

Action taken in response to Child Sexual  
exploitation and issues identified in the  
Serious Case Review of Children A-F

March 2015

# Introduction

The serious case review of children A-F identifies that there was a systemic failure in the period before Operation Bullfinch and the council accepts all recommendations from the review and takes full responsibility for its role in what went wrong. The council has apologised to the victims and their families, and deeply regrets that the abuse was not stopped sooner.

Police and social workers have identified 373 Oxfordshire children who have been, or are strongly suspected of being, victims of child sexual exploitation over a 15 year period (1999 to 2014). This is not an estimated number. It relates to known children who have been interviewed as part of Operation Bullfinch, or the specialist Kingfisher team has worked with - or in some cases both.

The capability to tackle child sexual exploitation has been transformed in Oxfordshire since Operation Bullfinch. This has been made possible by far greater understanding of this form of abuse, strong leadership and ensuring that resources have been made available to undertake the action that is required. This report provides a summary of the action that the council has taken since 2010 when Operation Bullfinch was launched, and also identifies broader lessons and national issues for consideration.

## I. Summary of actions and impact

### 1. Effective joint working:

**Kingfisher Team** was established in 2012 as a co-located multi agency team focusing on child sexual exploitation. It consists of social workers, police, Oxford City Council, local health services and other specialist workers including drugs and alcohol teams, the voluntary sector (Barnardo's) and others including those focusing on the BME community and working with parents. The team has worked with over 200 children and has an active caseload of around 70 at any one time, and prevents abuse through awareness raising and protecting children at risk, disruption and prosecution of perpetrators. Social workers have small caseloads enabling intensive and persistent work with children to build trusting relationships and support disclosure. Since 2011 our work has resulted in the issuing of 60 abduction notices.

- **Criminal proceedings:** The original Operation Bullfinch trial had 6 victim witnesses and 9 defendants. Seven were found guilty and were sentenced to a total of 95 years in prison
- Since April 2013 closer partnership working has led to nine trials for child sexual exploitation in Oxfordshire, with 10 men being convicted of related crimes and sentenced to over 45 years in prison:

3 victim witnesses,	1 defendant	found guilty and awaiting sentence
6 victim witnesses	1 defendant,	pleaded guilty and sentenced to 10 years in prison
1 male victim witness	1 defendant	sentenced to 32 month in prison
2 victim witnesses	1 defendant,	sentenced to 8 years in prison
1 victim witness	2 defendants	each sentenced to 27 month in prison
1 victim witness,	1 defendant,	sentenced to 3 years in prison
1 victim witness	1 defendant	sentenced to 6 weeks in prison and financial compensation
1 victim witness	1 defendant (3 charged, 2 had charges withdrawn)	sentenced to 14 years in prison
1 victim witness	1 defendant	2 convictions, sentenced to 20 months in prison for each conviction

In addition there is currently a trial underway in Oxford with 8 victim witnesses, 7 defendants. A number of significant further investigations are well underway that are expected to result in further arrests and charges shortly. Our work to date has involved victims from all geographic areas of the county; it is not limited to any one particular area.

- **The Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub** was launched in 2014. It provides a single front door from universal services and the public for all referrals to children's social care. Includes children's social care, Thames Valley Police, city and district council staff and health professionals, enables sharing of information and more effective action at the point of referral. The team will also start handling referrals to adult social care in 2015, enabling further integration and intelligence sharing across this boundary. Over the first four months of operation the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub dealt with 4,592 enquiries of which 1,337 resulted in formal assessments.
- **Work with Schools** has been intensive involving headteachers and chairs of governors, as well as children and teachers to help them understand this issue and what to do if they are worried. The Kingfisher team now leads monthly multi-agency discussions with schools and other agencies in their local areas to raise awareness and enable intelligence gathering on children of concern. We have recognised the risks that children face when they are not in school and have a new attendance and behaviour policy that strengthens our approach to children who are not attending school.
- We have worked closely with **Oxford City Council and the other district councils in Oxfordshire**, including briefings for their members and management teams, and through regular meetings with their Chief Executives. These councils have a key role in alcohol licencing and taxi and

private hire licencing, as well as being housing authorities and leading community safety activity at the local level.

- We use **multi agency patrols** to identify people and premises of concern and disrupt activity creatively where child sexual exploitation evidence alone is not strong enough. For example we have used trading standards, health and safety and fire safety to close down premises (2 guesthouses and 1 pub), and undertaken raids for drugs and underage drinking. We also work with the police to use harbouring notices and other tactics to disrupt activity. To date 60 abduction notices have been issued as part of disruption tactics.
- We take a **strategically aligned approach** between the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board, Health and Wellbeing Board and Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership, Police and Crime Commissioner, city and district councils and community safety partnerships and others.
- We are strengthening arrangements between the Safeguarding Children Board and Community Safety Partnerships, with children's social care managers now members of the community safety partnerships in their respective District Council areas. We are developing a protocol in place to ensure that the Oxfordshire Safer Communities Partnership works effectively alongside the Safeguarding Children Board and are using both boards to deal with key issues such as child sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation and the 'Prevent' agenda, therefore gaining multi-agency co-operation.

