

# Parents Speak Out

*Crucial partners in tackling  
Child Sexual Exploitation*

**P**ace

Parents against  
child sexual exploitation



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# Foreword

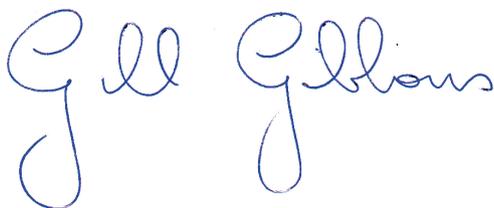
## Gill Gibbons, Pace CEO

Pace was founded as CROP (Coalition for the Removal of Pimping) in 1996, by parents, with and for parents of children groomed into what was then still known as child prostitution. CSE is now well recognised as the heinous crime that it is. The true extent of this sexual abuse and the systemic statutory failings to safeguard children has slowly come to light through criminal investigations, journalistic investigations, reports and serious case reviews.

One key partner in tackling CSE however is often underutilised or even rejected. Despite the recent changes and progress in tackling CSE, the crucial role parents play in safeguarding a child at risk of sexual abuse and violence outside the home is still largely ignored in our national approach to CSE. Parents are not the sexual abusers of their exploited child but they go through a statutory system where they are treated as such. The term Child Sexual Exploitation refers specifically to extra-familial abuse. It is *different* from intra-familial abuse. The risks and abusers are located outside the child's home although the impact of the abuse will be felt within it. CSE has specific characteristics including internal trafficking and offenders who can be involved in other criminal activity. These differences are still not acknowledged in the current child protection framework. The effect is often that parents are blamed for the abuse rather than the perpetrator and so a valuable resource in opposing CSE is disempowered.

Since 1996 Pace has worked with over 1,000 families and in recent years we have seen increasing numbers of families turning to Pace for information, support and guidance - in 2014/15 Pace worked with 291 families affected by CSE.

Pace welcomes this report in which parents powerfully speak for themselves about their crucial contribution to safeguarding their children but also the frustration when their distinctive knowledge and expertise is not respected and valued. This report is offered as a contribution to the shared and demanding task of bringing the sexual exploitation of children to an end.



# Introduction

“Remember to listen to the parents; they are there to pick up the pieces when everyone else has walked away.”

A CSE survivor speaking to policy makers and professionals at a government advisory group in London.

This report has been researched and written by parents themselves through the Parent Action Group (PAG) within Pace. In 2015, in response to parents' concerns and experiences, PAG undertook a survey of affected families. 31 parents responded to a questionnaire. All parents were actively involved with Pace at the time, though at different stages of the exploitation. Although the method of this enquiry may seem impressionist rather than scientific, we are satisfied that what is reported here is reliably typical of many parents. It corresponds with the sustained learning of Pace through nearly twenty years. The experience of the 31 respondents resonate with other stories that we hear day by day and at national Parent Network Days and so could be duplicated many times. The survey used both qualitative and quantitative methods to identify how parents prevent abuse, protect against perpetrators and provide long term support for their child. A few parents did not answer all questions and so the total is not always 31.

### Counties of respondents (where location question answered):

Derbyshire	6	West Midlands	2
East Sussex	1	South Yorkshire	1
Devon	2	Oxfordshire	2
London	3	Cambridgeshire	2
Greater Manchester	1	Northamptonshire	1
Nottinghamshire	1	North Yorkshire	1
West Yorkshire	4	Wiltshire	1

# Summary of key findings

## Section 1: Parents in action

Evidence shows parents are often the first to identify signs that something is seriously wrong with their child. This can be months or years before statutory agencies are aware. Unfortunately, most parents in the UK do not know the warning signs of CSE and so raising awareness among all parents of the early signs of CSE is vital.

The unique gift of love and commitment by the parent to the child is crucial and distinctive. For parents the word love and all the difficult emotions it encompasses are normally key to the relationship with their child. This is a critical difference between parents and practitioners. Relationship with the child is a matter of practical daily life together, rooted in the past, and looking to the future. Practitioners care for a child who is a victim of abuse but their interaction starts when the abuse becomes apparent and ends when it passes or the child becomes adult. Parents' knowledge of the child and commitment is holistically rooted in a relation starting long before the exploitation is on the horizon; it grows and adapts with the child over years and it is still there when the exploitation has been removed.

Parents are inventively, energetically proactive in protecting their child.

Mobile phones, social media and apps have become a major connection between children and abusers. The role of parents in safeguarding is much harder because of the difficulties of controlling these media, which are used by sexual abusers to coerce, manipulate, threaten, control, flatter and entice children.

## Section 2: Sharing information with the police

Because of their relation with their child, parents often get information which is useful in identifying perpetrators and enabling police and CPS to mount successful prosecutions. Parents want to work with the police to prosecute perpetrators and would like to see the police fully acknowledging the role of parents and making the most of what they offer.<sup>1</sup> Successful prosecutions of CSE perpetrators have rapidly increased and continue to improve. Parents in this survey evidenced their role in *proactively* providing information and intelligence about perpetrators to the police. This has in many instances been a contributing factor to the recent increase in successful prosecutions of CSE perpetrators.

## Section 3: Quality of support from agencies

This report demonstrates how vital a role parents play in seeking to safeguard their child from CSE. But parents know they cannot do it alone and need support both from statutory agencies and also from specialist organisations; all need to be open to the positive potential of parents, whatever their background, and to listen, understand, respect and value their knowledge and specific contribution.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, for many parents, this report shows that this non-judgemental support is not forthcoming.

