

# Operation Raptor

## Investigating and Responding to Child Sexual Exploitation in Croydon

*November 2014 – March 2015*

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August 2015



TOTAL POLICING



## **Foreword**

It was recognised by the Metropolitan Police Service and Croydon Council's Children Social Care that the number of missing children and repeat missing children in Croydon needed to be tackled at a strategic level. There was a clear intelligence gap and a working methodology with a multi-agency approach was required to assess if the high number of missing children in the area was linked to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). With the assistance from the National Crime Agency (NCA), a methodology was devised to try and look at this issue.

## **Introduction**

This report details a multi-agency investigation into missing children and the links to CSE in Croydon, outlining the ensuing response which has been developed to safeguard the children at risk and pursue those involved in exploiting these children. The response is on-going, and the work initiated under Operation Raptor was the start of a continual process of identifying and responding to the risk facing children in the London Borough. The report details the work undertaken to inform understanding of the nature of the missing profile and the exploitation being committed, including some of the challenges those involved faced. It is hoped that this will enhance learning to support other agencies to undertake similar work, in order to tackle CSE being perpetrated across the country.

## **Background**

During the summer of 2014, Croydon Safeguarding Children Board commissioned an independent audit with the aim of reviewing multi-agency practice with at risk adolescents. The review of children identified as being known to be at risk and vulnerable noted that CSE was a feature affecting a number of the young people. Simultaneously Croydon borough of the Metropolitan Police Service ('Croydon Police') and Children Social Care (CSC), working with intelligence analysts at New Scotland Yard, identified that Croydon repeatedly scored as the London borough with the highest number of missing children. It was recognised that this needed to be tackled at a strategic level, and relationships were formed with the Missing Children Team within the Child Exploitation & Online Protection Command of the National Crime Agency (NCA-CEOP) to aid this. In September 2014 representatives of NCA-CEOP, MPS and Croydon Council met and devised a multi-agency strategy to investigate and respond to these concerns, referred to as Operation Raptor. The work was also informed by the findings and recommendations from the Jay Report into CSE in Rotherham which was published as the work began (in September 2014).

Operation Raptor Phase One commenced in November 2014 and concluded in early January 2015. The aim of this joint operation was to gather data and map patterns by analysing the:

- networks,
- relationships, and
- behaviours

of the top twenty children identified by police, Youth Offending, Safer London<sup>1</sup> and Children Social Care as 'of most concern' in relation to episodes of missing, sexual assault and other vulnerabilities indicative of CSE.

## **Methodology**

Officers from NCA-CEOP were engaged to assist the operation by reviewing the available data to identify the links and connections between the young people. With the assistance of the MPS Intelligence Bureau and Croydon Council, data held on police and social care systems was extracted and triangulated with data held by the voluntary sector and Youth Offending Services to ensure a comprehensive picture of the information known about the young people and their risks.

A group of 20 children believed to be the most vulnerable and at risk was identified through collation of a list of the young people with the most missing episodes reported to the MPS between September and November 2014 combined with information held by Safer London, which identified children at risk but not featured within these police reports. It was apparent within the information held that these children were going missing but were not being formally reported as such to the police by the responsible adults. This was also a fluid picture as children would move away from the Borough.

The Children Recording System (CRS) used by Children Social Care was reviewed for each of these children to identify intelligence and associations relating to these children. At this stage, and in order to facilitate the level of work required in order to fully understand what was happening and inform the intervention strategy, the group was initially reduced to focus in more depth on ten children which was shared with the MPS for analysis of data held on their systems. Once the analysis was completed on the first ten, attention was focused on the next group of ten vulnerable and at risk young people. Individual meetings were also arranged with the social workers assigned to these children to derive more information. Many of the twenty young people identified were associated with other missing people and sometimes went missing together. All incidents of missing from July to December 2014 were mapped for these children to identify these patterns

Officers from the Missing Persons Unit also conducted face to face interviews with the children when they returned from missing episodes to ascertain if any further intelligence could be gained. Profiles were developed of the children, using all the information that was available.

