

Experiences of survivors of sexual exploitation as they reach adulthood

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This briefing raises awareness of the experiences of women who are survivors of sexual exploitation as reach adulthood, when responsibility for their support transitions from children's into adult safeguarding services.

The briefing is based on learning from the STAGE Project, supported by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) Tampon Tax Fund to explore and highlight the nature and extent of sexual exploitation of adult women across our communities.

The STAGE Project brings together charities [Changing Lives](#), [GROW](#), [A WAY OUT](#), [Together Women](#), [Basis](#) and [WomenCentre \(Kirklees and Calderdale\)](#) to provide trauma-informed support for women who have been groomed for sexual exploitation across the North East and Yorkshire¹.

CONTEXT

Our learning to date from the STAGE project tells us that sexual exploitation is not being significantly addressed in any of our local areas, with systemic issues in common across all of the places that we operate. Among the most significant of these challenges is the experiences of women as they reach the age of 18, and responsibility for their support transitions from children's into adult safeguarding services.

For the majority of women we support, experiences of trauma and abuse started in childhood. It is well evidenced that adverse experiences in childhood can lead to lasting impacts on health and wellbeing, yet across statutory services we see a lack of understanding that the vulnerabilities of women who are being sexually exploited does not go away once they reach adulthood. This is leading to range of adverse impacts on women who are adult survivors of sexual exploitation, as well as increasing the risks to girls as they reach adulthood. For example, in some of our services we are finding that perpetrators have an understanding of the statutory duties relating to the age of women and girls who are being sexually exploited, and will target 17/18 year olds who appear much younger in both looks and behaviour.

These challenges cannot be blamed on poor practice confined to one particular area. We see cases continuing to emerge, yet find that services are not engaged with the issue. While the Department for Education has overall responsibility for supporting the transition of young people leaving care into adulthood, there is a lack of policy focus on the experiences of young people more broadly – this may include, for example, young people who have experienced child sexual exploitation within family settings. Many of the women we support report being exploited by their fathers, or by other adult relatives. They may continue to live in the family setting, unknown to children's social safeguarding services. This means that when they do become old enough to leave home, they may

¹ Partners deliver services in eight areas where there are recent or live sexual exploitation investigations: Bradford, Huddersfield, Leeds, Newcastle, Rotherham, Sheffield, Stockton and Sunderland.

already be too enmeshed in exploitation, and/or not have access to sufficient support to escape.

KEY FINDINGS

The experiences of women supported through the STAGE project highlight the following key challenges in relation to the transition between child and adult safeguarding services:

- **Inconsistent transition pathways**

There is wide variation in transition pathways from children's to adult safeguarding services between local authorities. This makes it challenging for women, and specialist services such as the STAGE project, to navigate through available sources of support. Our teams talk about the effectiveness of support being largely dependent on the personal commitment of individual staff members within safeguarding experiences, with one Case Worker describing this as "*hit and miss*".

- **Reliance on statutory obligations as main framework for support:** As women transition out of children's services, statutory obligations towards them change. This place an undue onus on women to manage their own risk and safety. Further, adult safeguarding services frequently do not have the time and resource, or a specific duty to ensure continued engagement with adult women, meaning that relationships can break down.

- **Poor understanding of sexual exploitation**

We have found that understanding of what is meant sexual exploitation, and its signs and indicators, is generally poor across statutory services. This means that the markers of sexual exploitation are not always identified. For example, this might include women being bought expensive items, or taking taxi journeys paid for by other people. A further challenge is that women with previous experience of accessing support through child safeguarding services may not have heard their experiences referred to as sexual exploitation, meaning that the language and terminology used when they reach adulthood is unfamiliar to them.

- **Welfare of children of adult survivors of sexual exploitation**

A particular challenge for women who have care of their children is that they may be engaged with children's and adult safeguarding services at the same time, often finding that their own needs go unmet. While the welfare of children is clearly paramount, it is vital that support services do not lose sight of the continuing needs of women which are likely to continue well into adulthood.

- **Impacts on women who are adult survivors of sexual exploitation**

The impacts on women we support cannot be underestimated. Many of the women we support reach adulthood with few independent living skills as a result of their experiences, for example, they may have limited budgeting capabilities. This, combined with a reduction in support they receive from statutory services, makes it more difficult for them to address and eventually overcome the trauma they have experienced, and places them at greater risk of vulnerability to future abuse and exploitation.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

We make the following recommendations based on learning to date from the STAGE Project, which highlight the systematic and systemic nature of sexual exploitation across our communities.

NATIONAL	<p>We would like to see:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Government create a National Framework for Adult Survivors of Sexual Exploitation, led by the Home Office and including a statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation. The Framework should ensure that patterns of exploitation are embedded in strategic thinking across relevant government departments, and be inclusive of the experiences of young women as they transition from children’s to adult safeguarding services.• A new duty on services, under the remit of the Minister for Safeguarding, to refer women who disclose historical or ongoing sexual exploitation to specialist sexual exploitation services.
LOCAL	<p>We would like to see:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater local commitment to commissioned long-term support for adult survivors of sexual exploitation, which includes specific provision for young people aged 16-18 as their support transitions from children’s into adult safeguarding services.• Further investment in training staff within adult safeguarding services to respond more effectively to women experiencing sexual exploitation, using trauma-informed approaches. This should include a recognition that women may have continuing support needs, even when they have children.