### Section 4: Working relations between parents and professionals

This section is perhaps the most disturbing of all, as it shows that in spite of really good practice in some parts of the country, too many parents are still excluded from playing the full part that they want in relation to safeguarding their child. This happens in 4 specific ways:

- Refusing parents contact with their child in residential care. Parents who care should be empowered and supported, not discouraged, in maintaining relationships with their children when they go into care. It is especially odd to obstruct this relationship when the parent has taken the initiative in asking for their child to be taken into care, because, after careful and desperate thought, the parent decides it is the safest course for their child.
- Some practitioners are still barring parents from safeguarding meetings that they are entitled to attend, even when in some instances the parents have themselves asked for the meeting.
- Once a child reaches 16 it often proves to be difficult to get ongoing support from statutory agencies. Young people over the age of 16 are still vulnerable and inexperienced, especially if they have been groomed and exploited for years.<sup>3</sup>
- For sexually exploited children who are groomed, manipulated, coerced and fed lies by abusers, the likelihood of their not always telling the truth about their parents or home life increases. It is a common tactic of the exploiters to coach their young person to allege that their parents were abusive. This makes it very hard for practitioners to work out what the truth is and for parents to potentially defend themselves against unfounded accusations. This aspect of child sexual exploitation needs to be acknowledged. It is *not* to blame children. Nor is it to suggest that we should not listen to children. It is simply to acknowledge that under immense psychological pressure some exploited children will speak with the voice of the perpetrator rather than their own and so tell untruths about their parents in order to protect and distract focus away from perpetrators.

### Section 5: Families harassed or endangered by abusers and their associates

Half of the respondents said they and their other children were victims of crime instigated by the perpetrators of their child's abuse. The shocking statistic highlights the wider impact of CSE and its effect on entire families. This reality always needs to be part of the policing response to CSE victims.

### Section 6: Final comments

It is plain that this enquiry and report is grounded on the conviction that parents have a vital role to play in safeguarding their children, in partnership with other agencies. It also has confidence that they can be effective.

This view of parents is not universally shared and meets with scepticism, drawn from experience and theory, which in turn prevents the development of trust and cooperation. The stereotype of the dysfunctional family as the cause of a child's being vulnerable to CSE is powerful. It is easy to see how it makes professionals wary of working with parents and slow to expect much good to come from them. It distracts attention away from the perpetrators.

However, the practice of Pace over nearly twenty years provides strong evidence of the viability and wisdom of working with parents, respecting them as prime front-line agents in the face of CSE. This enquiry has been conducted by a tiny sample of the hundreds of parents with whom Pace has worked effectively.

Pace works with parents from all sorts of backgrounds and ethnicities. It meets parents as persons, who are not to be prejudged through stereotypes. It does not deny that there is a relatively small number of parents who are abusive. But it believes that most parents are committed to their children and want to help them.

It does not pretend that parents are fully competent for all eventualities. Even the best equipped of parents tend to find themselves at their wit's end when a child is groomed, alienated and exploited. That they want support and ask for it is no sign of incapacity or dysfunction, but rather of good sense and determination.

The appropriate response to parents in the crisis of CSE is not to expect them already to be demonstrating a certain level of competence or rectitude, but to look for what they could do, if offered adequate support, respect and partnership. Such professional practice should not be restricted to a few specialist agencies like Pace, but needs to be more widely understood and disseminated in all agencies and in public understanding.

# Parents Speak Out

## Section 1: Parents in action

This section starts by highlighting the lack of preparedness and bewilderment of parents at the beginning of their child's sexual exploitation, but goes on to show how active parents become in trying day and night to protect their child.

### Question 1: When did you first start to suspect that your child was at risk or actually being sexually exploited?

#### The signs of CSE

Although listing signs that might indicate a child is at risk of CSE is now common practice (e.g. OCC Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Groups and Gangs: Interim Report 2012), CSE remains a difficult phenomenon to detect. Parents may sense that something is intrinsically wrong, but may not be able to identify precisely what, and where the enemy lies. For many parents, CSE is something they assumed would never happen to them. The first question shows the variety of ways in which parents first became aware; they were asked to tick the relevant boxes and add any additional comments.

Child's behaviour changed significantly	24
The child went missing	16
Online/phone activity	15
Professional told me	7
Child made a disclosure	6

Other signs often mentioned: Truancy Gifts such as iPhones or expensive trainers

The most common sign, that of the child's behaviour 'changing significantly' is far from clear. Teenagers often change behaviour suddenly and drastically and sexual exploitation is one of many possible reasons of change in behaviour. Other signs give much stronger signals of exposure to harm, such as - regularly going missing from home or repeated truancy. More specific indicators of sexual exploitation tend to be limited to online or phone activity. Disclosure by the child is uncommon and often comes late in the day, sadly when much harm has already happened.

It is clear that a significant amount of time may pass between parents observing ambiguous signs before they seek help. This means that children are already trapped in exploitation before intervention occurs, reinforcing the need for more awareness raising to emphasise that CSE can happen to any child of any family who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

*I knew something was wrong but did not suspect CSE as I had not heard of it. She displayed the behaviour listed above but it was combination of her disclosure and a professional that actually told me.*

*I didn't know she was being sexually exploited on first symptoms.*

*It had been going on for 2½ years before she told me.*

## Question 2: What do you think that you as a parent (i.e. not as a professional) uniquely contribute to safeguarding your child?

