



Commission of Inquiry into the Child Safety System  
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**Submission by Project Paradigm, IFYS to the Commission of Inquiry into the Child Safety System**

Project Paradigm welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Commission of Inquiry into the Child Safety System.

We note that the terms of reference for these submissions are broad and relate to:

- a. Reforming the Residential Care System: Investigate models of care and the factors contributing to the growth and reliance on a billion-dollar residential care sector
- b. Fixing a broken system: reviewing the effectiveness of Queensland's child safety system to keep children safe.
- c. Safer Children: failures both systemic and policy that have impeded the ability of the Department responsible for the Child Safety portfolio (the Department) to provide support to families and protection to children at risk of harm in Queensland.
- d. Safer Communities: Evaluate the effectiveness of the Department as a corporate parent and whether it is able to meet community expectations around parenting.
- e. Reviewing Queensland legislation about the protection of children, including the Child Protection Act 1999 and Adoption Act 2009.
- f. Any other matter relevant to the inquiry.

## **Background**

IFYS had its inception as a youth shelter on the Sunshine Coast over 40 years ago. Much of the focus of its work in the early days was aimed at addressing what was referred to at the time as ‘opportunistic prostitution’ or ‘child prostitution’. In the early 1990’s the organisation was one of only 5 agencies state-wide, funded to provide detached outreach services to young people at risk across the Sunshine Coast region. Today IFYS has a service footprint that covers from the Gold Coast in the South to the far North of Queensland as well as involvement in a number of national initiatives aimed at addressing child sexual abuse and exploitation. The organisation delivers a range of specialist support and intervention programmes for children, young people and families.

Our vision is a national community that acknowledges, understands and values childhood by committing to the protection of children and young people through collaboration, advocacy and support.

Nationally, through our Project Paradigm Programme, we are focusing on prevention and intervention for children and young people at risk of or experiencing child exploitation by:

1. Building the capacity of frontline professionals and communities to be able to identify and respond appropriately to child exploitation through the development and provision of training and resources.
2. Contributing to the broader community of practice through research and advocacy activities.
3. Collaborating with stakeholders to achieve best outcomes for children and young people at risk of or experiencing child exploitation.

Fundamentally, our stance is that of ensuring that the best interests of the child is the primary consideration in all decisions captured within the proposed actions of the **Commission of Inquiry into the Child Safety System**. As it stands, Queensland’s out-of-home care system is not fit-for-purpose to support the needs of children and young people. The proposed items **must** consider our nations obligations as a signatory to The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Intervention efforts should be rights based, trauma-informed, age-appropriate, rehabilitation and outcomes-focused and considerate of individual factors that contribute to their behaviour.

Australia ratified The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in December 1990, committing to ensure that **all** children in Australia enjoy the rights set out in the treaty. These rights recognise children, and young people are unique and as such entitled to additional rights which recognise their specific needs to help them to thrive and achieve

their full potential. Special protection is afforded because of broad acknowledgment regarding their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. This includes an acknowledgement that children with offending behaviour are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community. They often have complex and intersecting needs that include cyclical histories of maltreatment and undiagnosed disorders. It is for this reason that they should be afforded every opportunity for healing, rehabilitation and restoration.

### **Defining out of home care in Queensland**

The Homeward Project (2023) defines Out-of-home Care (OOHC) as “arranged overnight care for children aged under 18 years of age who are unable to live with their families due to safety concerns”.

Children in OOHC are generally on care and protection orders, where legal responsibility for their welfare is held by a child protection department. This involves ongoing case management with the goal of achieving a permanent placement or reunification where suitable.

For some children OOHC is for as little as a few days, however for the majority of Australian children (82%) taken into care, it is at least for one year, with 41% in OOHC for over 5 years (AIHW, 2022).

In understanding the landscape of out-of-home care placements, the Queensland Government highlight a system under pressure, with ‘traumatised children languishing in residential care’, with 73 per cent of children in out-of-home care living in four or more homes during their time in care and more than half of children living spending more than five years living in these homes (Qld Govt, 18 May 2025). The types of care arrangements as documented by the Queensland Government Child Safety Practice Manual (2025) include:

- Family based care – foster care and kinship care
- Residential care - supported independent living, therapeutic residential care and Indigenous community residential care and family intervention services service
- Other entities – non-family-based care, mental health facilities, other private health facilities, service providers located interstate and accommodation support and respite services.