## 2. Leadership

- Oxfordshire has firm and committed political and managerial leadership with absolute determination to tackle this issue head on. No excuses.
- There has been a cross party approach by senior politicians, with no political football.
- Councillors, led by the Lead member for Children's services, have played a critical role in shaping and challenging our approach. This has included two major reports to the County Council Cabinet, regular discussion by Political Group Leaders, and several briefings for county and city and district councillors. Our main performance committee has also been involved, receiving the chair of the safeguarding board's annual report and developing appropriate performance metrics to hold services to account.
- A cross party member group was established in 2013 and has tightened members' roles in relation to safeguarding assurance processes.
- Elected members sit on the Corporate Parenting Panel which receives an annual report on the safeguarding of looked after children, listens to the Children In Care Council and visits residential children's homes.
- Political decision making has supported increasing resourcing to children's social care despite major budget pressures.

- Action has been driven by the Chief Executive and Director of Children's services.
- We have taken every opportunity to share our learning with others, raising national issues that need national solutions, sharing what we have found works with other professionals and learning from them.
- The serious case review identifies concerns about escalation processes within the council. We have significantly strengthened requirements for escalation, with a new 'Need to Know' policy and training for senior managers. A monthly 'Need to Know' report is collated and reviewed by the Lead member, Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services.

### **3. Resourcing**

- Tackling child sexual exploitation is expensive. We have faced a significant financial burden but resourcing of child protection is regarded as non-negotiable, with strong commitment from politicians across all parties.
- The budget for children's social care has increased by over £20m over the last ten years, an increase of 80% in real terms, despite huge cuts in other areas.
- The county council spent in excess of £3m during Operation Bullfinch on social work and other support to the investigation.
- In 2013/14 county councillors agreed an additional £1.4m to enable the recruitment of an additional 21 child protection social workers. The costs of the Kingfisher team are now in our base budget.
- We also face significant increased demand for child protection services - in 2014 there was a 24% increase in referrals; and a 10% increase in numbers of children on child protection plans and coming into care. In part these increases were due to increased awareness of child sexual exploitation and the legacy of abuse and neglect in making children vulnerable to exploitation.

### **4. Professional practice**

- Through our contribution to the Serious Case Review we have identified a huge amount of learning for our managers and practitioners. Four hundred and fifty staff have been involved in fourteen learning events working on difference practice themes.
- 7,000 plus multi agency front line staff have been trained to understand the warning signs and use new screening tools to identify children at risk, working with the Kingfisher team where they have concerns. By December 2014 327 screening tools have been completed and presented to the Kingfisher team by a wide range of agencies, including schools.

- We spend a lot of time listening to victims and their families and learning what works best to help prevent, protect and disrupt, ensuring that our practice reflects what they tell us.
- Highly intensive and proactive approach to victim support – e.g. getting disclosures from children working with the Kingfisher team can take 12 months of intensive work, for the Bullfinch trial we provided 24 hour a day 7 days a week support from one social worker for four months while the trial was underway.
- Work with parents now has a greater focus through training of staff and supervisors and the deployment of dedicated staff to work with parents in the Kingfisher team. Tight agreements are struck with all parents to ensure missing episodes of children who are of concern are immediately reported to the police.
- We have a new approach (with the police) to missing children - led by a senior manager and a new Missing Persons Panel that meets monthly to review all children who have gone missing more than twice in a 90 day period, and take strong action as required. Multi-agency performance reporting on missing episodes has been improved and is scrutinised quarterly by the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children's Board. In addition we have very high expectations of school attendance and attainment, ensuring that social workers are immediately aware if a child fails to attend school, and that immediate action is taken.
- Adults and children's services are working closely together at a strategic level, including establishing a joint team in the on-going Bullfinch investigation to support now adult victims. A joint business unit for the adults and children's safeguarding boards is being set-up with a single strategic safeguarding partnerships manager post that will oversee the work of both boards and ensure common agendas are identified and acted on.
- We have applied learning from tackling child sexual exploitation to other areas of our work – e.g. new models for children on the edge of care, a new placement strategy, a new approach to neglect and adolescence
- We seek to avoid out of county placements for our most vulnerable children; Four new children's homes are being built in Oxfordshire, including one to support vulnerable girls facing child sexual exploitation. We are also improving the packages of support that are available to support children to keep their placements. This involves more integrated work with mental health, schools and youth offending services.
- We recognise that many young people facing child sexual exploitation are affected by substance misuse problems, we have therefore focused on new drug and alcohol services education programmes for children and re-commissioned integrated services for adults

