

## The Ace Project: Developing an Agenda For Change in the North East and Beyond on Young LGBTQ People and Child Sexual Exploitation<sup>1</sup>

### Catherine Donovan<sup>2</sup> June 2014

Nicola, a white lesbian, was 13/14 years old when she met a woman nearly 15 years older than her who became her 'best friend'. They both hung out in the town centre and the park, drinking and smoking spliffs with other young people. Gradually they became friends and soon Nicola was spending a lot of her time at the woman's home drinking, smoking and taking drugs all of which the woman paid for. Nicola really liked the woman, she felt she had found a special friend who understood and cared about her, spoilt her, and treated her like an adult, not a kid. When the woman began occasionally locking Nicola into the flat she explained it was so that nobody would find Nicola – who should have been in school. The woman even showed Nicola a hidey hole under the bed where Nicola could hide in case the police came to look for her (Nicola was reported missing regularly by her parents by now). Things changed when the woman expected Nicola to kiss and have sex with her in return for all of the money she had spent on providing drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol. Nicola didn't feel she could say no.

Stories like Nicola's are rarely heard in discussions about child sexual exploitation. Our Agenda for Change wants to change this. We start by outlining some contextual factors about being lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and/or questioning their sexuality or gender identity (LGBTQ) that could increase a young person's risk of experiencing CSE. We then list some key actions needed to improve services for young LGBTQ people. Finally, drawing on the See Me Hear Me framework developed by the Office of the Children's Commissioner (2013), we suggest some questions for practitioners to consider and inform their practice and/or to ask the young people they work with and/or reach-out to in addressing CSE.<sup>3</sup>

**The Ace Project:** Funded by the Northern Rock Foundation and facilitated by Prof Catherine Donovan at the University of Sunderland, the Ace Project brought together practitioners from across the North East for a series of four half-day meetings over five months during 2013 to share experiences of working with young LGBTQ people in relation to CSE and develop an Agenda for Change. The first three meetings were led by input from Catherine Bewley (Galop), Wendy Shepherd (SECOS, Barnardos), and Debs Walker (Trinity Youth) and focused on defining the problem, understanding the particular experiences of young LGBTQ people and identifying gaps in service provision and practice in relation to young LGBTQ people and CSE. Contributors to the ACE Project were Trinity Youth, Outpost, West End Women and Girls, SCARPA (the Children's Society), SECOS (Barnardos), Streetwise, Northumbria Missing Children, NEDAP, Hart Gables, GADD, Stockton Riverside College, Mesmac North East and Shine, Disc, West End Youth Inquiry Service, West End Women and Girls and NRF.

<sup>1</sup> For a definition see <http://www.nationalworkinggroup.org/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation>

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Donovan is Professor of Social Relations and Head of CASS at the University of Sunderland; and was the principle investigator and facilitator of the Ace Project.

<sup>3</sup> Berelowitz, et al., (2013) "If only someone had listened" Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups Final Report

**Contextual factors:** Some of what is outlined in this document echoes issues that arise with young heterosexual women and men. However, the context in which young LGBTQ people are growing up, which is shaped by the ‘heterosexual assumption’ and the ‘heterosexual family narrative,’<sup>4</sup> mean that these issues have particular meanings and significance for them:

- Coming out: coming out in relation to sexuality and/or gender identity is a process that is on-going and layered. Some members of a family might be told but not all; some friends might know but not all. Talking to practitioners can present fears about confidentiality in relation to coming out – fears about being “outed” to family or other practitioners/agencies.
- Relative youth and inexperience: in addition to fears about coming out and because people come out at different stages and ages in their lives and often in isolation from any LGB and/or T community or friends, or sources of help, it can be the case that coming out, regardless of the age of the person, can position them as ‘young’ insofar as they might not know ‘how to be’ LGB and/or T or what to expect in a sexual encounter and/or a relationship etc. This potential inequality of experience can make an LGBTQ person vulnerable to sexual exploitation beyond the age of 18 years.<sup>5</sup> There are also particular issues of capacity which impact on consent with young people who have learning disabilities.
- Isolation: whilst this can occur anywhere a young LGBTQ person lives depending on what LGBTQ resources exist locally and how visible that is, it can be exacerbated by living rurally. Feeling like ‘the only gay in the village’ can increase the vulnerability of young LGBTQ people by leading them to explore and ‘experiment’ with behaviours (e.g. see using the internet below) that put them at risk of CSE.
- Living outside heterosexuality: young LGBTQ people may have low self-esteem, low self-confidence and live with actual and/or fears about homo-bi-trans-phobic hostility in their home, on the street, at school and/or college, in the workplace. This could make them more inclined to put up with and/or normalise the exploitation they experience and conversely less inclined to speak to anybody who might be a potential source of help (parents, teacher, youth worker, friends etc).

