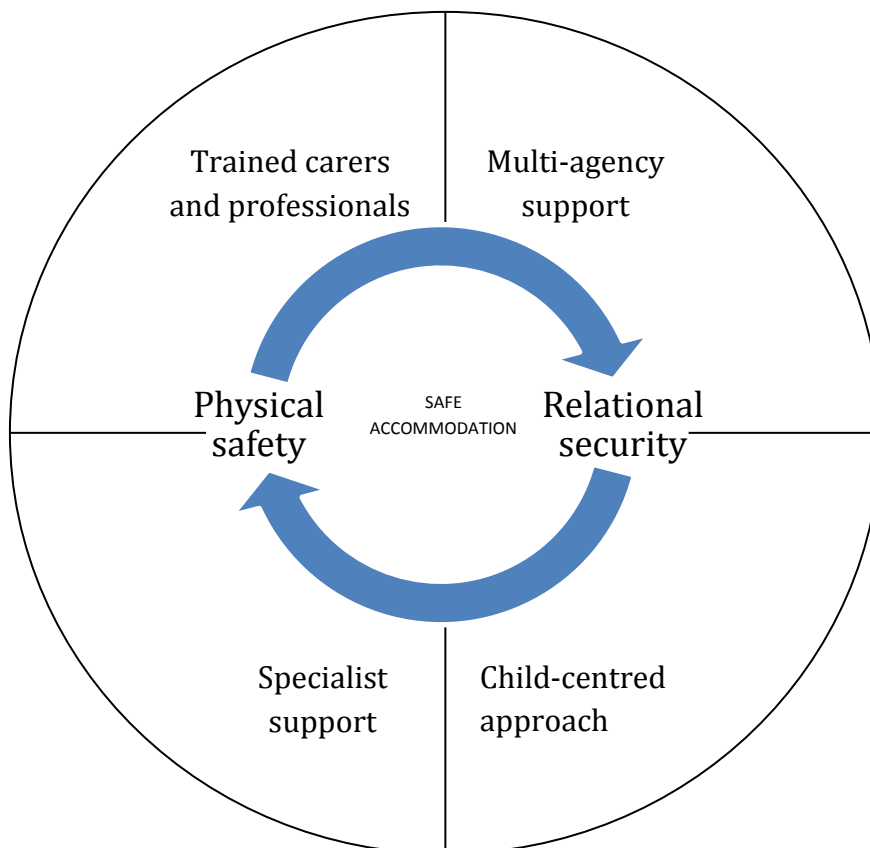
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