For the state of Queensland, the Queensland Government report that as of December 2024 there are 12,497 children living in out-of-home care:

- 2,212 Queensland children and young people were living in residential care including 116 children aged five and under.

- 4,173 Queensland children and young people were living in foster care and 6,112 were living in kinship care (Qld Govt, May 18, 2025).

The Honourable Amanda Camm raised in December of 2024, that the former government spent just shy of a billion dollars on residential care in Queensland the previous financial year, with costs calculated at \$1,360 per child, per night to live in a residential care home.

Industry experts' forecasts Queensland children living in out-of-home care to hit 4000 children and young people in the next three years, adding \$2.5bn to the department's budget (Nolan, July 30, 2025) suggesting that residential placement will exceed foster carer placement by 2028.

Recent media attention has also revealed that across Queensland there only 36, of the state's 146 residential care providers, who are licensed, with 110 unlicensed providers operating in the for-profit sector not bound by strict child protection laws, nor monitored or audited by state authorities (Chowdhure, July 23, 2025).

### **Defining child sexual exploitation**

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) remains a hidden problem. It is a type of child sexual abuse that is not consistently defined across Australian states (ECPAT, 2018; ECPAT 2012; Cameron et al, 2015). As the term straddles both categories and emerged in response to criticism of discourse around 'child prostitution', CSE becomes a complex, social problem that is difficult to define, and therefore to identify. In Australian discourse, policy, and practice, CSE is most frequently associated with the production, distribution, and possession of Child Exploitation Material (CEM), or is conflated with, or added to the broader categorisation of CSA, online exploitation, and abuse, and has been found to be a significant concern for children and young people who live in residential care (The Royal Commission, 2017). The Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People's Out of Sight Report (2021) identified that organised paedophile rings actively target children and young people in out of home care and an alarming 40% of children and young people who were absent or missing from residential care are sexually exploited, abused, and assaulted often by adult men (Commission for Children & Young People, 2021).

Whilst there is a strong focus on online non-contact offending, in person, community contact offending is occurring right across Australia. Often online and offline child sexual exploitation offending are intermingled and present in combination with each other. This process is multidirectional, perpetrators may use devices to initiate contact, entice young people away from their protective supports, use devices to perpetrate Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) offences, and arrange to meet up in person and also to control and manipulate young people to commit further offences against them or to procure others. Concurrently perpetrators may groom young people and then

transition to CSAM production. Neither exists in a vacuum, however legislation currently focuses on online dangers only.

Project Paradigm, who currently provides consultation and practice guidance to frontline staff across Australia and supports local multi-agency working groups have observed numerous cases where young people, both males and females, have experiences of CSE which capture both online and offline contact offending occurring simultaneously.

The relationship between online and offline has most recently been reported by Coen Teunissen and Sarah Napier (2023) who recently published through the Australian Institute of Criminology Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice, on the overlap between child sexual abuse live streaming, contact abuse and other forms of child exploitation. The pair analysed chat logs of seven Australian based men who had committed 145 child sexual abuse live streaming offences and examined the overlap between this offending, contact sexual offending and engagement of CSAM. Their research demonstrated travelling to offend against children, use of CSAM and CSA live streaming appear to be interrelated. This is certainly the case when you consider the media's reporting of childcare workers arrested and facing contact and non-contact offending charges.

#### **MEDIA REPORT**

**ABC, AUGUST 1, 2023**

*A former childcare worker is facing more than 1,600 child abuse charges. The [REDACTED] man, [REDACTED] is facing 1,623 charges for allegedly abusing 91 children in [REDACTED], between the years of 2007-2022. [REDACTED] Police intend to charge him with 68 counts of sexual intercourse with a child under the age of 10, 42 counts of aggravated sexual intercourse with a child under 10, 69 counts of aggravated indecent assault and one count of producing child abuse material.*

## **MEDIA REPORT**

**THE GUARDIAN, JULY 1, 2025**

██████████ childcare worker charged with sexual abuse offences as 1,200 children to be tested for infectious diseases.

██████████ police allege ██████████ man ██████████ sexually assaulted infants and children in his care at a ██████████ childcare centre.