From this group of twenty young people the NCA-CEOP officers developed a profile of risks and vulnerabilities which indicated possible criminal and child abuse activity. This report was used to inform phase two of the work, which consisted of converting the intelligence gathered in to a multi-agency response, including a formal police investigation of the crimes being perpetrated. The next section outlines the themes identified, omitting any specific details of the individuals involved.

### **The 'survivors' and perpetrators**

The twenty young people focused on in-depth were all girls, aged between 14 and 18, and over half (12) were Black (African, Caribbean and Black British). The individuals identified as perpetrating the exploitation were males aged 14 – 25, and all identified as Black. However, as indicated below, the distinction between

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<sup>1</sup> Safer London Foundation is a charity which supports police and communities by developing projects across London to engage and inspire young people at risk of violence and crime to feel empowered to change their lives.

being a victim (or survivor as they will be referred to throughout this report) and a perpetrator is not always a clear one. There was intelligence to indicate that some young men 14 – 18 may also have been involved but their full names could not be identified. Like the girls, the young men were identified as crossing borough borders. This work has highlighted that research and practice with young men regarding sexual exploitation needs further development.

It should be noted that the aim of the report that was produced was not to focus on the survivors individually, but to look at the connections between them in order to identify individuals or venues which pose a risk to them and others. Intelligence collected focused on incidents occurring in 2014, with a greater emphasis placed on more recent events in the latter part of the year.

It is also important to point out that these young women were identified as the most vulnerable young people in Croydon between November 2014 and January 2015. Their situations are extremely fluid traversing between levels of risk and vulnerability and the report produced for Operation Raptor is a snapshot of child sexual exploitation in Croydon at a specific time.

## **Themes identified**

The research showed no evidence to suggest that missing and CSE in Croydon was linked to Organised Crime Networks operating in the area. However a number of themes, patterns and behaviours were identified by mapping the activities, contact points and relationships of each of the 20 young women and reviewing their connections with one another; particularly risk-taking behaviours, local gangs, specific locations and possible predatory males.

### **1. Networks**

The intelligence did not identify the existence of a large group of males sexually exploiting children in an organised and systemic manner but it did identify that one specific male with loose networks with younger men aged between 14 and their early twenties had exploited a number of young people. Overwhelmingly the sexual exploitation that was in evidence was that of Peer on Peer with older male peers exploiting younger peers.

The intelligence indicated that two of the young women were involved in recruiting other young women for sexual exploitation. This exploitation would last a few weeks until it was identified by parents, police and social care and protective interventions were carried out. The 'recruiters' would then move on to the next vulnerable young person. The information also indicated that these two young women had themselves been sexually abused/exploited and it was likely they had been groomed in a similar manner by previous 'recruiters'.

A number of the young women were linked to attending 'sex parties' together, often at local hotels. The intelligence suggested that one male was heavily involved in booking the hotel rooms for these 'parties', fraudulently using credit cards from unconnected individuals.

The group dynamics were identified as an important factor facilitating the exploitation. The intelligence indicated that some of the survivors idealised those young women who acted as recruiters, due to the status they held within the group. There was also a suggestion in the intelligence that some of the girls were being blackmailed or manipulated via social media.

## **2. Social Media**

Social media was a powerful enabler of the exploitation. Telephone numbers, Blackberry pin numbers and other identifying numbers, email addresses and twitter accounts of vulnerable girls were circulated amongst a number of males. Messages for sex were sent to these girls and video footage of girls having sex were circulated, or were threatened to be circulated if they did not continue to engage in sexual activity.

## **3. Risk Taking Behaviours**

The young women demonstrated a number of risk taking behaviours particularly;

- Attending private homes and hotels on invitations of strangers
- Drug and alcohol use and also transporting drugs across boundaries
- Connections to a range of gangs in Croydon and Brixton and there were clear links of girls being moved to Brixton for exploitation
- Half of the young women were linked to crime/known to Youth Offending Teams; for example, for street robbery
- All had been reported missing to the police, although for some the number of formal reports made did not reflect the true number of incidents where they stayed away from home/their residence and the responsible adult in their lives did not report them missing

The young women identified as survivors of CSE demonstrated behaviours that have proved difficult for professionals to intervene and bring about change. These young people have threatened social work staff, were violent, involved in criminality, gang affiliated, unable to manage boundaries, out of education, rejected, exhibiting risk behaviours (for example; drug misuse, placing themselves in risky situations) and being absent. To date all the young women have refused to engage with police and most would not talk to their social workers about their exploitation.