In his early teens Benedict had come across the language of sexuality but not gender and it was only when he was 16/17 that he realised there was a language that better fitted him. This was the language of transgender. Currently Benedict identifies as a gay man. However, when Benedict was 17 and thinking about and making sense of who he was, he was living as a bisexual young woman and involved in a ‘relationship’ with a man of a similar age. Benedict finds it extremely difficult to speak about what happened to him when he was being sexually exploited but his ‘boyfriend’, who was himself violent and aggressive, regularly involved other men who were very sexually violent towards Benedict.

- The internet: for many young LGBTQ people the internet can provide a valuable source of information and support, especially in the early months and years of coming out. However the internet can also create and reinforce norms that promote CSE through normalising: sex for payment, intergenerational sex and sex in risky environments. Again this might be especially the case in rural areas and/or in areas where there are few visible signs of LGBT community and/or services.
- LGBT communities and scenes: there is some evidence that parts of local LGBT communities and/or scenes create gendered community norms that sexualise young men and /or promote ‘settling down’ among young women. Both of these can normalise potentially sexually exploitative relationships and/or sexual encounters. Young LGBTQ people experiencing hostility from family and at school, with low self-esteem and low confidence and having had neither formal nor informal education about sex and relationships are vulnerable to being flattered by older and/or more experienced adults (who may or may not be LGBT themselves) who offer acceptance, ‘love’, comfort, companionship, and/or to make them feel better, even momentarily.

<sup>4</sup> Weeks et al (2001) use the ‘heterosexual assumption’ to explain that not only are individuals assumed to be heterosexual but society’s institutions, infrastructure, legislation and policy also assume heterosexuality. The heterosexual family narrative assumes monogamous, long term relationships, ‘the white picket fence’ image of love and intimacy. This leaves out and potentially silences those who do not ‘fit’ the heterosexual norms implied in these messages.

<sup>5</sup> Donovan and Hester (2014) in the UK and Ristock (2002) in Canada show first same sex relationships can provide a heightened risk for experiencing domestic violence and abuse.

- Intersecting identities: young LGBTQ people who have been abused or rejected by family and/or their (faith) community, who may be refugee or asylum seekers, who may have learning disabilities and/or who may be living in poverty and have few resources, including secure accommodation, money, and/or care from an adult might be susceptible to older and/or more experienced LGBT/ heterosexual adults offering interest, acceptance, a room for the night, food, money, cigarettes, alcohol/drugs, clothes.
- (Non-)Recognition of CSE: young LGBTQ people with few resources or experience of being cared for emotionally and/or materially, who have experienced hostility, discrimination, homo-bi-trans-phobic bullying and/or hate crime may not recognise their experiences of sex and/or relationships with older LGBT or heterosexual adults as CSE. Conversely they might identify their experiences as proof of acceptance, identity, belonging, 'love', of being in control (especially if they are making money or able to look after themselves), as being consensual, and/or as being exploitative of the older adult.

Arapesh was 13 or 14 when he met a man 10 years older than him at the bus station in town. Their first date was in a public toilet. Arapesh was in love with this man and they were 'boyfriends' for a couple of years. The man would come and pick up Arapesh at lunchtime from school and, after school when Arapesh told his parents he was out playing football, he would go out with the man. The man bought lots of presents for Arapesh and took him out for meals and for drives in his car. Arapesh was not out to his family and believed they would reject him because of their culture. After a couple of years the man asked Arapesh to help him out because he was in debt. Arapesh was asked and then expected to have sex with other men who paid his 'boyfriend'. Initially Arapesh was reluctant but did not feel able to refuse because of the obligation he felt to help the man out. This began two years of being sold for sex by the man. It was only when Arapesh was 17 years old he realised that he had been exploited and sold by the man. He spoke to somebody at college about this and children's services became involved. He was removed from his family, first to an emergency foster placement, then to a young people's unit in the South East, then to another foster family in a city nearer his home city. His experience of the police and children's services lead him to regret he ever spoke out about what had happened to him.

- The impact of history: given the problems identified with recognition and isolation outlined above - taken together in some cases with a lack of resources (material and emotional) - it is also the case that abusive and/or exploitative relationships/encounters become normalised to the extent that a young LGBTQ person previously victimised by CSE might become exploitative and/or abusive themselves in subsequent relationships/encounters.

