SEEN AND HEARD: THE CASE FOR A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO TACKLING ADULT SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

As the government considers its forthcoming Violence Against Women and Girls strategy, this fact sheet explains the need for a strategic approach to understanding and tackling sexual exploitation of adults.

This factsheet is based on learning from the STAGE project, supported by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)

During the first four months of lockdown, there was a **179% increase** in the number of women in the North East disclosing to Changing Lives that they have experienced sexual violence/exploitation.

Tampon Tax Fund. The STAGE project brings together charities Changing Lives, A Way Out, GROW, 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 Yorkshire.

What is adult sexual exploitation?

Sexual exploitation of adults is a form of sexual abuse where an individual or group grooms, coerces, manipulates or deceives a person into sexual activity. This takes various forms – it might be in exchange for something the victim needs or wants (e.g. drugs, a place to sleep), it might be for the perpetrator's financial advantage, or it might relate directly to perpetrating sexual violence. Women supported by STAGE tell us these crimes can be carried out by individuals or groups of men, and may involve physical violence, gang rape and use of weapons.

This specific form of sexual abuse - sexual exploitation - is currently recognised in law for children, but not for adults, but it does not end when a person turns 18 and can indeed be initiated during adulthood. While most adult women are presumed to have capacity to consent to sexual activity, the impact of grooming and exploitation of perceived or actual vulnerabilities can mean sexual activity that appears consensual or non-violent is anything but.

Within Changing Lives' specialist support services we have seen an increase in predatory behaviour, with women disclosing that perpetrators of sexual violence are **five times as likely to be previously unknown to them** rather than someone the victim has a previous association with.

Who is affected?

There is no one 'type' of person who has experienced sexual exploitation. Perpetrators target their victims based on both real and perceived vulnerability, particularly those who they think are unlikely to be deemed credible witnesses by police or believed in a court of law. Some will exploit pre-existing vulnerabilities, whilst others will coerce people, primarily women and girls, into a position of vulnerability. Whilst domestic abuse has gone up during the pandemic, we have also seen an increase in perpetrators targeting places where there are groups of women with perceived vulnerabilities, such as specialist supported accommodation for women.

Where is this taking place?

This is not isolated to one or two locations and is happening in both urban and rural locations. The STAGE project works in Bradford, Huddersfield, Leeds, Newcastle, Rotherham, Sheffield, Stockton and Sunderland. We expect that sexual exploitation of adults occurs in every area of the UK, but that many areas are not equipped to identify, prevent and respond to concerns, as knowledge and provision related to sexual exploitation tends to be limited to children.

What powers do the police and courts have to bring perpetrators to justice?

Where powers exist, they are not being used effectively by the police and courts. Although there is legislation that covers aspects of sexually exploitative behaviour, in practice, the lack of a statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation means that understanding of this issue is poor and exploitative behaviour is not recognised as such.

Women who have experienced horrendous abuse are being further victimised because this abuse is neither recognised nor understood, not only in the criminal justice system but right across services. We can do better.