

Historic Child Sexual Exploitation in Kirklees

An Independent Review of Cases

Dr Mark Peel

The Context of this Review.

The commissioning of this work follows from the recent Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) criminal cases relating to the historic operation of a CSE ring in Kirklees, in which 22 local young women bravely provided evidence that has resulted in lengthy prison sentences being handed down to the adult male perpetrators.

These events prompted understandable shock across the town, region and country, with some calling for a Public Inquiry to be commissioned in order to come to a full, evidence based understanding of what happened, and why the established multi-agency safeguarding arrangements in place at the time of these offences, failed to detect the operation of the CSE ring, and failed to protect the girls who became trapped within the ring and went on to be very seriously abused by the local men who so shamelessly exploited them.

Indeed I have often heard, during the time I have spent in Kirklees, a concern that 'only' a (by implication) Judge led Public Inquiry has the potential and power to draw together all the issues pertinent to the CSE ring in Kirklees, compel an appropriate degree of participation, ensure public transparency and yet be clearly independent of any local interests and agendas.

The independent review of cases I have undertaken in Kirklees is clearly not at the level of a Public Inquiry, added to which, my existing role as Independent Chair of the Leeds Safeguarding Children Partnership, has raised some queries as to how far I would be able to bring a truly independent perspective to bear.

These are quite understandable and legitimate concerns, which I will address directly.

Firstly, I have been clear that this independent review of cases should in no way be seen as an alternative to a Public Inquiry. The focus is much narrower and, based on a detailed reading of appropriate case files, addresses the following questions,

1. The independent review should aid reader's better understanding of why it was that young women known to Kirklees Children's Services, who latterly featured in the CSE Court case, were not recognised at the time as being at risk of or subject to CSE.
2. The independent review should, if possible, elicit what lessons can be drawn from this consideration of historic safeguarding practice to improve present safeguarding arrangements in Kirklees.

More specifically

3. The independent review will address whether the young women known to Kirklees Children's Services who latterly featured in the CSE Court case, received services of an acceptable standard, as judged by the legislation, professional guidance and local policy in place at the time.
4. The independent review of the case files should look especially at whether concern(s) were raised, passed onto and received by Children's Services with regard to risk of CSE from other agencies or individuals
5. The independent review should ascertain whether any Children's Services officers knew at the time that any of the young women who latterly featured in the CSE Court case, were engaged in inappropriate, exploitative and illegal sexual activity to the extent that they should have concluded these children were at risk of 'serious harm'

The advantage of an in depth review of case files of this type is principally to come to an evidence based view without undue delay. That whilst specific to Children's Services is in turn indicative of other potential issues, as a means of quickly 'mapping the territory' for possible future consideration.

In sum, an Independent review of this type takes a detailed look at the level of awareness within Children's Services at the time with regard to risk of CSE for the young women who latterly featured in the CSE Court case, whilst additionally serving as a useful foundation or 'pilot study' such that latter work could move ahead apace, toward understanding and resolution.

Secondly, with respect of the degree to which I could be truly 'independent' in taking this review forward. I would note that my role over the past three and a half years as Independent Chair of the Leeds Safeguarding Children Partnership has not required contact with Kirklees, and I have no professional or personal history of living or working in the area.

Additionally, as an academic and researcher, my working history has required me, above all else, to take an unbiased and evidence based approach in just the same manner that is essential here.

And lastly, I would have not have been prepared to take on this independent review without the clear agreement in the first instance that I could do so with unfettered access to data, free from the undue influence of any external person or agency and with editorial control of any reports produced, other than in matters of error or inaccuracy.

I have had three opportunities to discuss these matters with elected members and others in Kirklees, in addition to directly presenting interim findings, delivering a CSE seminar and presenting this final report

It is fair to say that these discussions have been necessarily direct, and sometimes robust. But it is my opinion that this process served to establish my credibility as an independent person, and also the value of undertaking an independent review of cases of this sort.

If this independent review is indeed a 'starting point' for a better retrospective understanding of CSE in Kirklees, then the point at which the findings are published and become available in the public domain, is exactly the right time, in my opinion, for those in authority to consider 'what would be the best next step?'

