



# The participation of young people in child sexual exploitation services: A scoping review of the literature

Summary for practice

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## 1. Introduction

This literature review summary focuses on the nature and scope of the participation of young people in child sexual exploitation services. The review arises from the wider context of the evaluation of the CSEFA Hub and Spoke services.

The summary identifies the key issues and messages arising from the main review. It is important to consult the main review document for further information about the methods and discussion of the relevant sources. This summary also provides 'questions for practice' arising from the review.

One of the key aims of the CSEFA strategy is to investigate and support ways for young people to be actively involved in child sexual exploitation (CSE) services. This is embedded into the evaluation, which includes exploration of the following issues:

- How do Hub and Spoke services view and conceptualise 'participation'? What is agreed, what is contested?
- What are Hub and Spoke services doing to actively engage young people in informing and shaping the services that are provided?
- What examples of good practice and effective working are there?
- What is challenging about young people's participation in CSE services?
- How can learning about participation best be shared and disseminated?

A specific strand of the evaluation, focusing on participation, has subsequently been developed. The methodology for this includes the literature review, but also direct work with young people to gather views and develop young person friendly outputs. This work is ongoing.

The review has taken place between September 2015 and February 2016 and focuses on the following questions:

- How is 'participation' of young people in CSE services conceptualised in the research, policy and professional literature?
- What are the different theoretical strands that inform thinking about the participation of young people in CSE services?
- How explicit is the policy requirement for children and young people's participation in the processes associated with assessment, planning and review and what evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of these processes?

- What evidence exists regarding participation in the context of what represents 'good' practice and 'effective' working in relation to child sexual exploitation services?
- What evidence exists regarding the conditions that need to be in place to make participative working possible and effective for different groups of CSE affected young people?
- What are the challenges for professionals, young people, parents and carers in relation to participative working in CSE services?
- What evidence exists regarding the replicability of participative models?

## 2. How was the review carried out?

### 1. Was it a systematic review?

No. In order to carry out a systematic review the research available needs to include at least some studies that have evaluated the effectiveness of an intervention, and where there is good information about the research methods that have been used. There is not enough literature of this kind available in relation to the participation of young people in CSE services.

This review is better described as a scoping review. This means that the review aimed to clarify the nature of the research question, to identify the range of relevant and significant information and to make a broad assessment of the quality and coherence of the knowledge base. It then identifies the key themes and messages relating to the topic.

### 2. What kind of literature was included?

The review included research based information from 1989 to the present. It focused on information relating to the participation of young people in CSE services in the UK. In order to better understand the links between participation in CSE services and other welfare services for young people, the review also included examination of literature relating to child protection services, the care system and the youth justice system.

### 3. How were decisions made about which studies to include?

The review focused on peer reviewed research information and research based publications from relevant organisations. The review was necessarily wide ranging. Participation is a broad concept which is not easily defined. It was therefore important for the review to draw on a wide range of literature in order to explore the concept of participation and the different ways in which it has been applied.

### 4. How was the literature identified?

Searches were carried out using academic search engines, and also specialist databases relating to child sexual exploitation.

Policy documents and other grey literature were searched using government websites and organisations known to produce significant information relating to child sexual exploitation and participation. Experts in the area were asked for advice on current/recent work which might be included.

For further information relating to review methods, please refer to the main report.

### 1.2 What kind of information was available?

There is a growing amount of information about child sexual exploitation available. Often this includes information about participation, but this is not always defined or discussed in detail. Equally, there is an extensive literature on participation, but this has not to date focused on child sexual exploitation as an issue. Only one research study was identified that focuses on participatory approaches and CSE, as opposed to exploring young people's views on different issues related to CSE, including service response. A core group of 10 studies were identified that explicitly involved young people and practitioners and addressed, to varying degrees, the question of their participation.

