

# Uma Child Safeguarding Practice Review

## 6 Step Briefing



### Overview

Uma is 14 years old and in care. A man, not previously known to Uma, has been convicted of rape after Uma bravely told professionals what happened to them after leaving school during the school day.

Historically, Uma experienced abuse and neglect from a young age. Their parents suffered poor mental health and there was domestic abuse within the family setting. Uma's mother and father separated, and Uma has alleged sexual abuse from men subsequently joining the family.

Uma experienced several placement breakdowns since being in care and many different professionals have been involved with them over time. Uma has some history of self-harming and risk from sexual exploitation on-line and in person. Uma also shared difficulties faced when exploring their sexuality and gender identity.

This review considered systems and practice in place for children at risk of sexual exploitation, who had previously experienced intrafamilial child sexual abuse. Uma worked alongside the independent reviewer to share and consider their story. This collaborative process was extremely powerful and enabled the review to identify systemwide learning.

### What Uma told the review

*'Any child who has been sexually abused is more at risk of being groomed and abused again. It is what we know. We might even miss it.'*

*'It was scary how quickly I was targeted and abused on-line.'*

*'We shouldn't be blamed for being groomed and abused. You don't blame adults who are scammed online and lose lots of money.'*

*'I was sure that professionals thought I was a liar when they didn't take any further action about my abuse allegations.'*

*'Do professionals understand how hard it is for kids and their ability to trust when there are lots of changes of professional? I had one worker who I trusted with my life, but then she was gone.'*

*'It is hard that everyone who cares for me and is helping me gets paid to do it. I know they don't get paid much, but that isn't the point!'*

*'I always want to know what is happening, as this is my actual life.'*

### The Learning

- When working with children, professionals need to recognise that there are likely to be early indicators in those who are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation. There is a need to work preventatively with those likely to be most at risk.
- The language used in records about children and young people who are or have been sexually abused, including through exploitation, always needs to reflect that they are children who are being abused.
- It is not uncommon for children who have been or are being sexually abused to make allegations and then retract them. This does not mean they are not being abused.
- Children in care can feel that professional relationships are not important or meaningful to the professional and often feel let down.
- There is a need for joined up and effective responses to children at risk of exploitation when they go missing.
- When a family has lived in another local authority area, there is a need for robust seeking of information.
- The Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) service is holistic and provides emotional support and practical help to any victim of sexual abuse, recently or in the past. Professionals should consider referring relevant children to this service.

## Questions for professionals to consider

- If I am a new worker with a child, do I seek out those who have been involved for longer and ask to discuss the child's history with them, e.g., their Independent Reviewing Officer?
- Do I always seek information from other areas if I am aware that a child has not always lived locally?
- Do I take time to seek and hear a child's voice?
- Do I keep my promises to children and keep them updated on what is happening in respect of their case (life!). If I am leaving, am I sure to say goodbye in a way that is meaningful to the child?
- Do I always check the language I use in my records and in meetings, and do I challenge others in respect of the language they use about a child who has been abused?
- Do I know if the children I am working with have been sexually abused? Do I recognise this puts them at an increased risk of being abused in the future?
- When a child alleges historic sexual abuse, do I consider asking the SARC to see them?
- When no further action is being taken in respect of a child's allegations, do I make the young person feel believed and heard, and encouraged to share any further information in the future?
- Am I clear how damaging on-line abuse and exploitation is for a child?
- Am I up to date with recent changes in procedures and practice for children who go missing?
- Do I understand the link between children excluded from school and increased risk of exploitation?

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

That the Partnership ensure that the learning from this review informs the other work being undertaken in Southampton on a similar theme.

### Recommendation 2

That the Partnership ensures that all relevant partner agencies consider what can be done differently to ensure the early identification of children on a trajectory to exploitation and provision of multi-agency support and preventative/educative work.

### Recommendation 3

That the Partnership raises with other HIPS safeguarding children's partnerships and agency partners the need for system wide support for practitioners in respect of good practice when working with children who are exploring their gender identity.

### Recommendation 4

Hampshire Police to provide detailed feedback to the Partnership on the work being undertaken in respect of missing children.

### Recommendation 5

That the Partnership asks agencies to provide information on progress and challenge in respect of the language used in respect of vulnerable children like Uma.

### Recommendation 6

That the Partnership asks the relevant partner agencies to provide assurance regarding what is being done to prevent school exclusion for children who are at risk of exploitation.

## Useful links for Best Practice

- [HIPS Child Sexual Abuse Toolkit](#)
- [HIPS Procedures Manual - Children who are Exploited](#)
- [Challenging victim blaming language and behaviours when dealing with the online experiences of young people](#)
- ['Everyone deserves to be happy and safe'. A mixed methods study exploring how online and offline child sexual abuse impact young people and how professionals respond to it. November 2017. Hamilton-Giachritsis et al, 2017](#)
- ['Protecting children from harm: A critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England'. Children's Commissioner, 2015](#)
- ['Multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment' Joint Targeted Area Inspection \(JTAI\), 2020](#)