Whether this is a renewed call for a Public Inquiry or for further more detailed research, is not my place to suggest. But for healing, truth and reconciliation to flourish in Kirklees in the aftermath of such shocking and divisive crimes, and for public confidence to be regained in the ability of agencies and public bodies to safeguard our most vulnerable children then this independent review should indeed be seen as a necessary first step.

Commissioning this Review.

This independent review was commissioned by the Chief Executive on behalf of Kirklees Council, with day to day access to required information being delegated to the Director of Children's Services. As such completed reports will be sent to the Chief Executive and copied to the Director of Children's Services in the first instance, with the proviso that the author will make himself available to present these directly to elected members if required, and such that additional any questions can be raised and clarification given if possible.

All work undertaken as part of this independent review will remain the intellectual property of the Chief Executive on behalf of the Council, and any notes or other materials constituent will rest with Kirklees, unless otherwise specifically authorised and agreed by the Council.

An interim report to be concluded by 31st January 2019 will consider and present an indicative sub-set of the overall sample so that early information can be shared with the Chief Executive, Director of Children's Services and Elected Members and others as directed. This will hopefully build confidence in the process and enable some 'fine tuning' of the direction of remaining work subject to necessary agreement.

Where possible indicative and/or contributory factors within the sample are identified in hindsight, these will be drawn out.

Collecting the data

Unless those young women directly affected had been brave enough, and well enough supported, to come forward it is more than possible that the perpetrators involved here would still be active, and that new generations of young women would continue to be sexually exploited by them today.

From my perspective the 'superstars' of this tragic affair are the 22 young women who, through their actions, simply refused to be defined by what happened to them, and in so doing have effectively stopped this happening to others. The personal and psychological consequences of CSE for these women are likely to be long-term, and in seeking to understand what happened, we simply must not forget that continuing to support them is effectively repayment of a debt we collectively owe them.

Throughout this work I have been extraordinarily impressed by the degree to which all in Kirklees wish to learn from what happened in the past to decrease the likelihood other local young women being abused and exploited in the callous and degrading way that was certainly true for these young women.

I would specifically like to thank the Jacqui Gedman and Mel Meggs (Kirklees Chief Executive and Director of Children's Services respectively) and their officers at all levels for their help in accessing data, and taking this work forward. I have seen directly that there is real commitment in Kirklees to 'learn the lessons' and would wish to reassure all those who might suspect that I have not gained access to 'all' the data, that this was simply not the case.

Most importantly, I have seen from elected members and others a willingness to ask 'difficult' questions and effectively challenge the so called 'experts' like myself!

I will return in my final section to say a few words about turning this tragedy into opportunity, but would say here that with the commitment I have seen, and with outstanding officers in place, Kirklees has the potential to respond to CSE creatively, collectively and compassionately.

Method

All of the data collected as a mechanism for completion of this report has come from social work case files. Initial information supplied by West Yorkshire Police with regard to the names and birth dates of the 22 young women featured in the CSE Court case allowed me to cross reference this within the Children's Services file system to initially determine how many of these young women were known to social workers at the time of the offences.

Once this work was done I was able to review all of the case files on record for this sample, looking for any information prospectively relating to CSE, and more specifically for information provided to social workers around risk of CSE from third parties, including the young women directly.

The timescale for the range of CSE offences and the operation of the CSE ring in Kirklees covered the changeover point from paper to digital records and, whilst I initially suspected that this might prove problematic, this has not proved to be the case.

In the course of completing this review I have not kept count of the number of individual file pages I have consulted but this is likely to run into thousands, particularly given the regular need to cross reference events and back check telephone calls and meetings.

This methodology, like all others, has many advantages as well as disadvantages, but on balance seemed a relatively shorthand way to see if suggestive data could be found, which would be indicative of what was known, and felt sufficiently important to record, at the time.

A key disadvantage is clearly that this data is specific to social work and social workers, and does not look at what was 'known' about each of the young women and recorded across all the agencies with responsibilities for safeguarding. For example, a similar review of Police files or those held by schools might be equally productive. And this potential deficit largely underpins my specific interest in looking to see if social workers had been informed by any third party (from the wider community or between safeguarding professionals) of any concerns and risk pertinent to CSE.