### 1.3 Were there any noticeable gaps in the literature?

Yes. There were significant gaps in the following areas:

- Research examining the experiences of young people who have experienced child sexual exploitation and have received different services, statutory and voluntary;
- Literature relating to the experiences of young people who have received CSE services but have not taken part in formalised 'participation' experiences;
- Longitudinal studies following the experiences of young people and professionals over time, which could help understand changes in the approaches taken by organisations towards participation, and shifts in the way in which young people respond.
- Literature that describes in detail the practice undertaken by professionals working with young people at risk of or experiencing CSE;
- Literature relating to the experiences of specific groups of young people – for example, young people from different minority ethnic groups, disabled young people – in participating in CSE services.

These gaps are important as they highlight the limitations of our research knowledge – and also the importance of ongoing feedback and evaluation by different groups of young people at practice level.

### Questions for practice

- Are any of these gaps in research evidence reflected in 'gaps in practice'?
- Do you have any additional questions relating to evidence about the participation of young people in CSE services?

## 2. What ideas underpin thinking about the participation of young people in child sexual exploitation services?

There is a very extensive academic literature relating to 'participation' more broadly. There is wide agreement in the literature that:

- The term is complex and is used in different ways by individuals and organisations, covering a spectrum from the way in which professionals interact with young people on an individual basis, to activities that focus on young people's involvement and influence in service and policy development.
- Participation involves a range of activities and experiences for young people.
- It is important to view the idea of participation critically – it is more complex than may first appear, and arguably also more problematic.

Many different ideas underpin the concept of participation. The following areas of theory were identified as especially important in the context of thinking about young people's participation in child sexual exploitation services.

### Children's rights

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) asserts the right of children to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. The implication of this is that participation concerns all aspects of young people's lives. This has been reflected in child welfare legislation throughout the UK. Children's rights to participate are linked to their need for protection. These rights have been embedded in national legislation, including the Children Act 1989 and associated legislation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The evidence suggests that progress on implementing children's rights has been patchy. The most recent report of the four UK Children's Commissioners on the implementation of the UNCRC identified a number of areas where more progress was needed, included the need to incorporate of the UNCRC into domestic law. It has also been argued that the wider context of economic austerity, with associated cuts in

public services, has limited the capacity of statutory services to develop participatory approaches and ensure that the views and experiences of service users are communicated and used to influence decision making.

Nevertheless, progress has been made. The establishment of children's rights in law and policy has generated extensive work on encouraging the participation of children and young people in service development, and in understanding better the experiences of children and young people as service users. This can be linked to the idea of children and young people as citizens, individuals with rights that include the opportunity to contribute to social policy at all levels. This is sometimes controversial, and there are ongoing debates about how children's rights should be balanced with their protection and their capacity to contribute at different stages of their development.

In practice the interest in participation has resulted in a wide range of projects and initiatives at local and national level. It is important to recognise that concern with service user participation is not restricted to children and young people, and that there has been a more general interest in how service users can contribute to the shaping of public services and the specific services they receive. Participation should therefore be considered in relation to a wider set of terms including service user engagement, personalisation and the co-production, co-design and co-creation of services. These ideas are widely seen as positive in rebalancing the power relationship between service users and providers. At the same time, there is a lack of robust evidence on the outcomes of participation work. Some commentators argue for caution in assuming that participation in fact results in the intended benefits for individuals or for services, and that too often participation is directed by adults rather than children and young people.

### **Children and young people's 'agency'**

Legal definition of children's rights has been accompanied by a shift in academic thinking. This has involved a recognition that the experience of childhood and adolescence is not fixed according to a series of developmental stages, but that children themselves are competent individuals who can act autonomously, engage with their social worlds, and make decisions that affect their lives and the lives of those around them. These decisions and actions are also shaped – though not determined - by wider historical, social, cultural and economic contexts. This 'new' sociology of childhood has helped develop understanding of the many different ways in which childhood and youth may be experienced, and has helped challenge the view that young people who have experienced adversities are defined by these difficulties and labels.