Pace is built on the conviction that Parents are Against Child Sexual Exploitation and that the relation between child and parent, rooted in life together before exploitation occurred, is a strong resource of commitment and understanding in getting through the destructive disruption. In answering this question parents let us see who they are, what they do and with what motives.

First, they emphasise the **distinctive significance of the parent/child relationship**: we should not be shy about talking of love.

*Knowing your child, impact, having love and safe place for your child 24 hours a day. Being constantly there and fighting for their safety.*

*We love our child unconditionally. We are always available and willing to support her and fight for her. We have a lifelong commitment to her that no professional could ever match.*

*Love. Perseverance with my relationship with my daughter. Also with trying to get help; but I feel powerless to safeguard my child.*

*We know them best. We know what is truth and what is lies. We are there 24/7. We know the fine line that has to be trodden to keep their trust in us.*

*Know them best and their welfare. Not just a paid job.*

*Help as much as possible and do family stuff if can. Try and keep relationship going and stick with her.*

*I know her best and have the longest relationship with her – and basically she trusts me.*

*Never gave up and will always be there for her.*

*I know my child inside and out and live with her 24 hours a day. I know her vulnerabilities and know how she responds to fear and anger. I love my child and would put her first above everything else.*

The test of this language is in what parents actually do.

### Question 3: What action have you taken to protect your child?

*As a parent I try my best to safeguard my child by disclosing any information I can regarding my daughter and her chosen group of friends to the police, Social Care and FIT (Family Intervention Team) worker. I have also gone looking for her myself on many occasions.*

*Been to just about everyone over it - MP, safeguarding, police etc.*

*Taking my child to another country, namely New Zealand. Even though she was this far they did contact her on the internet.*

*Stopped her going out, seeing him. Took her/picked her up from school. Took her to stay with her grandmother at another time.*

*Harbouring notice - although this did not work.*

*Monitored social media, found counsellors, persuaded daughter and friends to give evidence, reported hotel address to Social Services and the police. Found out man's mobile, provided photos, place of work (all before the police did), provided text messages and images. Demanded CSE Unit get involved. Educated the school. Provided love and support to daughter. Took out 2 warning abduction notices.*

*Sent her abroad to her father for a couple of months but nothing changed.*

*As parents we have physically restrained our daughter from leaving the house and many times we have gone to bed with all the house, car and window keys under our pillow to prevent our daughter getting out through the night. We have called the police on several occasions to find our daughter. I have spoken to these men on my daughter's phone to warn them to leave my daughter alone and that she has a family who love her.*

*I tried locking the house but she jumped out of an upstairs window.*

*After our son had been threatened with arrest should he go missing again, we would try and find him ourselves and tried to extract him from high risk situation without police help even when they were aware.*

*Talking, parental control, checking with other parents when arranging events for child to attend. Boundaries, times to check home. Drop off and pick up. Check child has arrived at school.*

Two specific questions were asked about significant action parents take. They further show how parents are proactive agents for their child taking initiatives which are often costly.

### Question 4.1: Have you ever found or rescued your missing child before the authorities?

20 out of 31 respondents found their child who had gone missing before the police did. This is not a cause for surprise or for criticising the police: they are few and have many people to attend to, while parents are concentrated on a child in their family. It shows that supporting parents who are largely self-mobilising is a valuable contribution to safeguarding. These comments speak graphically of their searching with extraordinary persistence and imagination.

*Every occasion I went out to look for my child. She was drugged and abused. I would look in the red light areas at least 5 hours at a time.*

*Several times found her by going out actively searching, using clues she had left and working out what they meant when professionals had given up. Used info passed on by her friends from school.*

*Patrolled the streets and found daughter before police and warned authorities of public transport.*

*I have found her first loads of times when she was abandoned in other towns. She phoned us and we went to collect her, driving everywhere until eventually we found her.*

*Followed her and brought her home. Drove to other towns after calls from street angels to bring her home.*

*Followed her and made notes; passed information quickly; collected evidence and put in plastic bags separately.*

*Regularly located child and requested assistance to enter property and protect her – this was not forthcoming or too much of a time delay. At times we were not taken seriously and her safety was never prioritised by police in particular.*

*Found addresses, picked her up when called by friends or from hospital when overdosed etc.*

*Found and rescued her many times. Spoke to authorities. Reasoned, indulged, cajoled, cried, shouted and threatened her. Asked family and friends for help. Locked her up; locked her out. Tried everything I could think of.*

*Brought her back from a park; removed her from a flat.*

*Go looking, check for bus tickets. Talk to friends and friends' parents. Father would take bike in back of car and then cycle – check with pubs ad clubs, show photos.*

*I have gone in taxis here there and everywhere. She ran away and I picked her up when she had been stolen by exploiters.*

*She kicked off and I went after her but I was shouted and screamed at and physically attacked and she got away. The police did respond and searched but she turned up in her stepsister's house in a local village.*

*The police never found her. She only came back of her own accord.*

*I have walked the streets and sometimes found my daughter myself.*

*Actively searched and located her.*

*Did everything we could to monitor, track, follow and support her throughout.*

These short accounts show the resilience, persistence, strength and wisdom of parents who are also under inordinate levels of stress. Parents clearly need support by agencies, but not because they are weak and ineffective. Rather they need support bolstered with respect; for their proactivity, their determination and their initiative.