██████████ health authorities are recommending that 1,200 children are tested for infectious diseases after a ██████████ childcare worker was charged with allegedly sexually abusing infants and children in his care.

Police on Tuesday confirmed that a ██████████ resident, ██████████ had been charged in May with more than 70 offences relating to eight alleged victims aged between five months and two years old.

The infants and children attended a childcare centre in ██████████ ██████████, which Guardian Australia has chosen not to name, and their families were notified last week of the alleged offending.

At present there is no nationally consistent formal definition for child sexual exploitation. In its absence, Project Paradigm draws from The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which uses this definition when in discussions about CSE.

### **Royal Commission states child sexual exploitation is;**

*"When a child is manipulated or coerced to participate in a sexual activity in exchange for, or the promise of, an incentive. This can include incentives such as food, accommodation, clothing, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes or money. It can also include incentives such as love, affection, or safety. Child sexual exploitation is a distinct form of child sexual abuse because of this notion of exchange or reward," (2017).*

CSE is a form of abuse that does not discriminate based on age, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Perpetrators will normally target children and young people based on vulnerability, sometimes through sophisticated, tech-facilitated, grooming techniques and often by exploiting the young person's attachment needs.

The relational aspect of CSE is seen as a major driver in the overrepresentation of children in out of home care experiencing this form of abuse (Victoria Commission for

Children & Young People, 2021), yet it is the experience of Project Paradigm that this particular cohort of young people (12 years and older) receive inadequate support from care and protection systems because their actions are inappropriately attributed to the motivation of the young people themselves often simply labelled as ‘risk-taking behaviours’, rather than recognising the sophisticated power and control dynamics created by the adults who are exploiting them.

The language and terminology around child exploitation often leads to the pathologisation of young people, implying they are somehow responsible for the abuse and crime that they are subjected to, normalising and minimising the child’s experience resulting in a lack of appropriate responses. Project Paradigm frequently observes language used across services that reflect this situation, such as labelling the young person as ‘promiscuous,’ contextualising the abuse as consensual, such as ‘she is a 14-year-old and has a 23-year-old boyfriend,’ and ‘they are putting themselves at risk.’ In each of these scenarios the adult or perpetrator and their behaviour is not the focus, whilst the child or young person is understood to be choosing to be sexually abused (Children’s Society, 2022).

Sexually exploited children are often misidentified and labelled in ways that distract from the reality of the abuse they are suffering.

This can include:

- placing them in the domain of harmful sexual behaviours;
- viewing them as being engaged in a consensual intimate partner relationship;
- And/or considering them to be in a domestic violence relationship.

This last category is a particular issue for young people aged 16 or 17, the legally determined ages of consent across Australian States and Territories. There is a misconception that young people can consent to a sexual relationship at this age, so practitioners focus their interventions on the behaviour of the young person. There is an expectation for young people to leave or cease the ‘relationship’, with professionals struggling to identify them as victims of abuse if they cannot extricate themselves from the situation. This experience mirrors that of victims of domestic abuse who have traditionally faced unrealistic and unsafe pressure to leave a domestic violence relationship with the emphasis of professional intervention on the victim (Meyer, 2011). The focus of intervention on the victim is an approach that distracts interventions from the actions and tactics of the perpetrator and seeing the exploitative interaction between victim and perpetrator as a ‘relationship’ is also a misnomer. Sexual exploitation is a highly lucrative activity (Laird et al., 2020) and can often be the motivator for the perpetrator rather than just for sexual gratification, which could explain the victimisation of boys in CSE as well as girls.

## **A NOTE ON CONSENT**

*The law in relation to sexual offences against children under the age of 16 treats the victim as being incapable of giving consent. There is a possible defense in a court of law if the victim is over the age of 12 and the accused can prove on reasonable grounds an honestly held belief that the child was over the age of 16. It is worth pointing out however, that when consent is viewed within the context of CSE the UN explicitly states the following: ...the term ‘sexual exploitation’ refers to all children up to the age of 18; issues of locally defined ‘age of consent’ are not relevant to the child’s right to protection (United Nations, 2001). It is also important to note that the range of grooming processes combined with power and control methods employed by perpetrators of CSE, render the young person incapable of identifying the fact that they are being exploited and therefore unable to give informed consent (Welsh Government, 2013). In Queensland for example, these factors are particularly important when considering child victims aged 16 and 17 because their cases are most likely to be dealt with as though they are adults under sub-sections 352 - Sexual Assault, 349 – Rape, and 218 - Procuring Sexual Acts by Coercion, of the Queensland Criminal Code 1899. Even when it can appear as though the young person is initiating the ‘relationship’ and they are old enough to consent to sexual activity, consent is provided based on informed freedom of choice and capacity. Professionals need to consider whether lack of choice, substance use, or potential power and control dynamics exerted by a perpetrator, are impacting on that young person’s ability to consent (Townson, 2019).*