Social policy and the way in which services are delivered also contribute to the shaping of childhood and adolescence, and the extent to which young people are viewed as competent and able to contribute to decision making about their lives. Young people and families who experience high levels of involvement in and surveillance from the state are often those least likely to be given opportunities to express their views and have these taken seriously.

The history of young people who have experienced child sexual exploitation is one in which many have been labelled as troublesome and as lacking the competence or value to contribute in positive ways. This has been reflected in their experience of approaching statutory agencies for help, with many reporting that they have been ignored or blamed for what has happened to them. Many have also become isolated and detached from other forms of community or social engagement – through, for example, absence from school, running away, or placement changes while in care. Additionally, young people may be viewed as victims, and either passive or in other ways perceived as unable to act with autonomy or agency. Such perceptions of young people are also influenced by conscious and unconscious thinking about gender and sexuality. Adolescents have frequently been held as somehow responsible for their abuse and exploitation, rather than as young people who have been abused and in need of support.

These ideas about 'agency' are important in explaining why participation is an important theme in the way in which CSE services are delivered. Participation is often perceived by young people and practitioners as a part of a process of recovering their sense of self, and sense of agency. This can involve a reconnection with other, non-abusive individuals and groups. This is not straightforward: the abuse and other difficulties that young people are experiencing do not end with intervention from a specialist agency, and the process of recovery is often a lengthy one.

These ideas also help explain why young people may or may not feel able to seek or accept help. Participation in services also needs to be considered against non-participation. The evidence from the review is clear that young people know when they are listened to, but are, equally, aware when this is not the case – and this influences their choices in terms of engagement with services.

The evidence indicates that this is less about participation versus non-participation but the different positions young people may adopt in terms of their involvement in the services. This can be considered in terms of a process of 'becoming' a service user. Young people may adopt different stances towards involvement in an organisation, and will adopt different roles. The level and type of participation may also change over time.

The literature relating to CSE also emphasises the barriers, visible and invisible, that exist in relation to young people's participation in services. Becoming involved in more formal types of participation requires some acceptance of their experience of sexual exploitation, and willingness to be known as someone who has been exploited. Adopting to some degree the identity of a 'CSE service user' is far from easy, and the evidence is clear from both young people and services that it may take a long time for young people to tell their stories. However, a service can also represent a type of community, and growing attachment to those working in the service and other young people who are service users can be an important motivation to participate. Others may choose to accept help but may not want to take part in consultations or other activities.

### Questions for practice

- To what extent do you think a participative approach is important to practice with young people who have experienced child sexual exploitation?
- What are the different ways in which participation is viewed in your service, and in children's services locally?
- What are the different ways that you find the term 'participation' being used in practice? Does this matter?

### 3. Has participation been recognised in CSE policy?

Participation is a very important concept in current CSE policy. This is largely due to the evidence from young people, presented in public inquiries and court cases, demonstrating that they have often been ignored or blamed by professionals when seeking to report child sexual exploitation. This is strongly reinforced by the research evidence.

This failure to listen to young people has resulted in the widespread failure to identify and respond to child sexual exploitation. Also, as charities, researchers and others have campaigned to have sexual exploitation recognised as a form of abuse, this has sometimes resulted in a perception of young people solely as 'victims', rather than as individuals with knowledge and skills to contribute to changing their own lives and communities.

Official guidance therefore emphasises the importance of young people's participation, both at the level of listening to children in relation to decisions about their lives, and in the development of good practice. Those working with children need to take the time to get to know children, so that young people are more able to talk about issues that concern them and to seek help. This involves ensuring frontline professionals have a good understanding of child sexual

exploitation and understand the difficulties for children and young people in talking about CSE.

It is very positive that participation is viewed as a critical element to the effective delivery of CSE services. However, policy assertions do not automatically translate to effective practice, and the challenges of definition and what constitutes effective practice remain.