### Question 4.2: Have you ever needed to take steps to prevent your child's access to mobile phones or the internet in order to protect them?

YES	NO
24	7

Mobile phones and the internet are powerful weapons in the hands of exploiters. Whilst the number of parents who did not restrict their child's access to mobile phones and the internet may seem surprising, their explanations show the dilemma facing parents who seek to control teenage online activity.

*Would not allow us to.*

*I wanted to, but knew she would have left/gone missing if I did.*

This indicates one of the major problems now, in the age of internet - it is harder than ever for parents to control who has access to their children, and who their child can access. It is clear however that many parents do all that they can. Examples of action that was taken include:

*Blocked certain individuals; put tracker on phone (restrict internet and phone etc).*

*Disabled Facebook and removed computers and phones.*

*Yes, prevented access to both computer and phone and were actively opposed by Social Services who were highly critical of our actions in so doing, accusing us of being 'rigid and draconian' in our parenting style.*

*Removed her mobile phone and gave her access to a laptop computer to do homework only, while working with me in the room.*

*Took laptop/phone/iPad away temporarily. Found it hard to sustain as she needed a laptop for school.*

*Phone is removed at night; installed 'track my iPhone'.*

*We have taken our daughter's phone away from her on many occasions and would routinely take her phone at night. We have switched off and taken the router upstairs to bed with us to prevent her getting on the internet at night on the family computer which*

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*was downstairs (there were no other computers that my daughter had access to in the house). Everyone in the family who lived at home or visited our home and stayed overnight had to be able to lock their phones and ensure they kept them with them at all times.*

*Removed Wi-Fi and phones. Installed safeguarding software on all PCs.*

*2 years ago talking to strangers via the Kik app to the extent that the morning one of them was meeting her I blocked her phone internet and collected her from school as I had found some concerning internet activity. Her phone and internet access was removed and even school monitored internet/email usage.*

*Stolen her phone while she was asleep and put sim card in my phone to obtain details of perpetrators.*

*Originally removed all internet and phone access; parental controls on internet access, only allowed downstairs and I have to put a password in it. At school she started having panic attacks so I gave her a 'retro phone' as she calls it which will only send texts and make calls; blocked all data on her contract with her mobile phone provider so if she did get another phone the sim would still only give her calls and texts; changed her mobile phone number with her provider (this is easy to do just give them the crime ref number and they do it straight away); kept close contact with school who are aware; informed very close family whom I could trust and would understand and help if need be.*

# Section 2: Sharing information with the police

## Question 5: Have you passed on information about the people suspected of harming your child?

Parents often hold a great deal of information about the perpetrators, which can be crucial to police investigations and to building a case against a suspect. Often, it could not be obtained without the parents. Our experience is that this information is gratefully received and acted upon in some places, but not at all times and by all Forces.

Names	24
Mobile numbers	20
Locations	19
Car registrations	13
Other	9

31 respondents passed on 85 separate pieces of information.

Other information given included:

*Pictures on internet.*

*Diaries and notes she had written; soiled underwear led to successful prosecution which was later overturned on appeal.*

*Social media on boxes and direct messages printed out.*

*NI number.*

*Drug supplies and use.*

*Email details.*

*Account names, photos.*

*Descriptions of perpetrators and addresses.*

Sometimes parents may be reluctant to share information for fear of causing further harm to their child.

*I have not passed on information and this is because I am afraid of upsetting my daughter's recent and fragile steps to recovery.*

### Questions 6: Has there been any police action against the people suspected of harming your child?

Parents naturally expect police to investigate cases of CSE in order for the Crown Prosecution Service to pursue the convictions and prosecution of perpetrators. There is evidence of some improvement here: prior to 2008, only two families who worked with Pace secured prosecution of the perpetrator, in one case only after the young person had been murdered. Figures from the parents who responded to this survey are more encouraging. Most had experienced some police action and 10 parents had achieved convictions.

Conviction rates vary between different locations. In areas where a specialist CSE multi-agency team has a Pace Parent Liaison Officer (e.g. Blackburn in Lancashire) to ensure close police-parent relationships, the conviction rate tends to be higher. Parents from these areas did not participate in this survey.<sup>4</sup>

Yes some police activity	21
No	7
In progress	7
Investigation but no prosecution	7
Guilty verdict	10
Not guilty verdict	0
More than one investigation	8

Within this improving trend of police action, prosecution and convictions, parents had varied experiences of police responses. Police can be dismissive:

*The police said she was making it up.*

And sometimes the processes and outcomes of the law can appear to be erratic or inadequate:

*Just a caution for approaching a 13-year-old.*

*No investigation for my child but the perpetrators raped a boy for 3 days on a complete other case and one was imprisoned. I had repeatedly put in complaints. This man still continues to this day with new victims and is above the law. I rang the police saying he will in time be headline news and people/police/social workers will say we had no idea. I will then say YES YOU ALL DID!*

*No investigation on some other cases even though guilty verdicts in some.*

*Successful prosecution of one perpetrator but many others were not investigated.*

*Plus, one verdict of 'doing the deed' (i.e. facts were established). Same as guilty but due to his 'mental health' it was a trial in his absence.*

*Sometimes parents and police are successful together.*

*Alerted Social Services, police and school; got the man arrested - i.e. I'm the safeguarder.*

# Section 3: Support from agencies

The vital issue of the quality of support parents receive from agencies was the subject of two questions.