I found it interesting throughout the course of undertaking this independent review, that the case files do not corroborate 'stories' carried

in the press that ‘everyone knew’ that CSE was widespread and established. Indeed, I have not found a single instance across all the case files reviewed of agencies voicing and sharing any such concern.

Clearly, in looking at records only I have not interviewed any of the key individuals directly. For the young women featured in the CSE Court Case I took the view that they had been ‘through enough’, and unless there was outstanding need to reach out to them directly, that it would not be appropriate. As far as interviewing professionals is concerned, it is fair to say that many of those working at the time have now moved on or have retired, and that even if found and approached them to conduct interviews, this would be dependent on memory dating back more than a decade as well as their willingness to take part.

Lastly, there was considerable need to get the independent review completed to the best standard possible as swiftly as possible. It would not have been possible consequently in the four months overall I have put into this work to add in the considerable time necessary to arrange and conduct what could have been a large number of interviews and stay within the time frame specified.

It is not suggested in sum that this method of review is perfect. But it would appear to be the least worst’ approach, given the real life constraints and requirements in place.

It is quite possible that more was known about the 22 young women featured in the CSE Court Case than is recorded in their case files, but it is my contention that these are the only readily available contemporaneous records, which additionally permit comparisons to be made between each young woman individually.

Descriptive data

Of the 22 young women notified to Children’s Services as involved with the recently concluded criminal trials, 15 were known as subjects across/during the period in question.

While initially it appeared that less than 15 of the young women had open case files in their own right, more careful second tier analysis was

undertaken, which increased the overall number known to Children's Services from 12 (54%) to 15 (68%).

An initial 'Deep Dive' review was completed on a randomly selected sample of 3 of the 15 cases known to Children's Services indicated above, with this hopefully indicative data being presented to the Chief Executive, elected Members and others as interim findings on Tuesday 5th March 2019.

The Interim Deep Dive review of three randomly selected case files

1. Review of the case files showed that these three young women received services that were of an acceptable standard, as judged by the legislation, professional guidance and local policy in place at the time.
2. There was no evidence, for these three young women, that concern(s) had been received by Children's Services with regard to risk of CSE reported by other agencies or individuals.
3. There was evidence of good social work practice in all three case files reviewed, including appropriate onward referral to other agencies, and of engagement with the young women directly and on their own terms.
4. There was no evidence, for these three young women, that Children's Services officers (or indeed any other Kirklees officers) were aware of any inappropriate, exploitative and illegal sexual activity to the extent that they might have reasonably concluded these children were at risk of 'serious harm'.
5. **With the benefit of hindsight** the three cases reviewed as part of the initial deep dive process, did reveal indicative behaviour(s) and events that current research now suggests are constituent to vulnerability to CSE relating to;

- Domestic violence within the subject family

- Reported homelessness and circumstances in which the whereabouts of a child are unknown for at least 24 hours
- Volatility within the parent/child caring relationship
- Older female siblings with older boyfriends
- Offending behaviour (usually petty for example shoplifting and other theft)
- Sporadic family involvement with sex work
- Behavioural issues (usually being seen as 'out of control' by carers)
- Poor engagement, or exclusion from, education
- Direct awareness of or use of illegal drugs and alcohol

Overall Findings: The review of fifteen case files for young women known to Kirklees Children's Services who latterly featured in the CSE Court Case.

The evidence from the case files reviewed establishes that it cannot be argued that Kirklees was simply unaware of the young women who latterly featured in the CSE Court case who, as the majority (68%) had open case files in their own right across or during the time period in question.

Indeed, the findings for the sample as a whole confirm those of the deep dive exercise, as an acceptable standard of safeguarding practice and risk management was offered to all the young women featuring in the Court case and known to Children's Services.

The work evidenced in the files is appropriate to the legal requirements of the day, and typically paints a picture of these young women sporadically coming to the attention of social workers with a range of issues of low to medium concern. For example as a result of family argument and tension resulting in presentation at a social work office temporarily homeless, with such issues being promptly and professionally addressed.