### Questions for practice

- To what extent do young people in your service influence CSE policy and practice locally and nationally?
- What are the barriers to this, and how might these be overcome?

### 4. What evidence exists regarding the experience of participation in CSE services, and its impact, from the perspectives of young people, parents and carers, and professionals?

There is more research evidence about the perspectives of young people regarding participation than those of parents, carers and other professionals. Research into services that has included these groups shows that parents and carers, like young people, valued services that listened to them – and their children – and took their views seriously.

There is limited evidence about the experiences of different groups of young people, for example boys, young people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, young people from rural communities and young people with experiences of different forms of learning and physical disability. However, this gap is recognised and some studies have tried to find out the views of more diverse populations of young people.

Young people do not talk about 'participation' as such, but talk a great deal about what they value in services. They identify interpersonal factors as especially important, most obviously the relationships they have developed with individual workers. However, organisational factors are also important – for example, flexibility and availability of staff. These issues relate to the wider ethos or culture of the service, where young people feel they are taken seriously and treated with respect.

This makes young people feel noticed and cared for. This stands in contrast to the feelings of difference, exclusion, vulnerability and invisibility that have often been present in their lives, and may have contributed to their experiences of exploitation.

It is important to recognise, however, that the research that has taken place involves young people who continue to engage with services and have clearly had a positive experience. There is a lack of evidence, though, about young people who have found it difficult to engage or have rejected CSE services.

Professional accounts of service provision and research evaluations highlight the importance of participation – in the sense of placing young people at the centre of their work and prioritising listening and working alongside young people – as protective and an intervention in its own right. This includes providing young people with information that enables them to reflect and re-evaluate their experiences. Providing opportunities to take part in different activities and to develop new skills is considered helpful as a means of shifting direction in their lives and developing new and healthy relationships.

### Questions for practice

- To what extent has your service talked to young people, parents and carers, the staff group and other stakeholders about participation?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which participation takes place within your service?

## 5. What are the implications of young people's experiences of other services?

The literature emphasises that young people's engagement with CSE services is informed by their past and current experience of service use. While there is no one profile of young people who use CSE services, research samples indicate that a disproportionate number will have experienced many adversities such as family conflict; disengagement from education; experience of the care system; experience of running away; emotional and mental health difficulties. There is strong research evidence indicating that young people may have been viewed as difficult, manipulative and troublesome – though there may also be positive relationships with individuals or services which can be built on.

In relation to participation, service experience – including that which is negative – may represent an opportunity and a testimony to the expertise of young people as service users. Young people who are involved with multiple services have considerable knowledge and skill in navigating between services, and are able to identify what is effective. There is also evidence that young people are aware of their potential to contribute and feel they have valuable contributions to make to improve practice. It is important that this expertise is not confined to the CSE community, but is used to influence practice and policy across the different agencies working

with young people.

However, service experience may also represent a barrier to participation. In the context of this past experience, even accessing services in the first place is difficult and traumatic for young people. Young people may already feel that no one will listen and fear rejection.

The nature of participation or how this has been communicated will also be important. A large body of evidence relating to children's services focuses on the experience of participation in the context of formal processes of review and assessment, usually involving meetings. Overall, this indicates that requirements relating to the participation of young people are not always adhered to; within meetings young people often feel awkward or not listened to, or not able to speak honestly about their views or experiences. Demonstration of an alternative way of working is therefore likely to be important.

### Questions for practice

- How does young people's experience of other services affect their participation in your service?
- Can you think of examples of young people's 'service expertise' that has influenced the development of your service?

## 6. What kinds of participative engagement have been undertaken by young people in CSE services?

This tends to be described in quite general terms in the literature, but the following can be identified:

### Involvement in training

There has been a strong emphasis on the importance of raising awareness and improving the knowledge base of all professionals working with young people in regard to child sexual exploitation. New training is being developed and is being delivered, often by specialist agencies, and there is evidence of young people being involved in this to very positive effect, either by developing training materials or being involved in delivery. There is a lack of clear evidence about how participatory styles of working are presented in such training, and the effects of this.