Without defining and describing CSE, there is a continuing ‘child prostitution’ discourse that is reflected in the media, policy, and practice suggesting that because children may ‘gain’ something from a sexual encounter, they have exercised agency by deciding to engage in such activity. Furthermore, due to social and political constructs of victimhood, if children are considered less vulnerable and/or innocent (McAlinden, 2014) than their peers due to their behaviour or circumstances, they are deemed less deserving of help and are often blamed for the harm and abuse they suffer (Brown, 2015), (National Strategic Partnership on Child Sexual Exploitation, 2022).

Recent research undertaken by Larissa Christensen and Katarina Pollard (2022) regarding how CSAM offenders are depicted in the media, reiterates the media’s reluctance to use alternative terminology instead of inappropriate phrases like ‘child pornography’ or ‘kiddy porn’, impacting on how the public perceives the offending behaviour. It could also further trivialize and rationalize the offending by those offenders who already discount the harm of their offending.

### **Common characteristics of child sexual exploitation**

- control, coercion, intimidation, threats of violence, and violence
- associating with other children involved in exploitation
- suffering from changes in emotional well-being and/or behaviour
- misuse of drugs and alcohol
- appearing with unexplained gifts, money, or new possessions
- going missing for periods of time or regularly coming home late
- regularly missing school or education or not taking part in education
- having older romantic/sexual partners
- suffering from sexually transmitted infections, displaying sexual behaviours beyond their expected sexual development, or becoming pregnant

(NSPCC, 2025)

#### **CASE STUDY – QUEENSLAND SPECIFIC**

##### **COMMONWEALTH BANK EXECUTIVE CHARGED WITH PROCURING UNDER-AGE GIRLS FOR SEX**

*A senior [REDACTED] executive accused of trying to lure two teenagers for a sexual act has been sacked from his job and had his accounts frozen, a court has been told.*

*[REDACTED] sat stony-faced in [REDACTED] Arrests Court on Monday – days after his arrest by [REDACTED] detectives at the [REDACTED] Airport terminal – as he applied for bail. Both [REDACTED] and his co-accused, [REDACTED], walked from [REDACTED] Watch House on Monday afternoon with strict bail conditions...*

*On Monday, the court was told police alleged [REDACTED] – a married father of two who travelled frequently interstate – formed a “connection” with [REDACTED], a sex worker...*

*It is further alleged [REDACTED] was organising to use her services while in Brisbane in May but queried if she had any “younger friends” she worked with...*

*The teen girls, aged 14 and 15, and [REDACTED] allegedly attended the Sofitel Hotel, but [REDACTED] said it was not alleged the girls went up to [REDACTED] room.*

*(Antrobus, 14 July 2025)*

## **Missing Children and CSE**

Scott and Skidmore (2006) describe going missing in the context of child sexual exploitation as ‘the most immediate indicator of vulnerability’ (Sharp, 2012). It is well recognised that there is a link between children going missing and child sexual exploitation. When a child goes missing, this can be both a cause and a consequence of the child being sexually exploited (Youle, 2020). While reliable data is limited, the actual rate of children and young people who go absent or missing from residential care is greater than current reports and is significantly higher than that of children and young people in the general population (Victoria Commission for Children & Young People, 2021). The Out of Sight report (2021) reported in the 18 months to 31 March 2020, 388 warrants were granted each month in Victoria, on average authorising police to take children and young people who were absent or missing from residential care into ‘safe custody’. This equates to nearly one warrant per child or young person in residential care each month. The report draws attention to the strong correlation between significant numbers of children and young people going missing from care and harm they suffer through sexual and criminal exploitation. The report highlighted that the most significant causal factors for children going missing from care are a lack of perceived safety and positive human connection. The result of this is young people often seeking connection elsewhere, frequently leading to relationships that sexually or criminally exploit them.