In retrospect, we of course know for certain that each of these young women was at some point in the cycle of sexual exploitation at the hands of the CSE ring found in Kirklees at the time the files under review were being written, yet this 'fact' remained 'undetected' and hence unrecorded to skilled and experienced workers and managers.

With two exceptions, which I will consider in detail below, the file data simply could not, even with the benefit of retrospect, be held to contain sufficient data for any professional worker to 'piece together' sufficient evidence to come to the reasonable conclusion that the young women were at risk of sexual exploitation.

Here one has to remember that whilst CSE is a type of abuse with which we are now (sadly) more familiar. More than a decade ago it was largely unknown, even in professional practice. Indeed, it is instructive to remember that as late as 2009 Government was still issuing guidance to Authorities with regard to teenage prostitution.

With this in mind, unless the young women themselves had directly disclosed to social workers at the time that they were subject to a type of abuse we now recognise as sexually exploitative, or this had been raised by a third party, it is unlikely that social workers and their managers could have unilaterally come to such a conclusion, as they simply were (in the main) unaware of the issue, and consequently were not looking for it.

Additionally, knowing what we now do about how young women subject to CSE are often 'trapped' into the abusive cycle (for example through blackmail, drug dependency and the range of coercive control) it is perhaps unsurprising that none of the young women here felt able to directly disclose what they were going through, despite clear evidence that some enjoyed positive relationships with social workers in other regards.

As mentioned in interim findings however, looking back at these files in retrospect, through a lens more attuned to CSE, some indicative factors, now more clearly linked to CSE are apparent, and these were bullet pointed in the section above.

It would be inaccurate however to argue that such factors are simply endemic to families and young people in difficult or chaotic circumstances, and hence no more 'indicative' now than in the past. As one would hope that modern safeguarding policy and practice guidance around CSE would encourage social workers and others to sensitively explore the issues, and support young women to speak freely.

Further, it is important to remind ourselves that such indicative factors, whilst now more widely identified are certainly not a 'litmus test' for CSE, but rather reflect the lived experiences of many young women who come to the day to day attention of safeguarding agencies nationally, the great majority of whom go on to lead successful and productive lives free from exploitation and abuse of any type.

It thus remains difficult for even the most skilled and experienced safeguarding professional to 'follow the breadcrumbs' linking individual young women to risk around CSE. Talking openly about sex is still problematic for many of us as adults, and perhaps more so for adults talking to young women and vice versa. In retrospect it is tempting to ask 'why didn't they spot CSE when it was so obvious?' The simple fact here is that nobody spotted it, because we simply weren't looking.

Two Exceptions

Two of the case files reviewed contained specific information, revealing that the young women directly concerned (as well as others in the second case) were being sexually exploited; as is detailed below.

Girl 4

In the case file relating to Girl 4 (of the 22 featured in the CSE Court Case) the following data was recorded on 5th November 2007, when Girl 4 would have been 16 years old.

"(Girl 4) has a moderate learning difficulty. She is being exploited into prostitution, she hangs around with a number of men who take her money. She is a very promiscuous girl."

The case file contains no further information as to where this information came from, but the manner of expression would suggest this is more than a suspicion or personal opinion. As it would seem to be a statement about something the author was aware of as a matter of fact.

The case file does not contextualise this information in any other manner, and hence it is not possible to say with any degree of certainty if this view of Girl 4 was known to and/or shared by others.

Similarly the case file does not contain details of any upward or onward referral, or of any discussion or action(s) taken as a result of the knowledge that Girl 4 was being sexually exploited.

It would appear that whilst this information was recorded for Girl 4, that no further action was subsequently taken to ensure her safety or such that the 'men' in question might be identified, referred on or held to account in any way.

The fact that Girl 4 is described in the case file extract as 'promiscuous' now seems an old fashioned and judgemental term, possibly suggestive of a view on the part of the writer that Girl 4 was in part responsible for what was happening to her.

Similarly the fact that Girl 4 is described as having 'moderate learning disability' does not seem to have triggered any reflection as to variance between her chronologic age (16) and likely lower functional age, with a view to her questioning her ability to understand and give consent.