## Question 7: How well have you felt supported by relevant authorities/agencies?

## Question 8: Can you give examples of professional support services that have really helped?

In areas where Pace has Parent Liaison Officers embedded in multi-agency teams, there is positive recognition of the value of including parents in the shared task of combating CSE. This has led to more successful prosecutions as well as what has been described as ‘full wrap around care for the child.’

Some parents have a long and varied experience of agencies concerned with CSE and give some historical perspective.

*Everything I have written here is as it was when our daughter was being exploited. Things are different now as there is a historic case review and from that an ongoing investigation. The police this time round are totally supportive and we feel we are being listened to. Social Care was useless the first time around and with the ongoing investigation has not been in touch.*

*In the first court case, very unsupported by all. In the second court case all the agencies were involved. I wonder if Social Care was better because a child was born out of the rape. The police now have a dedicated unit for children which we accessed in the second case, school got involved more as CAMHS became involved and Safe and Sound Derby gave us access to an ISVA (independent sexual violence adviser) who took us through the court process.*

The majority of respondents in this survey were at a much earlier stage of living with their child’s exploitation. While there are some significant and welcome improvements in some areas, the overall response shows that many parents still experience limited help, particularly from statutory agencies.

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Respondents were asked to mark three kinds of agencies on a scale of 1-10. This table shows the total number of points given and the average scores per respondent.

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Average out of 10</b>
Police	117	4.2
Social Care	64	2.2
Other*	179	7.2

(\*Other is mostly third sector but also includes schools.)

This question can give only an impressionistic picture, but would be reinforced by many conversations at our National Parent Network days. When taken together with parents' comments, these low scores are cause for concern. There is a long way to go in getting a high level of effective mutually supportive cooperation between agencies and parents.

One issue was highlighted extensively - **The sole transitory good worker.**

Several parents said it was important to work with and get to know a particular individual over a sustained period, someone who listened, valued and understood the parent. The high scores were often, not always, related to one person, who was greatly valued as the comments below demonstrate. When the individual left their role, the relationship with the agency often deteriorated. This was less true in relation to the voluntary sector, when the stance of the whole organisation was felt to be positive towards them.

*Social Care - please note one social worker was very good, wise (CSE specialist). Info, but lack of action and so impact very limited. High police score refers to one division only; others were less useful. Some social workers were well meaning but they 'didn't get it' and ultimately failed us all.*

*One social worker was amazing - listened and asked police to make checks etc. At this time, we as a family were taken seriously. She then left and it reverted back to continued serious mistakes being made.*

*A youth intervention officer in police - very supportive.*

*Court was easier than expected due to legal aid and a very good legal firm. We feel very fortunate Court ordering the local authority to step up to the mark.*

*Police team - very supportive, kept me in the loop, dealt with the same DC who has made me feel I am able to ask things I am unsure of; doctor has been very supportive, seeing me every two weeks to check on my wellbeing and offer advice and I know he is also in close contact with the doctor that my daughter sees; school not only supports my daughter but also myself and if there are any concerns they contact me or I do them and often give updates. I have her mentor's private number for emergencies.*

*We had an amazing social worker in our second case, who I felt listened to my daughter and to me as a parent.*

## Support from agencies

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*The police have scored 5 because of one particular police woman who understood, but when she left the good support stopped. The police talked to other family members and Social Care to her sister without consulting us.*

*Apart from one initial officer who took my statement, police made me feel like an overanxious mother.*

*Some individuals in all organisations were helpful - but they were the exception rather than the rule.*

*I have often felt I am a pain in the bot. We got little or no help from the police - due to lack of training I guess.*

*One particular worker at our drugs project, a charitable organisation. She helped me with ways of handling my daughter's behaviour, informing me of other possible help and being there and listening.*

Schools were mentioned very positively twice, although there was also one negative comment. There were many very positive comments on local charities, such as Safe and Sound (Derby), although some others were described as wishing to help but being out of their depth because their focus was rather different - e.g. alcohol and drugs. National charities that were positively mentioned once included Barnardos and NSPCC.

Only 25 of the 31 respondents filled in an answer to this question. Most of the positive comments written in answer to Question 8 that refer to the statutory sector have already been included above. The voluntary sector was highlighted 17 times. It is also not surprising that Pace was highly commended 16 times. The respondents had worked with Pace and found it true to its name. The level of response does however highlight the real need for a specialist organisation, or worker, whose focus is parents. Exploited children are far too often treated as isolated individuals, and those working with them do not necessarily see them in the context of their family and social context. Other comments show that giving effective and sustained support to parents is not restricted to Pace. The practice is spreading and can be spread further and faster.