The link between going missing and child sexual and criminal exploitation is not a new phenomenon. Research in the UK has long recognised that young people who go missing are often vulnerable to exploitation because of their own traumatic circumstances – history of abuse, emotional and physical neglect, breakdown in family or home relationships, domestic and family violence, emotional well-being and drug and alcohol misuse are some key examples (Barnardo’s, 2007). Research also highlights that children in out of home care tend to be overrepresented in data due to the additional vulnerabilities found to be present in their situations – attachment deficit, lack of consistent care, etc. - and the fact that authorities tend to be slow to act due to inconsistencies in how an absence or missing episode might be classified (NWG Network, 2015). The added vulnerability factors for children in residential care mean that this demographic is often targeted and groomed by perpetrators, both gang based and individual, because they are seen as an easy target (Hughes & Thomas, 2016). The perpetrators will work to pull the young person away from any protective people in their life, often under the guise of being an understanding ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ or adult. In gang related exploitation, it is not unusual for the young person to initially see a gang as a place of belonging (Shepard & Lewis, 2017). Once control and dominance are established by the perpetrators, the young person may then be forced or manipulated into having sex with ‘friends’ of the perpetrators and/or will be used to carry out street

related crimes, such as drug dealing or petty theft (UK Government- Home Office, 2019).

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia noted that child sexual exploitation (CSE) was a significant issue of concern for children and young people in residential care, as increasing rates of sexual abuse and exploitation are continually reported (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017).

## **CASE STUDY – QUEENSLAND SPECIFIC**

### **DISPARITY IN REACTION**

*In February 2024 a 12-year-old girl went missing from her family home on the [REDACTED] after telling her older brother she was going to the park nearby. She was groomed online by an adult male and persuaded to meet up with him. She was found 2 days later 35km away.*

*During that week, law enforcement, SES and members of the public carried out an extensive search including search parties, drones, broadcasting pre-recorded messages, scouring CCTV footage and releasing amber alerts via social media.*

*In contrast, that same week, Project Paradigm consulted on a case further North, where a girl (just turned 13) in out-of-home residential care was groomed online and reported missing. Her support workers had to fight hard to get the child classified as missing by police. The response they received was “she will turn up when she gets hungry, she has done this before”.*

*Following extensive enquiries by the support workers, it was discovered the girl was 120km away. Support workers requested a welfare check be undertaken by local police until they could get there to pick her up. This request was refused and instead workers were told the police had “more important matters to deal with”.*

*Finally, on return to her place of care the young person asked a worker to take her to get a pregnancy test as she thought she might be pregnant and subsequently disclosed that an adult male had sexually abused her while she had been away from her place of care. No drones, no search parties, no amber alert...*

*(10 News First, 9 February 2024)*

Queensland government has recently publicly launched an emergency audit to find hundreds of children who are ‘missing’ from state care who may be presently homeless or living in dangerous circumstances. In total, 780 children are ‘self-placing’ in a location unknown to the government. Children recorded as ‘self-placing’ lose access to government-backed support services and case management, making it hard to track their location (Chowdhure, July 23, 2025).

## **CASE STUDY – QUEENSLAND SPECIFIC**

*ABC News - ‘Safety’ check with a child sex abuser.*

*The story of ██████████, who was under the care of the Queensland Child Protection Department at age 14. While living in residential care homes for children in state care, she is preyed on by men selling the promise of drugs and counterfeit love.*

*In April 2021, a senior worker at one of the homes, ██████████, repeatedly reached out to a man in his 40s who was known to sexually abuse ██████████*

*The texts, sent across 10 days to ██████████, instructed:*

*“Hello please tell ██████████ to call me so I don’t have to call the police.”*

*██████████ mother ██████████ had for months alleged to the police, the department and ██████████ that ██████████ was raping her child...the department explained the inappropriate text exchange as a safety check.*

*A review by the department said ██████████ had identified ██████████ to be her “boyfriend”, and that part of a safety plan “is to contact all people that may have regular contact with the young person to locate them”.*