### Development of resources and materials

There is evidence that young people are involved in developing a variety of resources using a range of media, which aim to improve understanding of CSE and also to serve as tools for training and practice. These include leaflets, films, reports and presentations. Young people attest to the value of involvement in these activities, and report enjoying learning or developing skills.

### **Involvement in policy development, locally and nationally**

There is an absence of research relating to young people's participation at organisational and structural level in the development of CSE policy and practice. Evidence to date suggests that between a quarter and a third of LSCBs involve young people in the development of their CSE strategies.

### **Undertaking research and evaluation**

This is an important strand in the literature on participation. Young people with experience of CSE have been involved in consultations and advising on research projects and research materials. They have also helped in the dissemination of research findings. The experience of being involved in CSE-related research is, however, under-researched.

### **Questions for practice**

- What are the different ways in which young people participate in your service?
- What opportunities exist for young people to participate in group activities in your service?
- To what extent are these activities used as a means to influence the development of your service?

## **7. What evidence exists regarding the range of participative models and techniques used in CSE services, and the accessibility and effectiveness of these different approaches?**

There is an absence of research that explicitly 'tests' the effectiveness or replicability of participative models. However, there is a high degree of consistency in respect to the style and approach of work with CSE affected young people that is considered to work well and that young people say they want.

Participation is an important aspect of existing models, though principally in the context of direct working rather than service design and development. Prominent examples of this include Barnardo's model of provision in terms of 'four A's': 'Access', which involves seeking new and creative ways to enable young people to access services; 'Attention', or developing protective and supportive relationships through the consistent and persistent attention; 'Assertive Outreach', or the use of 'persistent engagement techniques' to maintain contact; and 'Advocacy' work with other agencies to ensure that young people's needs are placed at the centre of decision making.

Similarly, a model of 'therapeutic outreach' emphasises the need to think beyond traditional models of service provision, such as planned appointments in professional spaces. Rather, it is important to develop services that recognise the nature of young people's everyday experiences and routines,

and works flexibly to interact with individual young people in ways that are comfortable for them. This has much in common with youth work models of provision.

More generally, key themes emerge as important to effective working, which correspond to practice that is participative.

### **Making services accessible**

Services need to be available when young people need them – for example, at evenings and weekends. This evidence can be related to a much wider body of literature attesting to the need for services for adolescents to be accessible in terms of location and opening times. Young people highlight the importance of being able to self-refer. The principle of voluntary engagement with services is important in demonstrating respect and understanding of the young person's experiences and choices.

### **Recognising diversity**

Given the invisibility of some groups of young people in CSE services, the importance of understanding local needs and identifying ways of communicating and raising awareness amongst different groups will be important in ensuring that services are both accessible and acceptable.

### **Relationship based working**

The research evidence is clear that positive relationships lie at the core of effective practice in CSE services. Developing and maintaining positive relationships provide a context in which young people can develop trust and feel safe. In turn this enables the young person to feel confident about how and when they talk about the issues affecting them. In turn, greater feelings of confidence are likely to represent the starting-point for exploration of other, different ways of participating in a service. Equally, through such relationships the individuality of young people can be recognised, and with this the fact that not all young people will be ready or will wish to take part in groups or more organised participatory activities.

### **Talking and listening**

Within professional/young person relationships the quality of the individual interaction or encounter is key. Listening, asking questions sensitively, allowing the young person to talk or be silent, all serve to indicate 'care'. At the same time there is some evidence urging clarity between participants about 'what happens next'.

### **Questions for practice**

- To what extent are these different themes evident in your service?
- Do you gather evidence about the effectiveness of these different elements? If not, can you identify ways in which this could happen?

## 8. What evidence exists regarding the conditions that need to be in place to make participative working possible and effective for different groups of CSE affected young people?