*Pace - support and information, empowerment rather than criticism and blame. Feeling validated by peers and staff at Pace.*

*My parent support worker from Safe and Sound is the reason I am here today. She restored my sanity and I will be for ever grateful.*

*Pace - wrote a letter to support my concerns and wishes for a strategy meeting. Telephone support and on-line forum; only people I deal with that understand the severity of an adult controlling my daughter.*

*At the beginning of our nightmare the police seemed helpful and concerned. Social Care did not care and let us down. Pace again has been the only support we've received that has been consistent throughout.*

*Subsequently found that Pace was the only organisation that had an understanding of the situation and difficulties that we faced. Protective actions by parents were actually inhibited by all other agencies.*

*Police offered support and referred me to Pace.*

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*Pace - to hear others' stories helps you deal with your own and the information and advice has been very informative.*

*Safe and Sound (Derby) in the second case for getting us through the court process and teaching my daughter about how to keep safe and what a good relationship looked like and a Connections worker who helped my daughter to stay in education and not run and give up.*

A whole raft of people needs to be involved in safeguarding children. Parents need the help and support of many different agencies. But safeguarding is most effective when we all go beyond just supporting parents, to looking for and building their specific and potentially positive role. The starting point, wherever possible, should be the assumption that parents care profoundly for their child and have a lifetime commitment. That commitment is a real resource of great value, whatever may be the specific lack of expertise parents may show.

# Section 4: Working relations between parents and professionals

This section covers 3 questions which arise for parents when they feel, or indeed are, excluded from proceedings relating to their child.

## Question 9: Have you or your child ever been prevented by professionals from having contact with one another?

Over half of the respondents answered yes to this question. This issue often arises starkly when for many different reasons a child is placed in care or is living away from the family. This move is often at the request of parents who feel that the child would be safer, safeguarded more effectively from the perpetrators, if they moved out of the family home. This is a hard decision but in our experience is not a sign of abandonment but rather one of deep commitment to wanting what was best for their child. Blocking subsequent access to their child does not make much sense to the parent. Residential care accommodation managers need to make adequate provision for preserving a child's relationship with their parent/s during their time in temporary care. It is important that a child's care plan has a detailed section on managing their return home (sometimes called an 'exit plan') and rebuilding their relationship with their family. Where this approach has been put in place feedback from parents is that it has been very successful for child and family.

Problems occur in several different ways, as the comments show. The comments often reveal a problem or conflict but do not give a full account of it. There is room for deeper more searching research in this area. Parents would welcome that, so long as it did not begin with assumptions that parents were either irrelevant or incompetent.

*She was put into secure and we had lots of restrictions. We could see her, but very limited.*

*Dissuaded from seeing her when accommodated in a private children's home, as we were seen as causing her 'stress' due to our insistence on reminding everyone she was being exploited – a key fact which was usually played down in favour of a focus on her behaviour or our parenting.*

Social workers and police have the power to prevent contact:

*Threatened with arrest for abduction should we try and extract him or those with him away. Told by police to keep away.*

*Yes, at TAC (Team Around the Child) meeting I was told that if I contacted my daughter or person she was staying with I would be arrested.*

*Regularly. A harbouring notice was served on me at the same time as one on the perpetrators. I was told that I was preventing Social Care from doing what was needed – but they did nothing. My daughter had a baby when she was 16 (by perpetrator) which is going to be adopted. We were assessed for looking after the baby but it was deemed we were not suitable.*

Sometimes contact is prevented on grounds which do not convince parents:

*Attempted to take her into care on false pretext.*

*Social worker told us to let her see these people [perpetrators] as they are her 'friends' and we were being too strict.*

### **Question 10: Have the authorities ever used your child's wishes or decisions as reason to overrule your decisions as a parent?**

YES	NO
19	10

Does it make sense to dismiss the parent on the grounds of a medical report given by the child, without corroboration?

*My daughter told the police I was a schizophrenic and hadn't taken my tablets and so they gave her over to an ex-business partner from which she returned back to the abusers.*

*Because they thought I was struggling with mental health as my daughter told them. I said they could check with my GP.*

And the danger of underestimating the power and effects of grooming:

*Our daughter did not want to make a statement, nor have these men prosecuted, therefore against our wishes the cases had to be dropped. These men made our daughter think they were her friends and she was in control of what went on in the friendship, therefore our daughter did not want to get them into trouble.*

*They would not listen to advice from myself or from Pace that the decisions about my daughter were not coming from her but from the perpetrators.*

*No contact as lack of understanding/training re disruption and breaking of parent/child bond. Daughter was embarrassed I had seen explicit texts so said she didn't want to see me; they did not encourage contact and kept us apart.*

*Social Services said on several occasions that if my daughter was not willing to engage, there was nothing further they could do. That her behaviour was a 'lifestyle choice'.*

*After I made police aware of daughter being groomed, her phones and devices were confiscated. Social Care then issued her a basic mobile but did not give me the number and after two months no contact, the home manager stated 'If she doesn't want to see you what do you want me to do about it?' No understanding of disruption and breaking child/parent bond.*

The principle of believing the victim of sexual exploitation is a good one. Parents perhaps more than anyone want the needs of the child to be at the centre. But what the child says must be interpreted with care, in full awareness of the power of grooming and the coaching of the victim in how to use disinformation to thwart safeguarding, whether by professionals or parents. The child is given a narrative which systematically exonerates and hides the perpetrator.

### Reaching the age of 16

Another issue that arose several times in answer to the 2 questions above was that of reaching the age of 16.

*A child at 16 can legally make their decisions and choices – upheld by Social Services and police although challenged formally by us as parents.*

*(They) said she old enough to make her own decisions.*

*When my daughter was 16 and leaving secure accommodation they gave her a flat on her own. I said it would not be safe, particularly as it was in the same area where she had been groomed and so placed in secure accommodation in the first place. It still went ahead because they said it was what she wanted.*

*The law needs to be changed on age of consent. The age of consent is 16 and up till then it should be black and white, not degree of consent related to the victim's age. Therefore, any person younger than 16 should be unable to stop an offender being prosecuted for sexual offences if there is enough evidence.*

Grooming does not cease at age 16: does effective safeguarding?