## **Child Criminal Exploitation**

The over-representation of child protection-involved children in youth justice has been a longstanding concern in Australia however there is little discourse regarding child criminal exploitation as a standalone issue. At present there is no accepted definition, and this terminology is often conflated with issues of online child sexual exploitation, overlooking other means by which children are exploited by adults. Broadly speaking there is negligible acknowledgement of the criminal manipulation of such children, apart from some limited legal debate about coercion, vulnerability, and culpability as opposed to the UK where vulnerable children and their connections to gangs and drug trafficking has been clearly identified as a national priority. Susan Baidawi and colleagues released a paper in 2020 regarding criminal exploitation of child protection involved youth for the Children and Youth Services Review. In nearly one-half of the key stakeholder consultations, participants spontaneously described criminally exploitative relationships between crossover children (who experience involvement across both child protection and youth justice systems) and adults.

The phenomenon of crossover children being “exploited by adults” was raised most frequently by child protection and youth justice professionals, and a range of stakeholders across community-based welfare, education and cultural programs and services. Conversely, judicial officers, lawyers and police less commonly outlined this phenomenon - though some police and magistrates did raise the topic of CCE (Baidawai et al, 2020).

Liana Buchanan, Commissioner for Children and Young People in Victoria is quoted directly as saying, ‘the figures in Victoria shows residential care acting, too often, as a pipeline into the criminal justice system for the state’s most marginalised children,’(LegalAid,2023) a sentiment echoed by the Queensland Family and Children’s Commissioner, who found children and young people in care are unnecessarily exposed to police while living in residential care and being criminalised as a result of police being called in response to actions that would not be treated as criminal in a family home leading to the establishment of the *Joint Agency Protocol to Reduce Preventable Police Call-Outs to Residential Care Services*.

The protocol aims to facilitate collaboration between police and residential services to provide a coordinated and trauma-informed approach, providing guidance to residential care workers and the police about how to best respond to children in residential care’s behaviour in a manner that is consistent with therapeutic care (Colvin et al, 2020).

The United Kingdom recognise the need to identify and support children and young people who are being exploited, and advocacy groups urge for victimised children to be treated as victims of exploitation rather than criminals by statutory agencies (Children’s Society, 2021). Child criminal exploitation is not defined in UK law, though the UK Government’s Serious Violence Strategy defines it as occurring where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity:

- in exchange for something the victim needs or wants
- for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator
- through violence or the threat of violence

In the UK, the term ‘County Lines’ is frequently associated with the issue of criminal exploitation. The term refers to criminal behaviour and process associated to organised gangs and criminal networks who are involved in exporting illegal drugs in and around the UK. These organised groups often use dedicated mobile phone lines or other forms of a ‘deal line’ and are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store drugs and money. Coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons are used in this process (Definition taken from the 2018 Home Office Serious

Crime Strategy). Children can be criminally exploited in other ways, such as theft, acquisitive crime, knife crimes and other forms of criminality and exploitation. Children as young as 12 years old have been exploited into carrying drugs for gangs. This can involve children being trafficked away from their home area, staying in accommodation, and selling and manufacturing drugs (NSPCC, 2019).

The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Recent research in Northern Ireland has pointed towards children being coerced into joining paramilitary groups, groomed, coerced, and exploited, often not recognising their victimhood (McKinstry, 2023). Another form of child exploitation is the recruitment of children to move the proceeds of crime (as cash or through banking transactions or purchases) on behalf of organised crime groups and fraudsters. These victims are sometimes referred to as ‘money mules’, or ‘financially exploited children’ (UK Government Home-Office, 2019).

Any child can be a victim of child criminal exploitation, not just those who are known to social care or local authorities. But risk factors include:

- neglect or abuse
- not having a safe and stable home
- poverty
- social isolation or other social difficulties
- connections with people involved in gangs or crime
- disability
- mental health issues
- alcohol or drug problems
- being in care
- being excluded from mainstream education

Barnardo’s (2021) identify a need for all professionals who support children to understand child criminal exploitation and reframe children as victims of exploitation not criminals. Barnardo’s has made several key recommendations regarding this to the UK Government including creating a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation and placing a requirement on local areas to specially tackle CCE and serious youth violence (Barnardo’s, 2021).