### **An organisational commitment to a participatory approach**

This is also referred to as a culture of participation, and emphasises that participation is not additional, but central to the work of the service. In order to make this happen is important to set clear aims and objectives for participation work, and to consider how to provide evidence for the process and outcomes of participation.

Ensuring children and young people have access to their rights to be consulted and to participate in decisions concerning their rights requires time, resources, and careful consideration of what support might be necessary (for example, in relation to language, special communication needs) to enable the young person to participate. This will involve ensuring that staff are trained and supported to understand and reflect on how all young people in a service can be enabled to participate.

### **Organisational arrangements that enable, rather than obstruct, young people's involvement in individual decision making**

The research evidence highlights the importance of organisational arrangements in ensuring that young people have the opportunity to develop positive relationships with individual members of staff. A stable staff group, ensuring consistency of workers, is important. The evidence is very strong that staff should be recruited who have the skills, or the potential to develop the skills, to work effectively with young people. This will include individual qualities such as warmth, friendliness, humour and lack of judgement are important. Skill and compassion should be allied with a strong knowledge base relating to CSE and the needs of vulnerable young people. Time is important – the evidence indicates strongly that it is difficult to impose time limits on work with young people, though this is often a pressure in terms of funding.

### **A flexible and creative approach to participation**

This will include discussion about what is meant by participation in the context of the specific service, and different ways in which this can be applied. It will also involve exploration of different methods of work. For example, there is evidence that it is helpful to offer young people different opportunities to communicate and explain what is important to them, such as art, music and drama. While there is an absence of specific evidence relating to CSE services in the UK, other evidence suggests that peer support can be important and both group work and other forms of peer support are potentially valuable.

### Questions for practice

- Is participation something you talk about in your service – or do you sign up for the ideas without using the term?
- Are there external or internal barriers to developing participatory approaches? If so, why do these exist and can they be challenged or overcome?

## 9. Does the sector make a difference?

It is important to recognise that the majority of the available evidence relates to young people receiving services in the voluntary rather than the statutory sector. Studies that have examined service delivery have highlighted the role of the voluntary sector in delivering CSE services. There is evidence that young people and families contrast the style of working in the voluntary sector as more positive and supportive than statutory services, such as social care and the police.

At the same time there is other evidence that indicates that individuals within the statutory sector are successful in developing positive and participatory relationships with young people. There are structural reasons why the statutory sector may find it more difficult to implement participatory styles of working at all levels – time, resource and frequent turnover of staff are not helpful. In larger organisations it may be harder to develop a 'culture of participation', and in turn more difficult to avoid a tick box approach to participatory practice.

### Questions for practice

- To what extent do you think a 'culture of participation' exists within your service?
- To what extent does your service represent different groups in your community?
- Can you identify any barriers which may limit the participation of some groups of young people?



## 10. What can we conclude overall from the review?

1. There is a strong commitment to the idea of participative practice in CSE policy and practice.
2. There is a need to make explicit the different ways in which participation takes place in practice, and to identify ways in which evidence can be gathered to demonstrate the impact of this on young people and services.
3. Research focusing on young people's views and experiences emphasises that they value the way in which CSE services recognise them as individuals, listen and take their views seriously, and provide a flexible and friendly approach.
4. Participation in CSE services is distinct, in the sense that professionals need a strong knowledge base regarding the routes into and experience of CSE, and a reflective and critical approach to practice.
5. The research evidence relating to participation more widely emphasises the need for congruence between organisational structures and individual practice in order to develop services that are responsive.
6. The wider research context relating to CSE means that research evidence demonstrating the nature and extent of different types of participative practice is limited, and there is therefore a need for more examples of how participation takes place in practice.
7. There are significant gaps in our knowledge of how groups of young people who are less well represented in CSE services view participation, and how this can best take place.
8. Participation is not a static idea and cannot be confined to the development of policy or practice guidelines; rather services will need to work with service users in an ongoing cycle of research, reflection and action.



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