The vast majority of the young women did not perceive themselves to be at risk or as being exploited. Some of the girls were beyond parental control.

There were many if not all CSE indicators present across this group; peer on peer abuse, gang activity, unaccounted for but large amounts of money, expensive clothing, going missing, being dropped off late at night, beyond parental control, histories of abuse and neglect etc.

Despite significant intervention and a reduction in risk through disruption, some of these young people either remain at risk of sexual exploitation or their vulnerabilities mean they could be at risk of exploitation in the future or other forms of exploitation such as radicalisation.

## **4. Family background**

Whilst Operation Raptor was not established to focus on understanding any underlying social and cultural issues which may be contributing to CSE perpetration in Croydon, it was noted that:

- Most survivors were from single parent households affected by poverty
- Most survivors had, in their early lives, experienced domestic violence between their parents or another adult
- Drugs and alcohol featured in their parents' lives, as did criminality

- Most of the young women were in conflict with their mothers

Additionally, 12 of the 20 young women were from Black British, Black African and Black Caribbean cultures.<sup>2</sup> The July 2014 strategic needs analysis in Safeguarding (commissioned by the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board) identified a significant rise in this population group and in their needs. This work raises questions as to whether current services are designed and professionals equipped to work with this client group in relation to CSE. Further consideration has to be given to the role of institutional racism, enhanced feelings of disaffection, and gender and power relations as other factors. An additional factor may be the role and influence of immigration and multiple cultures where there may exist different expectations and behaviours in relation to gendered roles.

## 5. Locations

There was clear evidence that young people who are at risk of sexual exploitation are highly mobile. There was one particular pattern that was identified with young people moving across boundaries especially to Lambeth.

The intelligence also identified a number of locations which repeatedly showed up in the reports:

- Alternative education sites such as Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Education providers
- Hotels, the majority of which were in central Croydon and included national hotel chains

Alternative Education provision became a focal point of concern because systematically the practice has developed of placing vulnerable young people together in Pupil Referral Units. The intelligence gathered suggested that this may have facilitated the recruitment of vulnerable young people by their peers for exploitation. In order to understand more about this specific issue we compared the twenty young women's education histories and some commonalities from an initial overview were identified:

- Most young women were from within two particular post codes
- The majority of pupils have been on a high number of school rolls
- Four schools provided a high number of young people who presented with CSE and other vulnerabilities

## 6. Health Services

Many of the young women had been referred or were known to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) but often they failed to attend their appointments. There was a powerful theme cutting across virtually every case of denial by the survivor that they were at risk or being victimised and subsequently a refusal to engage in services.

Research indicates that the traditional model of CAMHS and social work (an office-based appointment with a therapist between 9 and 5 Monday to Friday) does not meet the desired needs and lifestyles of survivors of CSE. Research indicates that young people need therapeutic intervention from voluntary organisations at a time and location that is convenient to the young person. It was also noted that the current commissioning arrangements for CAMHS means that survivors of CSE may not necessarily be eligible for a service.

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<sup>2</sup> Four were of Asian descent and four White.

The intelligence also indicated that a significant number of the young women had attended and been assisted by the Genital Urology Medicine Clinic.

## **Response**

A multi-agency strategy was developed to respond to the findings of the analysis, in order to intervene and disrupt the exploitation of children. This has involved:

- (1) actions taken to immediately secure the safety and protection of those specifically identified as subject to exploitation, and
- (2) development of a strategy to prevent, disrupt and protect children and young people from the likelihood of sexual exploitation in Croydon. This strategy has been integrated with the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board CSE Action Plan 2015, and includes devising a methodology to develop/monitor intelligence held by CSC and Croydon Police to identify changes in the children at risk and inform on-going intervention work.

A multi-agency team was created to implement the response, and consisted of individuals from MPS, NCA-CEOP, CSC, NSPCC, Safer London, Youth Offending, Health Services, Education Services, CAMHS and Licencing and Enforcement.