### The ACE Project: Agenda for Change

#### **For all practitioners with a remit for working with young people and child sexual exploitation**

1. Training is required to close the knowledge, skills and professional confidence gap among mainstream and specialist CSE agencies about young LGBTQ experiences so that they can identify and respond appropriately to young LGBTQ people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, CSE.
2. Consider that, though the definition of CSE uses a legal model focusing on age, i.e. under 18 year olds, LGBTQ people might experience CSE up until the age of 25 years old (and even beyond depending on their capacity). This is to take account of the particular vulnerabilities some young LGBTQ people might experience as a result of the coming out process and when, where and how they encounter same-sex sex and/or relationships for the first time.
3. In developing outreach work consider pieces of work that target young LGBTQ people. For example:
  - Develop relationships with the local LGBT scene, club and pub bouncers, to encourage identification of young LGBTQ people at risk of CSE.
  - Target gay dating internet sites and search for postings from men asking for young /underage men and/or those offering to buy sex from younger boys/men; collect intelligence about meeting places and work with police and partner agencies to target these; and with sites to have these messages removed

- Target known cruising grounds to identify potentially vulnerable people, and messages/telephone number left by men seeking young/underage boys/men
  - Work with colleagues targeting other public spaces where vulnerable young people, regardless of sexuality and/or gender identity, come together to drink, smoke, take drugs – bus stations, public toilets, fast food takeaways, etc, develop relationships with adults in these spaces in order to gather intelligence about young LGBTQ people at risk and adults presenting risks.
4. Don't be afraid to ask questions about young people's sexual and /or gender identity. Ask them how they describe themselves and use their language back to them.
  5. Acknowledge fears about being "outed" to family and other agencies/practitioners and consult with them about whether, how and when this is done.
  6. Build trust: young LGBTQ people might be cautious about revealing child sexual exploitation because they fear the consequences. Different agencies have different thresholds of the risk they can 'hold'. Experienced, specialist and/or trained practitioners who are able to 'hold risks' whilst working with the young LGBTQ person to build a trusting relationship are needed in order to provide the best possible opportunity for good outcomes for the young person.

#### **For mainstream agencies with a remit for addressing child sexual exploitation**

7. Training is needed, especially within the criminal justice system, to better understand the particular factors that might shape how consent and competence might be understood and/or assessed in young vulnerable LGBTQ people who are accused of and/or victimised by CSE.
8. Training should also include developing an understanding about the particular ways in which the confidentiality of young LGBTQ people should be protected and how information about a young LGBT person might be shared with partner agencies. Young LGBTQ people might need extra reassurance that their sexuality and/or gender identity will not become common knowledge, especially in ways that might make them vulnerable to homo-, bi-, trans-phobia within the agency/partner agencies.
9. Partnership working across criminal justice, youth, health and social care sectors is needed to ensure understanding about how to negotiate with young LGBTQ people about sharing information with their parents/carers, particularly, but not only, about their sexuality and/or gender identity.

#### **Partnership Working on Prevention in formal and informal education**

10. A sex and relationship strategy should include resources that :
  - are sex and relationship positive;
  - reinforces their sense of who they are and promotes self-esteem and self-confidence to engage in sex and /or relationships that are consensual, sexy and happy for both partners;
  - provides opportunities to consider what love and care might mean in sex and relationships and to guard against being pulled into relationships underpinned by control 'if you loved me you would ...'
  - explains in an accessible way how power can be mis-used in sex and relationships both to control, punish or exploit a partner; and to influence how these abusive behaviours are understood by the victim/survivor, e.g. challenging ideas about love that expect unquestioning obedience or loyalty;
  - uses language that avoids simplistic binaries of 'good' and 'bad', 'abuser' or 'perpetrator' and 'victim/survivor' and open up conversations about how young LGBTQ people can 'be themselves' without any negative 'cost' to a sex/relationship partner.
  - promotes positive experiences of sex and relationships and recognises that not all young people (including heterosexual young people) wish to pursue a 'white picket fence' narrative of the heterosexual family.

## LGBT Youth Work

11. There is some evidence<sup>6</sup> that LGBT youth work has the potential to play a central role in identifying, addressing and preventing CSE among young LGBTQ people. Yet LGBT youth work provision is very patchy, often has unstable funding and relies on sessional youth work. In addition, because of the scarcity of this provision and the resources underpinning it, LGBTQ groups often attract a wide range of young LGBTQ people some of whom face a range of complex needs other than and/or including CSE. Individual face to face work is often not a funded part of the project's remit and this can mean LGBTQ youth workers provide a lot of unpaid support to individual young LGBTQ people if only in their attempts to find suitable partner agencies to refer them on to.