- We are working across organisational boundaries with city and district councils on housing, guest houses, licensed premises, taxis. Safeguarding training and licensing requirements have been introduced. The county's local authority designated officer works closely with the city and district councils to ensure all concerns and allegations about taxi drivers and licensees are thoroughly investigated and licences are permanently revoked where appropriate.
- Oxfordshire has been selected as one of the national pilot areas for 'See Me Hear Me' by the Office of the Children's Commissioner. This is a comprehensive strategic and practice framework for child sexual exploitation that places the child's voice at the heart of the work.
- Oxfordshire is also a national pilot area for the Home Office's trafficking programme which entails the use of advocates from Barnardo's to support and maintain contact with children who are known or suspected to have been victims of trafficking.
- The school health nursing service has been re-commissioned by Public Health and nurses are now in post in every secondary school. Together with pastoral teams and primary adolescent mental health services they are strengthening the direct provision to children with emotional, behavioural and sexual health needs in secondary schools.
- Public Health have re-commissioned sexual health services and have been robust in their contract monitoring requirements in respect of the safeguarding screening of children presenting for contraception and genito-urinary treatment.

## **5. Culture, attitudes, beliefs**

- In the past children were wrongly treated as wayward teenagers – now we know that persistence and relationship-building is what makes the difference. A thorough understanding of the impact of grooming permeates our whole approach, and is particularly evident in the Kingfisher team who will work relentlessly over many months with girls and boys to gain their trust.
- In the period before 2010 the pull of grooming and the power of the abusers was not recognised and understood. Girls were seen as sexually active with "boyfriends" when they should have been seen as children unable to consent. Practice has changed. Children are treated as children and social workers know they must build trusted relationships and keep children engaged however challenging their behaviour.
- We have run a series of learning events for staff, including addressing use of language and its importance in direct work with children and in the way it is recorded.
- We have updated our practice guidance on consent and this is made available to all agencies and schools, making clear that children cannot consent and that children over the age of 16 who are groomed are not

consenting to being exploited. We supported the 2013/14 campaign led by Oxford City Council, challenging young people to be clear about consent and sexual boundaries.

- We have also worked with local health providers providing training and guidance for staff about sexual activity for children under 18.
- We are also focusing on perpetrators and the need for a robust approach to safeguarding their families and children.

## 6. Awareness raising

- We now have awareness raising activity underway on a huge scale, covering children, parents, schools, front line professionals, communities, hotels, taxi drivers, housing associations and others.
- Since 2011, 6,000 children a year have seen age-appropriate drama workshops, to help them understand the risks and know what to do if they are worried about themselves or friends. This includes 'Chelsea's Choice', shown to years 8 and 9 since 2013; 'Somebody's Sister, Somebody's Daughter' being rolled out to children in years 10 and above, from 2015; and the 'Values versus Violence' programme that is currently being piloted in Oxford city schools for primary school aged children as part of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), and will be extended across the county.
- **'Everybody's business'** we know that professionals alone cannot stop child sexual exploitation. We need everyone to understand the signs of grooming and take action when they have concerns. We have worked with local councillors, the local media and other local stakeholders to roll out this message. In September 2014 we held an event with the police for 150 local community stakeholders including representatives from voluntary, community and faith groups and local councillors.

## 7. Community engagement

- Safeguarding guidance has been given to all parish, town, district and county councillors, encouraging them to be the 'eyes and ears' at a local level and know how to report concerns.
- The serious case review makes clear that ethnicity was not a factor in the handling of children A-F, but we recognise that there are similarities with what appears to be a national pattern of cases disproportionately involving men of Pakistani heritage. We agree with the findings of the serious case review that urgent research is needed to understand why this is the case.
- Whilst it is critically important that our work does not focus on only one community, we think that this pattern must be acknowledged and we are working with those affected communities to tackle this crime together. This is being done through on-going work with families, young people and faith

groups, by ourselves, and through work led by the police and the voluntary sector. The national charity, Street UK is now working with mosques and young people and their families in the local South East Asian community focusing on addressing issues that may contribute to involvement in criminal activity including sexual exploitation and other issues.

- In October 2014 the county council and the police ran a Safeguarding Conference for the Oxford Pastors Forum which is the network for all the independent churches. This is predominantly Black Caribbean and African Churches. Muslim organisations were also invited and representatives attended. The conference focussed on trafficking and child sexual exploitation as well as other forms of abuse.
- The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) has led work with the Oxfordshire Mosques and their linked Madrassas on safeguarding children and have worked to ensure safeguarding arrangements are in place including DBS checks, basic training and a safeguarding policy.