*We were told that she had capacity to consent as being 16-year-old, despite company and evidence of exploitation.*

This last comment raises a real issue for many parents – and their children. Once a child reaches 16 they are too often deemed to be totally responsible for their actions and so help is very limited. This reflects a real lack of understanding of the profound effects of grooming and CSE on children and young people. Sexually exploited young people have lost the 'normal' emotional and psychological development of other teenagers because in this crucial, formative period of their life they have been controlled by another person/people. At 16 they may well still be emotionally much younger and so still desperately need help, understanding and long term support. Often parents are left as the only people still concerned enough to stay with the young person.

### Question 11: Have you ever been kept out of professionals' meetings about your child?

YES	NO
19	10

It is good practice to respect parents as partners and to include them in meetings about their children. So it is not good news that, while 10 have not been affected, 19 parents in this sample have been kept out of some meetings. We recognise and are glad that there has been progress on this issue in many parts of the country, but the level of exclusion is still too high. It is an improvement on the recent past when parents were routinely excluded, and it is vital to maintain the momentum of change.

Parents still have to fight to be included.

*[Would have been excluded from] Strategy meeting but fought against it and both attended that meeting.*

*Some information (when Social Services remember) is now shared as a result of a complaint process.*

*A few meetings have happened without us and we were told for 'professionals' only - we kicked up so eventually they allowed us. MASH referral meetings all happen without parents.*

*On a few occasions we were not told that the meetings were happening.*

*I was just not told about meetings and not informed that the time had been changed.*

The loss of initiative and information to share when parents are excluded:

*Social Services barred us from first Safeguarding Children meeting, despite fact that we had been the ones to request it and were the only people with information to impart! We successfully challenged this decision but were still excluded from part of the meeting.*

Reasons why parents are excluded - are the reasons good enough?

*I was told I was 'too controversial' and spoke my mind; my opinions were not agreed with and were therefore 'wrong'.*

*There was a meeting at school between some professionals that we were not able to attend. We were seen as part of the problem.*

## **Section 5: Families harassed or endangered by abusers and their associates**

### **Question 12: Have you or your family been directly threatened or harmed by the abusers or their associates?**

*Sexual exploitation involves physical and psychological violence. It is intended to control those being exploited. It is often extended to the family of the victim.*

*At our home: man was verbally threatening and kicking the door.*

*Threatening and abusive phone calls, sometimes sexual.*

*Have been broken into, car stolen and threatened.*

*Telephone threats against us.*

*House burgled by perpetrators while we were in holiday.*

Parents who go in search of their child, and enter the 'territory' of the abuser, may be directly threatened and endangered.

*I have had threats such as 'I'll smash your face in, 'I will stab her' and other general aggressive comments.*

*They were going to kill my daughter and demanded money. They came to the arena we were at and tried to get a young man to go outside where a large group waited. I chased them down the high street.*

Abusers often put pressure on the victim by threatening his/her family. The victim's care for their family is thus cruelly exploited, putting all in fear.

*Threatened by phone that they would come and burn the house down. The men several times phoned the house to taunt me that my daughter was with them and I could hear her screaming in the background for me to come and fetch her.*

*They told my daughter they would hurt her mother.*

*Threats through my daughter and in-boxed on Facebook from the abuser.*

*There were threats to our home and business. Child was told his parents would be harmed unless he conformed to demands.*

*We received threats through my daughter. We were scared for our safety, especially her younger brother.*

Even when the abuse has ended, the presence of the abuser in the neighbourhood is distressing:

*The first perpetrator lived next door with his family and although after coming out of prison did not return to reside there, visits very regularly causing a lot of emotional distress to all the family. The second perpetrator came to our house with a knife and threatened to kill his child and my daughter. We had an armed response unit, helicopter and police protection until he was found.*

This story shows that getting free of one abuser does not necessarily mean the end of trouble: another arrives. Significant police action was required and was forthcoming. But that is unhappily not always so, as another parent's experience shows:

*Had all that but police still went after us more than the abusers so we had to go to MP in the end.*

14 of the 31 respondents had been directly threatened or had property damaged. Several who said No to this question, had however taken preventative action, such as the police installing an alarm because of the known history of violence of one of the perpetrators.

The way in which sexual exploitation affects the whole family is not well-publicised. Responding to it adequately is a constant challenge.

# Section 6: Final comments

In their final comments, parents often reiterated points made in Section 1. They took their opportunity to speak out, emphasising the significance of parents in the long hard work of safeguarding children who are sexually exploited. Their active commitment, their capacity and confidence is not to be underestimated. The wisdom of the appeal they make is evident in the phrasing of the next comment, with its balance between ‘*for the most part we know...*’ and ‘*when we are out of our depth we need...*’.

*Parents are the first line of defence against these predators. We are the ones who care for and love our children unconditionally. For the most part we know what is best for our children, but when we are out of our depth we need support to make the right decisions – support by people who know what a family is going through, like Pace. Equally we need to be listened to by professionals as we know our children best.*

It must be admitted that a note of exasperation with professionals can be heard in many comments.

*We parents need a voice. The so called professionals (local authorities) have no idea what we go through.*

It is frequently present in the relation of parents and professionals. When parents express their frustration and disappointment, professionals are exasperated in turn. Each side justifies itself and blames the other.