As we know that Girl 4 was one of the 22 girls featuring in the CSE Court Case, it is possible that if remedial action had been taken in 2007 to safeguard her that links to others suffering similar exploitation might have been established, and the operation of the CSE ring discovered.

Girl 8, Girl X and Girl 22

In the case file relating to Girl 8 (of the 22 featured in the CSE Court Case) the following data was recorded on 21st December 2006 and November 2007, when Girl 8 would have just turned 16.

“(Girl 8’s) mother disclosed to (a local agency) that Girl 8 is associating with two young people known to Kirklees Social Services, Girl X and Girl 22. Girl 8 is getting into cars with Asian men for the purpose of drugs, alcohol and sexual exploitation. Girl 8 was referred to (a local agency) by (a local high school) which Girl 8 attends.”

This case file entry directly links two of 22 girls featuring in the CSE Court Case together, along with a Girl X, known to Kirklees Children’s Services, but who was not part of the Court Case.

The case file extract for Girl 8 is unusual in a number of ways; for example in the use of the term 'sexual exploitation', as this would not have been in general use, or indeed generally understood even in professional circles, in 2007.

The case extract is additionally unusual in that concerns for the well being of Girl 8 (and others) were reported by her mother, were known to at least one local agency in addition to Kirklees Children's Services, and were also known to her High School.

The case file for Girl 8 is additionally unusual in that Asian men are specifically mentioned as responsible for sexually exploiting Girl 8, as well as providing her with drugs and alcohol.

Lastly the case file for Girl 8 is unusual as another girl (Girl 22) from the CSE Court Case is specifically mentioned and linked to Girl 8, along with Girl X.

As was true for Girl 4 above the case file for Girl 8 does not contextualise this information in any other manner, and hence it is not possible to say with any degree of certainty if this view of Girl 8 was known to and/or shared by others.

Similarly the case file does not contain details of any upward or onward referral, or of any discussion or action(s) taken as a result of the knowledge that Girl 8 (and others) was being sexually exploited.

It would appear that whilst this information was recorded for Girl 8, that no further action was subsequently taken to ensure her safety or such that the 'men' in question might be identified, referred on or held to account in any way.

As we know that Girl 8, like Girl 4 above, was one of the 22 girls featuring in the CSE Court Case, it is possible that if remedial action had been taken in 2007 to safeguard her Girl X and Girl 22, links to others suffering similar exploitation might have been established, and the operation of the CSE ring discovered.

General Conclusions and Observations.

Did the methodology used in this review work prove to be ‘fit for purpose’?

Overall it would be my contention that the indicative data gleaned from case files worked well as a shorthand mechanism of accessing what was known about CSE with regard to the 22 young women featured in the CSE Court Case.

Although it could not be argued that the data collected is exhaustive, or reflective of ‘all’ that was possibly known at the time, given the nature of qualitative data, I would suggest that the sample size was sufficient for the results to be indicative, and that in broad terms, (Given that most of the young women were known to Children’s Services) it seems safe to suggest that:

- The quality of social work they received overall was of an acceptable standard, judged by the legislation and norms of the time.
- That for the great majority there was no suspicion or shared/disclosed information that could reasonably be ‘joined up’ to be suggestive of CSE.
- That in two exceptional cases where data was recorded which could, and should, have been acted upon, no action would appear to have been taken.
- It would however be unsafe to generalise further on the basis of this data alone, which in turn lends support to the notion of this work being simply a ‘first step’ of a more diverse and detailed overall approach.

Why was protective action not taken when information suggestive of CSE was available?

There is no evidence that any social worker or manager within Kirklees Children's Services was complicit or in any manner indirectly involved in the CSE ring in Kirklees. Thus, it cannot be suggested, in the two exceptional cases detected where information suggestive of CSE was known, that lack of subsequent protective action was due to any direct wish to conceal or obfuscate.

The most difficult element of this review has been the complete omission in the records of response, explanation and other contextual information in respect of the two cases found which included clear evidence of CSE. It would appear that no action of any kind was taken in both these instances. No discussion with senior officers and managers, no checking of facts or communication with colleagues from other agencies and no direct engagement with the young people and their families in order to protect them.