## **8. Independent accountability**

- Ofsted inspection in 2014 rated the council's children's services as 'good' and referred to 'high quality' work by the Kingfisher Team on tackling child sexual exploitation with consistently high use of the screening tool and 'excellent' awareness raising.
- An independent child protection consultant produced a detailed and thorough Independent Management Report looking at all social care cases. Learning has been acted upon and this document has been made available to the Department for Education.
- The handling of the Bullfinch cases by social workers have been reviewed for negligence or professional misconduct and independently reviewed by an employment barrister. A report on all practicing social workers has been sent to the Health and Care Professional Council (HCPC) for verification.
- The Kingfisher team were the 2014 winners of the outstanding achievements award for children's services by the Management Journal (MJ).

## **9. Sharing practice and supporting development of national policy**

- We have been on a steep learning curve, and have been keen to share our learning widely to help others tackle this issue effectively both nationally and at the local level.
- In 2014 we held a learning event for 300 social workers and safeguarding practitioners from across the country and the police held a similar event for police and criminal justice professionals.

## II. Broader lessons and national implications

Key lessons that we have learnt are set out below. We are sharing these issues widely, attempting to help others tackle child sexual exploitation effectively.

### Understanding the issue and having the right mindset:

- *Safeguarding is Everyone's Business* - This means that keeping children safe is not just an issue for social workers and other front line workers but requires responsibility to be taken at a broader societal, managerial and political level. Public awareness, particularly about the signs of grooming, is critical and currently a gap. This mind set is also needed at the national level and across the country.
- *Understanding grooming* - The abuse that was described in the Operation Bullfinch trial by the victims is known as 'street grooming'. This involves offenders deliberately targeting their young victims, often initially providing them with affection, alcohol, drugs and gifts before isolating them from existing friends and family networks and then subjecting them to extreme violence, sexual abuse and trafficking. Children often become 'trapped' by their abusers and can struggle to articulate what is happening to them.
- *Complexity* – The nature of this type of grooming means that you can't 'just tackle it'. It takes immense time and skills to develop effective relationships with victims so that they are able to disclose what is happening and in addition these cases are often very complex, involving multiple victims and perpetrators in a tangled web that takes time to understand.
- *Child sexual exploitation is happening everywhere* - If it isn't actively sought it will not be uncovered. This requires different skills – police officers to act more like social workers, social workers to act more like detectives. Local politicians and Police and Crime Commissioners to be questioning of children's services and police about missing children and ensuring that robust processes are in place locally.
- *Mainstream but get the balance right* – Tackling child sexual exploitation is now a mainstream activity in Oxfordshire. It is not recognised as such nationally or in other areas. However cases of neglect and other types of abuse are also rapidly increasing and remain by far the biggest safeguarding issues for Oxfordshire's children. Getting the balance right in terms of resourcing and managerial attention is a challenge.

## Multi agency working

- *Effective partnership working must become the norm* - In Oxfordshire we have established a Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub and have a specialist child sexual exploitation team known as Kingfisher. Both are joint teams with the police and other partners, and enable effective sharing of intelligence and information to protect children.

## Resourcing

- *Pressures* - Tackling child sexual exploitation at a time where year on year demand for children's and adults' services has increased by over 20% whilst public sector spending is being severely reduced is a very serious challenge. Since 2010 the council has lost over 40% of the funding we get from government, and there are significant constraints on our ability to raise additional income.

The county council alone has spent over £8m+ on Operation Bullfinch. We are fortunate that councillors of all political persuasions have prioritised children's services over other more universal services, and as a consequence the council has doubled its spend on children's services over the past seven years. Despite this, demand continues to outstrip available resourcing and we are currently forecasting an overspend in children's services of £7m this financial year.

- *Complexity* - The complexity and entrenched nature of child sexual exploitation can mean that to keep victims safe they are placed into secure units, we currently have 3 such cases at a cost of over £1m per year.
- *Historic cases* - The potential scale of tackling historic cases ('cold cases') is not affordable and has the potential to lead to a lack of focus on tackling current cases.

## Questions still in the 'too difficult' box

- *How do you persuade agencies to go looking when all the risks of vilification are so great – major risk of media blame game?*
- *How do you persuade local government and police forces to invest huge sums of money in preventative action when other things are much more pressing politically?*
- *How do we truly build resilience in our communities?*
- *Who is making the money out of these crimes?*

- *How do we challenge poor stereo types about women in some sections of society?*
- *What really are the risk factors, and how do we tackle them?*
- *What is going on with the disproportionate number of perpetrators coming from BME heritage backgrounds?*

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