*Too much blame is apportioned to parents and not enough action by Social Services to support families effectively.*

The common stereotype that sees inadequate parenting as the cause of a child’s exploitation by extra-familial abusers predisposes observers (professionals, journalists, politicians, lawyers and others) to blame parents at first sight. Pace has always challenged that stereotype, knowing that it does not do justice to the hundreds of parents it has worked with, parents like those who speak for themselves in this report.

*If only agencies had helped rather than seeing me as the problem.*

Conversely there is a widely held stereotype of professionals, which is based on some experience but is not fair to many professionals.

We need to get beyond stereotypes and the exasperations that build them up. We need to learn from each other how to work better together. Causes for exasperation are not to be whitewashed and denied. We need to help each other to learn through them so that we can work better together.

*More training of professionals is needed which involves and understands parents. That needs to happen at the beginning.*

## Parents Speak Out

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*Agencies should involve parents in implementing changes to policies. Local Authorities need to listen more and help parents lobby government into making changes to the law to protect children.*

*We as parents need to make the professionals listen and help us. Social Care and the police really need to change and work together and parents attend meetings; after all we know our daughters and sons better than any of them.*

*Police and Social Care to have more training on CSE and a dedicated team to work with families. When making first point of call, 101 police should be alert to flag up constant missing episodes instead of having to report everything from the beginning. Listening is very important.*

### **And finally - the root of Child Sexual Exploitation**

Professionals and parents and the exploited young people have one common problem, which is caused by the 'predators'.

In the words of a parent:

*These predators are very manipulative. They alienate their victims from friends and family, and then the victim becomes more and more reliant on the perpetrators, who portray themselves as their boyfriends. How can children be expected to see the bigger picture, when they are right in the frame with a brainwashed mind? The law needs to be used against these perpetrators to show the victims that what has happened to them is wrong and that it is not the child's fault but the perpetrator's entirely.*

# Recommendations arising from this report

The hundreds of parents who come to Pace know and love their child and bring specific knowledge and understanding; but we are all aware that we need the help and support of many others if our, and other parents', children too are to be safeguarded. We cannot do it alone. So these are some of our recommendations that arise from the work of Pace and specifically from this report. We as parents want to work as equal partners bringing what we have as a key contribution to the important role of others in a relationship of mutual respect. Pace is already working on these issues but we offer this invitation to other relevant agencies throughout the country to understand and develop the perspective which this report brings. We are very aware that in some areas some of these are already in place – but we ask that they be addressed throughout the country.

1. More should be done by all agencies to warn parents about CSE before the child is truly entangled in it; particularly schools when this is not already happening. Raising awareness of the early signs of CSE should be in all national and local statutory CSE early prevention strategies.
2. The remarkable contribution that parents make to safeguarding needs to be more generally recognised, respected and valued by all other agencies.
3. The focus on the cause of CSE should always be the perpetrators and not diverted to families.
4. Police forces which value and act upon the information given them by parents about specific instances of CSE have an extra tool in securing successful prosecutions. In addition, when parents have been involved in police training this has positively influenced understanding and should be implemented more widely.
5. When social workers are open to respecting and seeing the potential of parents this can lead to far better outcomes in tackling CSE together. Because parents are often distraught, they may on occasion be awkward and disagreeable and that can be challenging, but more effective outcomes will be secured if a relational model of working is adopted.
6. The appreciation of parents for any worker in any organisation who listens, understands and values them emerges very strongly in this report. Statutory agencies should seek to enable such workers to stay with a parent for as long as it takes. Multi agency CSE teams should wherever possible include an independent parent liaison officer who respects parents and recognises the potential of their unique role in safeguarding.
7. More should be done to ensure that wherever possible the relationship between parent and child is maintained when a child is placed in residential care.

8. Agencies need to be more alert to recognising the risk that a sexually exploited child has become the mouthpiece of the perpetrator. Child-centred training and practice encourages child protection professionals to accept at face value everything children tell them. That may be entirely appropriate in some situations, but it does not take into account the effects of grooming, especially in older children and teenagers. Within grooming perpetrators train their child victims to repeat what they tell them, and they deliberately undermine the parent-child bond. By doing so, the perpetrators create division within the family, which serves to divert the attention of the authorities from themselves.
9. There needs to be far greater recognition that a child who has been groomed is at 16 not capable of making informed decisions and therefore adequate policies and support should be put in place.

Parents have come together to speak out from their lived experience and to call for our inclusion in working with others against CSE. We appreciate the improvements that have been made by services in many parts of the country. We want to be listened to and supported but we also want to be recognised in bringing something unique to the table: the love for our children whom we have lived with and known long before they were exploited and our determination to stay with them for the rest of our lives. We look forward to working with you as together we seek to bring Child Sexual Exploitation to an end.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Supporting families through the court process. A guide for police officers, intermediaries and witness support. Pace, 2012.  
And  
Working with the Police: The role of parents in child sexual exploitation investigations.  
Pace, 2014
- <sup>2</sup> The Relational Safeguarding Model: Best practice in working with families affected by child sexual exploitation. Pace, 2013
- <sup>3</sup> The Children's Society campaign - Seriously Awkward: How vulnerable 16 - 17 year olds are falling through the cracks. June 2015
- <sup>4</sup> CROP (now Pace) and Blackburn Engage: Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation Together 2009 - 2011. Pace, 2012



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