Barnardo’s reveal that several Serious Case Reviews, where a child has died or come to serious harm, have illustrated that children who experience CCE, knife crime and/ or gangs are often passed from service to service without meaningful engagement. The

Serious Case Review into the fatal stabbing of a 15-year-old boy known as 'Archie' in Sheffield in 2018 contains a list of failings by authorities to protect him from harm. Agencies were too slow to act, information was not shared, youth engagement was abruptly ended, and the list goes on. 'Archie' is just one of many children not being seen as victims and not being protected from further harm or harming others (Sheffield Children Safeguarding Partnership, nd).

### **Intersection with homelessness**

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics, on any given night, around 45,000 young Australians under the age of 25 are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Organisations working to end youth homelessness are concerned about the current state of the problem, identifying that many young Australians don't have a safe place to live on any given night (Houlbrook-Walk, 2023). Young people who are homeless are particularly vulnerable to child sexual exploitation. Many of the risk factors associated with homelessness are also associated with sexual exploitation (McDonagh, 2011). Perpetrators use an imbalance of power to control and sexually exploit young people. Power imbalances may be due to a range of factors, for example due to the young person's age, gender, sexual identity, cognitive ability, social status or their access to economic and other resources, including a place to stay (Department of Education, 2017). Often perpetrators use emotional connection as a way to gain trust of young people who are socially isolated and have limited support networks (Homeless Link, 2019).

#### **CASE STUDY – AUSTRALIAN SPECIFIC**

##### **PROJECT PARADIGM CONSULATATION**

*A young female was targeted prolifically by an adult male where she was harboured away from her home and coerced to remain missing from care for approx. 5 weeks. During this time, it is believed that young female person was exposed to daily sexual and physical assaults, exposed to other adult males for the purposes of sexual exploitation, provided illicit substances and criminally exploited to undertake fraudulent bank transaction activity and car thefts by the person of interest. Young female continues to be targeted by adult males for sexual exploitation daily on online social media applications and is regularly lured to meet with these adults in person. Young female person is pulled away from safety and toward these unsafe connections as a means of obtaining substances and to feel a sense of connection and belonging. During these interactions, she is often provided with illicit substances and/or money in exchange for sexual acts.*

The hidden and unstable nature of young people's homelessness increases their dependence on others for accommodation, placing them at greater risk of sexual exploitation. While this may be seen as an 'exchange', the young person's choice is constrained, and the situation is exploitative and non-consensual (DePaul, 2017).

### **CASE STUDY – QUEENSLAND SPECIFIC**

#### **PROJECT PARADIGM CONSULATATION**

*A young 12-year-old male reported as being missing and being in a major Australian city by police. When located, young male person stated he had been sleeping on the streets for the past 3 days with his older 15-year-old male friend. Both children frequently visit the city and sleep rough. Both children are taking ever increasing risky behaviours with an escalation towards criminal activity and police attention. Young male person is hanging out at various train stations begging for money or drugs.*

As previously mentioned, parliamentary attention is presently being focused on locating 780 vulnerable 'missing' children from Queensland state care, but young people who are exiting the out-of-home care system face significant vulnerabilities and challenges transitioning into independent living especially in the context of stigma, financial instability, housing availability, and limited social supports. Research reveals that within four years of leaving out-of-home care, 54% of young people face homelessness (AHURI, 2021)

In 2021, CREATE Foundation interviewed more than 300 young people, aged 18 to 25, from out-of-home care origins and found nearly half had to leave their carer's household when the care orders finished. The organisation, which represents young people in out-of-home care, found the cohort was increasingly coming into contact with the justice system, was less likely to finish year 12 in school, met with stigma and low expectations and were at greater risk of homelessness.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Tomoya Obokata, learned that children and young people who are placed in childcare systems can be subjected to trafficking and exploitation both during and after exiting such support systems. In the same way as other vulnerable populations to contemporary forms of slavery, criminal actors, including gangs and organized criminal groups, are known to actively recruit persons experiencing homelessness. The Special Rapporteur is concerned by the fact that family members, friends or acquaintances of persons experiencing homelessness, private businesses, as well as local and religious leaders, are often involved in the recruitment of persons experiencing homelessness, including children and young people in street situations. Such individuals and groups entice them

with the promise of jobs, accommodations or other necessities and later coerce or deceive them into situations of sexual or labour exploitation (United Nations, 2023).