I cannot speculate as to whether discussions did take place that were simply not recorded, but the lack of consequent action to protect the young women concerned, strongly suggests that, at the time, what we now identify as sexual exploitation requiring rapid protective intervention, was perhaps then seen as nothing out of the ordinary or at least 'normal' for those young women typically on social work caseloads.

It would seem therefore that at the time in Kirklees, as has been found to be the case elsewhere, a different and lower safeguarding standard was implicitly applied to some young women in need of help and support.

Such an explanation of the seeming lack of concern and lack of remedial action for the two exceptional cases detected now seems almost alien. But the evidence from a growing number of CSE investigations would suggest that this was common across the UK at the time both professionally and organisationally.

Clearly, in such circumstances, where adults who wish to abuse and sexually exploit children implicitly get the message that they will 'get away

with it', Child Sexual Exploitation will grow, and the sort of abusive ring found in Kirklees can thrive.

3. CSE practice in Kirklees today and tomorrow

This review of cases is essentially retrospective in nature, with the general objective of coming to an evidence based and more accurate understanding of what happened in the past.

Additional work, reviewing safeguarding in Kirklees today, and planning for the future was commissioned at the same time as this review, and I suspect this will reveal a very different and much improved safeguarding environment for girls and young women in Kirklees today, than I have found to have existed in the past.

What is unquestionable however is that there can no longer be a place in safeguarding for a lower standard of safeguarding for children somehow 'judged' to be 'less worthy'. Children have rights, but as adults we hold collective responsibility for them, to the extent they are effectively all **our** children. As such, safeguarding is not just a responsibility for professionals, but rather something basic to our community with the potential to bind us together collectively, as our aspirations for **our** children need to be the best and boldest they can possibly be.

Conclusions that relate to the questions posed in the terms of reference of this review.

On the basis of case file information only it has NOT been possible here to conclusively describe and understand why it was that young women known to Kirklees (like Girl 4, Girl 8 and Girl 22) were not recognised as being subject to CSE, although some suggestions are offered in the General Conclusions and Observation section above.

Additional research could be profitably be directed at a more comprehensive review of all target historic CSE case files held by Children's Services, beyond those 22 girls featuring in the CSE Court Case.

Lessons for the future and improvement of awareness and professional practice with respect to CSE I am very much aware have already been put

into practice in Kirklees, and should be further informed by the research into present and prospective future services commissioned by the KSCB

Overall the case files reviewed reveal that the majority of the 22 young women featured in the CSE Court Case were known to Kirklees Children's Services (15) and that with the exception of two of these case files all the young women received services of an acceptable standard as judged by the legislation, professional guidance and local policy in place at the time.

The case files reviewed contain very little evidence that concerns for the young women who have latterly featured in the CSE Court case were passed on routinely (or indeed ever) to Kirklees Children's Services by other agencies and/or individuals. Of the two exceptional case files that were found to contain direct intelligence related to CSE, in only one instance (Girl 8) had such concerns been raised by a family member and were other individuals and agencies named directly.

In two of the case files reviewed Girl 4 and Girl 8 it is my contention that Children's Services officers knew at the time that these young women most likely to have been engaged in inappropriate, exploitative and illegal sexual activity to the extent that they had sufficient evidence to conclude these vulnerable young women were at risk of 'serious harm'.

In both instances however it would appear that, other than recording this information, no subsequent preventative safeguarding action was taken, and that thus an opportunity to break the CSE ring operating in Kirklees, and protect these girls directly and others more generally, was lost.

Last word: turning a tragedy into an opportunity

Whilst the mistakes, prejudices and misunderstandings of the past, sadly, cannot now be changed, the fact that 22 young women were brave enough, and well enough assisted and advised for them to gain justice for the sexual exploitation they suffered, suggests to me that if they were now sensitively approached and supported, that some might be willing to help develop services, and would likely prove to be highly effective advocates for the girls and young women of today.

Proactive engagement with those most hurt by this, might thus have the synergy of both continuing to offer support for as long as needed, whilst also gaining insight and understanding of how to best reduce the chance similar crimes in future.

MAP April 2019.