## **Statutory and Police Response**

1. **Each young person is subject to regular review and monitoring**, through the Child Protection, Children in Need and Looked After statutory processes. They are monitored through the Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation (MASE) meetings and MPS Single Point of Contact for CSE.

All 20 young women are subject to monthly review and all have received the offer of additional therapeutic support from Safer London as well as additional specialist police intervention.

2. **Operation MakeSafe**

Operation MakeSafe is a bi-monthly multi-agency police led operation designed to disrupt CSE activity through community engagement. The operation is thematic and informed by intelligence, with partners visiting key business/locations/organisations to raise awareness of CSE and how to report concerns. This activity will continue throughout 2015.

3. **Police investigation**

As a result of the intelligence identified, a police investigation has been commenced to identify any crimes committed and take action against the perpetrators. As the investigation is on-going at this time the details of this cannot be disclosed, but the MPS has already executed warrants on four suspects for offences relating to sexual assault and Indecent Images of Children.

#### 4. Information sharing

The Public Protection Desk of Croydon Police are currently considering placing a specialist CSE officer / champion in the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub. Croydon Police and Children Social Care have also committed to repeating the methodology of Operation Raptor, on a smaller scale, each quarter, and work is on-going within the MPS to repeat the work in other Boroughs.

### Croydon Council Strategic Response

#### 1. Awareness raising campaign in relation to CSE.

Elected members of Croydon's Safeguarding Children Board and senior leaders at Croydon Council have made the need to combat CSE in the borough one of the three key priorities for the Council in 2015. This means that the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) Congress in the autumn of 2015 will focus on CSE, and in preparation there will be a proactive public awareness campaign coupled with a series of community awareness and engagement activities to raise the profile of CSE as well as publicise what supports are available to parents and others to protect children from exploitation.

The report identified a need to focus the training on how to intervene and plan in CSE cases from a cross cultural perspective.

**CSE will be raised at all relevant strategic and operational forums across the Council such as the Safer Croydon Partnership to ensure that all are aware of its strategic priority across the Local Authority.**

#### 2. Research into CSE in Croydon.

CSCB and Croydon Council commissioned research to profile and map CSE in the borough. This report has further informed the strategic response to CSE and is available from the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board website at: <http://croydonlcsb.org.uk/>.

#### 3. Review of CAMHS.

The report into CSE in Croydon identified that CAMHS may not have the capacity to provide services to young people who had been subject to CSE (and may not be specifically commissioned to do so as they may not have a mental health problem). The CAMHS commissioner is currently reviewing the report findings and research in this area.

#### 4. Establishing ways of working with other Local Authorities.

As observed above, many of the individuals identified in the research regularly crossed borough boundaries, and it was recognised that CSC and CSCB need to agree specific ways of working with their equivalents in other Local Authorities. Croydon, Lambeth, Bromley, Merton and Lewisham lead officers for CSE and Missing are currently developing systems to improve communication and ways of working, including holding a joint MASE as well as the management of other Looked After (OLA) children. This activity will specifically focus on gang activity and has been expanded to



include West Sussex. However there remains work to do with neighbouring boroughs. The chair of the CSCB has written to her counterpart at Lambeth.

**5. CSC to develop its OLA strategy.**

The Director of Children Social Care and Family Support has agreed to lead a task and finish group to develop and operationalise an OLA Strategy.

**6. Work in relation to the hotels.**

Croydon Council's Licencing and Enforcement informally reviewed the licences held by the hotels identified in Operation Raptor. The Council will write to all headquarters of the large hotel chains to seek further confirmation in relation to improving safeguarding awareness and security in their hotels. A summarised report will be sent to the headquarters of all national hotel chains.

## **Education**

All PRU and Alternative Education staff received a dedicated training on the identification and response to CSE. As an interim measure colleagues from Safer London and the Youth Offending Service offered additional support to all young people and staff in PRUs and Alternative Education providers through co-location. A dedicated strategy group has been established to address CSE in each PRU by reviewing concerns about individual young people as well as patterns and themes. The lead manager for Missing and CSE in Children Social Care has also provided direct support and outreach to all staff in every PRU and alternative education provider. Any young person identified by the PRUs will be reviewed at MASE.