Despite the problem warranting stronger responses due to its global significance, the extent and prevalence of CSE in residential care is still difficult to establish due to poor and inconsistent data collection (Commission for Children and Young People, 2015, p. 11). The lack of information reflects a combination of under-reporting, the inconsistency in definitions of child sexual assault across jurisdictions, and problems relating to discrepancies in the recording of disclosures (Death, Moore, McArthur, Roche, & Tilbury, 2020).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

As stated, our stance is one of ensuring that the best interest of the child is the primary consideration in all decisions captured within the proposed actions of the Review of Systems Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

### **1. Defined Language**

It is the view of Project Paradigm that given the significance of this review, the adoption of a formal, nuanced and consistent definition for child sexual exploitation and abuse is undertaken first and foremost.

Such a move would support the adoption of the specified recommendations of The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 12.14 and 12.15.

#### **Recommendation 12.14**

All state and territory governments should develop and implement coordinated and multi-disciplinary strategies to protect children in residential care by:

- a. identifying and disrupting activities that indicate risk of sexual exploitation
- b. supporting agencies to engage with children in ways that encourage them to assist in the investigation and prosecution of sexual exploitation offences.

#### **Recommendation 12.15**

Child protection departments in all states and territories should adopt a nationally consistent definition for child sexual exploitation to enable the collection and reporting of data on sexual exploitation of children in out-of-home care as a form of child sexual abuse.

## **2. Multidisciplinary Teams and Information Sharing**

To respond effectively to Child Sexual Exploitation, we are seeking the child safety system to formally enshrine policies and procedures that supports transparent and efficient multi-agency and integrated working in the space of child sexual exploitation. Research clearly articulates the advantages of close working arrangements which include sharing expertise; establishing shared expectations and approaches; facilitating information sharing to safeguard young people; sharing resources; and sharing intelligence to disrupt perpetrators.

## **3. Supported Training for Frontline Professionals**

Project Paradigm would like to see the child safety system validate the need for continuous professional development for their staff in the context of attending endorsed child sexual exploitation education programs to ensure that all frontline professionals working closely with children and young people are trained to effectively identify the risk indicators and vulnerabilities to CSE and know how to effectively report their concerns.

## **4. Endorsement, support and investment in existing sector solutions**

Project Paradigm in collaboration with PeakCare and the Queensland Family and Children's Commissioner developed the *Safe and Sound in Queensland: Enhancing safety for young people who go missing from care*, a resource aimed at supporting frontline professionals to provide best practice responses for children who go missing from their home or place of care. Anecdotally, this resource has received extensive praise for building practitioner confidence, knowledge and skill as well as being a relational tool, to help support relationship building between the young person and the worker.

The Project Paradigm team would like the child safety system to support and invest in initiatives already in play in the sector that are innovative, and solution focused, especially those that place the rights of children at the centre.

## **5. Implementing appropriate language across the sector**

The Project Paradigm team are seeking the implementation of existing international resources that encourage the eradication of victim-blaming language in the context of child sexual exploitation and abuse.

We are asking for the adoption of The ECPAT International *TERMINOLOGY GUIDELINES: For the protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2025)* resource to be formally acknowledged by Queensland State Government, adopted broadly and linked within the Queensland Government online Child Safety Practice Manual (26 August 2024).

Victim blaming language refers to any language that implies, intentionally or unintentionally, that a victim is responsible for the abuse they have experienced, and this resource articulates the role of language as crucial in influencing the perspective and practice of any professional it is shared with.

## **6. Adopting a register for out-of-home care and early childcare workers**

Project Paradigm seeks the implementation of a register for workers in prescribed roles that would be overseen by an independent supervisory body with powers to suspend and exclude professionals and workers from working with children/vulnerable people, for misconduct issues that meet the ‘balance of probabilities’ threshold for substantiated harm/abuse. Such a register would provide an additional layer of due diligence aimed at preventing harm to children and young people in social and education care settings. Such mechanisms already exist in international jurisdictions.

In Wales, UK, Social Care Wales (SCW), oversees and monitors the registration, regulation; standardisation; accountability and professional identity of the profession of residential childcare workers and affiliated qualified workers.

SCW regulations stipulate that any paid social care workers (including residential childcare workers) must be registered with Social Care Wales before they commence work. Failure to undertake registration and the associated compliance processes, including ongoing continuous professional development, required qualifications and the maintenance of good character, prohibits individuals from working in any of the prescribed roles.

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