Sessional workers are often in a position where they are inappropriately supported and insufficiently trained to meet the needs young LGBTQ people reveal, including CSE; and they are not funded to attend appropriate training or to develop partnership working with specialist and/or mainstream agencies. At the same time mainstream agencies refer young LGBTQ people to LGBTQ youth work projects because of their sexuality and/or gender identity without considering whether and how they could address their needs.

Another result of the sessional nature of much of this work is that experienced LGBTQ youth workers move on to more secure employment: this 'brain drain' in a context of insufficient infrastructure to support the work means that replacement staff have to 'start again' in their development of skills and knowledge about working with LGBTQ young people generally and specifically in relation to CSE. For those youth workers addressing CSE with a young LGBTQ person this can result in high levels of stress.

Consequently, this Agenda for Change calls for LGBTQ youth work to be put on a more stable financial footing so that LGBTQ youth work posts are embedded in projects with some security of employment and sufficient hours to enable: one-to-one work with young LGBTQ people; expansion of the number of LGBTQ groups available so that a single group is not expected to address the needs of young LGBTQ people ranging in age from 12/13 years – 24/25 years; attendance at appropriate training; development of partnership working; contribution to local CSE strategies; appropriate management, supervision and support to respond to young LGBTQ people experiencing or at risk of CSE.

## LGBT communities

12. Work is needed by and with LGBT communities to challenge community norms that might create situations in which exploitation and abuse can exist; and to encourage community norms that are intolerant of any adult sexually exploiting young LGBTQ people.

## See Me Hear Me

The See Me Hear Me Framework, developed by the Office of the Children's Commissioner (2013) in response to CSE by gangs and/or groups provides important questions to consider in responding to young people at risk of or experiencing CSE in any form. This Agenda For Change provides suggestions about how some of these questions can be made more inclusive of young LGBTQ people.

## The Ace Project DVD

Contributors to the Ace Project believed that one of the most powerful ways of changing minds and promoting best practice is for practitioners, their managers, policy makers and funders to hear the voices of young LGBTQ telling how they have been affected by CSE and their experiences of help-seeking. In partnership with a filmmaker, Julie Ballands, the Ace Project produced a film with Nicola, Benedict and Arapesh (not their real names) called *They Love Me? They Love Me Not: Sexual Exploitation and Young LGBTQ People*. Please email [Catherine.donovan@sundeland.ac.uk](mailto:Catherine.donovan@sundeland.ac.uk) for a copy of the DVD.

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<sup>6</sup> Walker, D. (2014) *Findings of Scoping Exercise into Practitioners knowledge of Child Sexual Exploitation of LGBT Young People in the North East*, Northern Rock Foundation

### **Don't make assumptions about who I am and what I need**

- I might be a lesbian, gay man, bisexual woman or man, a trans woman or man or I might be questioning my gender and /or sexuality.
- I might believe and/or feel love, care, acceptance from the adult(s) responsible for my sexual exploitation. This means I might feel loyal, protective of them and/or that I might feel responsible for what happened to me. You might call this grooming but I might not see it like that.
- I might not be out about my sexuality and/or gender identity to my family and/or friends and this might mean I have a stronger sense of connection to the adult(s) sexually exploiting me because I feel they have accepted me and taken me/ my identity seriously.

### **Don't think there is a quick fix: Are you supporting my family to keep me safe?**

- Are you able to give me reassurance that, if necessary, help is provided to my family for them to come to terms with my sexuality and/or gender identity?

### **How do I know that what you have planned will keep me safe?**

- Safety for me might include safety about my sexuality and/or gender identity in relation to my family, community neighbourhood, school, friendship networks.
- Safety might have specific meaning for me if I'm from a faith community or family where to be LGBTQ is grounds for rejection/ exclusion from the family/community
- Safety might also include needing reassurance that by coming forward I am not risking being removed from the country, or taken back to a family context in which I have been abused, neglected or in other ways am at risk.

### **Punish the Right People**

- If I have been isolated from support for my sexuality and/or gender identity, exploitative behaviours and attitudes might have become normalised - this should be kept in mind when you are considering my understanding about what consent is and my competence to make decisions.
- Asking about and responding openly to my sexuality and/or gender identity will send me the message that I'm being accepted for who I am and that my identity/ies are not the problem.

### **Do I have hope for the future?**

- What reassurances can you make and/or support can you give me that I will be able to have positive experiences of sex and relationships as a lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans young person?