The leads for Missing and CSE met with the Head of School Standard and Commissioning Head of Learning Access (Alternative Education) to map how girls are recruited, (i.e. does it start from schools), to reflect on the current practice of grouping all vulnerable young people together and to develop a strategy to combat the recruitment of girls from education sites. This will include a strategy to monitor and track attendance, and for staff to provide police with more intelligence to inform investigative and safeguarding activity. The Fair Access Panel has been included in this activity.

A specific action plan was also generated in relation to Education:

- a) Safer London, NSPCC and Children Social Care to provide data and intelligence into pre-Fair Access Panel meetings to enable the co-ordination of information held and to enable consideration of known vulnerabilities in any new settings
- b) Map previous schools for the 20 young people identified in Operation Raptor, along with their address (by postcode) and routes through school / PRU
- c) Undertake review of a random sample of MASE cases
- d) Further training offered to staff at schools identified as a result of the mapping and review work
- e) Evaluation of training gaps and identification of further training needs, including a review of all Croydon schools' training needs in relation to CSE

## Learning and Communication

### 1. Production of a collective report to be circulated to partners.

Croydon Police, NCA-CEOP and Children Social Care have produced a collective report (this report) to be used as a learning platform and act as the basis of a communication strategy.

### 2. Provision of training.

A comprehensive review of training for staff and partners was undertaken by CSC. This identified a series of actions involving provision of multi-agency training around CSE to ensure staff and practitioners can identify and act on CSE concerns. This includes, for example, provision of quarterly training to all hotel staff in Croydon. This will be organised by CSCB in partnership with Croydon Police and Croydon Council's Licencing and Enforcement.

Croydon Safeguarding Children Board has reviewed and developed its learning and development curriculum, increasing the numbers of CSE learning events throughout 2015/16 giving the workforce the confidence to engage young people from a variety of cultures and ethnicities.

The LSP Congress and associated media campaign will raise the profile of CSE across the borough in the autumn of 2015, and a specific campaign to raise awareness across the many communities in Croydon is currently being developed.

## Practice improvements

### 1. Involving third sector agencies.

The work has identified that young people are not engaging in traditional services (police, CSC and CAMHS). However, they will engage with services that:

- Work outside of the statutory arena, with a focus on non-judgemental advocacy and support
- Provide engagement which is not determined by timescales or the need to close cases quickly
- Undertake relationship based work managed around the young people's timescales

As a follow up to the council's response to Operation Raptor and Croydon Council's CSE Action Plan (agreed April 2015) the international charity the Railway Children (<https://www.railwaychildren.org.uk/>) will provide funding to combat CSE in Croydon. The money will be directly paid to a 'preferred provider' in this case the Safer London Foundation (<http://www.saferlondonfoundation.org/>) who are currently based in our Youth Offending Service, (funded via Mayor's Office Policing And Crime - MOPAC), and have demonstrated a significant impact in over 300 cases of child sexual exploitation in the past 3 years.

This additional funding will allow Safer London the capacity to extend their offer by providing Croydon Children & Families Early Intervention and Children Social Care with two practitioners who will undertake direct work with survivors as well as provide training, consultation and support to

social workers and others. Subject to internal negotiations the intention is to base the workers in MASH, Children Social Care and the PRUs / Alternative Education and Ruskin College and externally in the GUM Clinic as well as link them systemically with the NSPCC's Return Home Interview Project. This will effectively give us a Missing and CSE team structured in a partnership arrangement with two respected NGOs and will go some way to ameliorating two CSCB priority areas; Missing and CSE. However, in terms of the operating model nothing is fixed as we will want to reflect on how best to allocate this important resource across the entire service. This is an exciting partnership model that will increase our capacity. At present our thinking is that the project will be coordinated by the Missing and CSE co-ordinator although this is again subject to reflection.

This model has been developed by applying the current best practice research. The project will commence in June 2015 and is funded initially until December 2016. If there is evidence of improved outcomes for young people affected by CSE, in that time, then it is expected there will be an extension of this funding and therefore the reach of the model.

## **2. Modernising engagement.**

The work has identified a need to modernise the way in which CSC engages with young people i.e. improve IT capacity so we can use Facebook, Instagram and other platforms to communicate. A strategy is being developed by CSC to support this.

## **3. Recognising and responding.**

It was identified that practices regarding recording of missing reports needed to be improved, and that cases were only being viewed singularly, failing to recognise the connections between these young people.

CSC and CSCB have developed a specific action plan in relation to missing children. All social workers have been trained in how to record missing children, including ensuring that photographs are uploaded to aid quick dissemination to partners should a child go missing, and a new software module for the CRS has been purchased to assist with the collation of intelligence around CSE. This should assist with preventing connections between young people being missed.

Work is also being undertaken by CSC with Croydon Police to expand the use of Child Abduction Warning Notices, which has been added as an outcome measure to the CSCB CSE Action Plan 2015, as well as to the Learning and Development CSE curriculum.

## **Looking forwards**

Completion of Operation Raptor has required a significant multi-agency commitment. As detailed above, the collation of intelligence to develop an understanding of the CSE being perpetrated within Croydon has led to a number of strategic and practical outcomes for all partners involved. It is recommended that if not already being completed, similar work is commenced. However, the effort required to achieve this should not be underestimated, and a number of critical factors were important to ensuring this work progressed:

- Engagement from those involved; access to the information to inform the work was only possible with the engagement from key individuals in each agency

- Analytical support; the NCA-CEOP and MPS Force Intelligence Bureau support to collate the intelligence was important, and any partners considering such work should ensure they have specialist analytical staff available who can dedicate the time needed to research and collate the information required
- Senior support; the need to improve the response to CSE and missing children was already recognised and accepted as a strategic priority by both the MPS and CSC. The work was aided by the existence of a CSE 'prevent' work stream already being progressed with buy in from the third sector
- Investigative support; the MPS Sexual Offences Exploitation Child Abuse Command took responsibility for the on-going police investigation in to the perpetrators of CSE which has a significant resource implication
- Flexibility; all involved remained flexible about the approach ensuring the process remained fluid and adapted as the intelligence picture developed
- Good working relationships; this not only aided information sharing but also fostered open dialogue and challenges to overcome difficulties
- Shared responsibility; throughout it was a multi-agency approach

During the process a number of lessons were learnt along the way:

- Agreed purpose – all partners need to have a clear understanding of what the aim is and what is expected from the activity; the objectives to be achieved should be agreed and clearly communicated
- Shared understanding – CSC and Police understanding of what “intelligence” is and what can be achieved differed; in future it is recommended that agencies ensure there is a shared understanding of what is required, police disclosure procedures and expectations on how long police investigations may take.
- Pressures on delivering – linked to the above, expectations from partners and senior managers on the speed of a response to the findings lacked realistic understanding of the resourcing and time required to do this; this was exacerbated by demands for updates and partners should ensure realistic time scales are discussed and set
- Access to information – all partners need to provide the information requested, and need to ensure they have staff available to commit to doing this within the time scales agreed; the pressures on all services due to reducing resources need to be overcome in order to ensure the importance of this sort of mapping is recognised and commitment gained from all relevant areas of the organisation
- Prepare to respond – completing the intelligence report was the first step in the process, and all agencies need to recognise that there will be resource implications as a result of the work; how this may be managed needs to be realistically considered and planned for

This work has demonstrated the importance of recognising the connections between children using information available from different agencies in order to assess the risks to them and to other children. It was identified that there was often information held within the file for one child that indicated other children may be at risk. Across all partner agencies, children were often assessed individually, when it would have been of benefit to have taken into account risk taking activities collectively for all children involved in that particular instance. For example it was noted that during periods when children were

reported attending sex parties at hotels, other children vulnerable to CSE in the same association group who were not featured in the report were reported missing during the same period.

It is also important to recognise that this is not a one-off exercise. The picture of which children are at risk is fluid and intelligence gathering and assessment is a continual process. Croydon Police and CSC are developing a methodology based on the work completed to ensure this is embedded within their working practices and will be refreshed on a quarterly basis. This disruption and prevention work has significant resource implications which senior leaders in all partners need to acknowledge and address.

The work completed also only focused on children within Croydon, but as detailed above links to other boroughs and counties were evident. Further cross border work needs to be considered in order to effectively address CSE.