



PROJECT PARADIGM[®]

WORKING TO END CHILD EXPLOITATION

Commission of Inquiry
Child Safety Systems
Reply Paid 89453
Brisbane QLD 4000

Submission by Project Paradigm, IFYS to the Child Safety Commission of Inquiry – Corporate parenting and the link between the child safety and youth justice systems.

Project Paradigm welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry and will do so by referencing our unique lens regarding the issue of children and young people in residential care and youth crime, which we believe has the ability to value add to the current commentary, drawing on a combination of practice experience, first-hand observations and insights. Through our work, we provide professional training, supervision, and practice guidance on a range of critical child protection related issues with a specific focus on supporting children and young people exploited sexually and criminally in the community.

With this in mind, it is our position that the points we will raise sit within the context of, and in accordance with the terms of reference for the inquiry, set out below.

Terms of reference:

The Commission of Inquiry into the Child Safety System invites submissions from the public in respect of the Department's role as a corporate parent and the link between the child safety and youth justice systems.

- Is the Department an effective corporate parent and is it meeting community expectations in relation to parenting, particularly in respect of:
 - children and young people who are placed in non-family-based (residential) care;
 - young people in care who are known to both the child safety system and the youth justice system;
 - young people who are transitioning out of detention into care and care into adulthood?

What is the link, if any, between the child safety system and the youth justice system? For instance, do elements of the child safety system operate as a 'feeder

system' to the youth justice? What are the factors contributing to children in care entering the youth justice system?

- Experiences of information sharing, communication and engagement between government agencies in relation to 'dual order' youth offenders.
 - The experiences of non-family based (residential) care workers, foster carers and kinship carers in dealing with children in care who are known to the youth justice system and/or youth offenders.
 - The experiences of children in family-based and non-family-based (residential) care who have also been in the youth justice system.
 - The experiences of children in family-based and non-family-based (residential) care of contact with other children in care who have also been in the youth justice system and the impact of that contact upon their experiences in care.
- The experiences of community members who have been:
 - victims of crime at the hands of young people who were in care at the time of the offending;
 - negatively affected by the conduct of children and young people housed in non-family based (residential) care facilities in their neighbourhoods.

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 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.

'Youth Crime' in Queensland

With recent youth crime narratives saturating media and public discourses, there has been a particular focus correlating children who are living in out-of-home care arrangements across Queensland in connection with the perceived 'youth crime epidemic', particularly across North and Central Queensland regions. Vigilante groups have at times reportedly targeted suspected young offenders residing in out-of-home care, potentially placing children and their workers at imminent risk (Smee, 2023).

The criminalisation of children living in out-of-home care in Queensland has previously been the subject of scrutiny by the Queensland Family & Child Commission (QFCC) in 2018. The subsequent findings at that time highlighted a well-established nexus between children's involvement with child protection services, overrepresentation in the youth justice system and likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system as an adult. The 2018 findings from the QFCC study also drew attention to the fact that children living in out-of-home care, and especially residential care, often have complex needs resulting from a history of trauma, due to abuse and neglect, including exposure to substance abuse and domestic and family violence. Most commonly these highly traumatised children are placed together in a home supervised by youth workers with no access to funded therapeutic support (McKibbin et al, 2023).

Perceptions regarding the causal factors leading to the criminalisation of children and young people in out-of-home care, as reflected in academic commentary (Gerad et al 2018), has identified the care environment itself, use of police as a behavioural management tool, deficient staff training and inadequate policies and funding to address the over-representation all as potential contributing factors. These factors, combined with the legacy of Australia's colonial past, were a particularly potent source of criminalisation for Aboriginal children in care. Whilst research does support the notion that 'at risk' children are more likely to commit criminal offences than those placed in foster care (University of Adelaide, 2017), many factors contribute to this correlational relationship highlighting that this situation cannot be understood or viewed one dimensionally.

The Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People highlighted the complexity of children living in out-of-home care environments within their *Out of Sight report, a systemic inquiry into children and young people who are absent or missing from residential care* (2021), stating that children and young people often enter care having endured some of the worst experiences imaginable: sexual and physical assault, neglect, emotional and psychological abuse, transience, and displacement. Without proper support within the care system, children and young people can go to dangerous lengths to try and find connection and belonging outside care, frequently putting them at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation. The report highlights an acknowledgment of a chaotic, pressured, and uncaring social care system where first and foremost, children and young people need to feel safe and loved.

Experts confirm that young people living in residential care are more susceptible to all kinds of exploitation due to their complex abuse histories with perpetrators seeking out young people who experience social isolation or marginalisation, especially those who have experienced neglect, physical or sexual abuse, lack housing stability or a safe home environment, social isolation, economic vulnerability, living with a disability, have mental health or substance use issues and also those who may be excluded from mainstream education (Home Office, 2018), (Family and Community Services, 2016, p. 8).

The number of children across Queensland in residential care has surged. As of December 2024, there were more than 2,200 Queensland children placed in residential care. There are 6,112 children who are placed with a kinship carer, or someone related or known to the family and 4,173 that are living with foster carers (Loftus, 2025), figures that exceed the national average, (QFCC, 2025).

A Queensland Government Census undertaken in 2024 of more than 3,000 children in care found that children who were entering the out-of-home care system had suffered significant trauma:

- 11% had been sexually abused
- 46% had been physically abused
- 83% had suffered emotional abuse
- 88% had been neglected
- 68% had been exposed to domestic violence
- 69% had experienced three or more abuse types

And those living in residential care have significantly higher needs than those in foster or kinship care:

- 42% have limited to severely limited intellectual functioning/developmental delay
- 51% have a diagnosed or suspected disability
- 40% have a diagnosed or suspected mental illness
- 48% have extreme instability/extreme emotional responses that limit functioning
- 44% self-harm now or in the past
- 22% have attempted suicide
- 61% have been excluded or suspended from an education facility in the past
- 52% have poor social skills/disconnected

Almost a third of children in care have unmet support needs in relation to their mental health and two in ten have unmet needs in relation to their disability (Queensland Government, 2025).

In Australia, recent research on 'crossover' children - those involved in both the youth justice and child protection systems - found that while robust prevalence data on this issue is lacking, stakeholders working with this particular cohort, regularly identified criminal exploitation as a concern (Baidawi et al, 2020). The research noted that children and young people 'in residential care and those with

neurodiversity were identified as particularly vulnerable sub-groups, while sexual exploitation and substance abuse often featured as facilitators of criminal exploitation for 'crossover children'.

Project Paradigm are very concerned about the discourse portraying these vulnerable children as simply 'offenders' within the current popular narrative of the 'youth crime epidemic'. Such discourse is seeing increased calls for stronger punitive measures with an omission in the dialogue recognising the unique juxtaposition of child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE) for children living in out-of-home care arrangements.

Through this submission, Project Paradigm seeks to broaden the Commission's knowledge of this issue, in an attempt to ensure that proposed initiatives recognise and are empathetic to, the unique experiences of children in out-of-home care or in contact with the child protection system.

What is child sexual exploitation (CSE)?

The United Nations says...

Sexual exploitation means any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation of another. It includes but is not limited to exchanging money, employment, goods or services for sex. This includes transactional sex regardless of the legal status of sex work in the country. It also includes any situation where sex is coerced or demanded by withholding or threatening to withhold goods or services or by blackmailing. (UN, 2025)

CSE is a form of abuse that does not discriminate based on age, affluence, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Offenders are deceptive and manipulative, targeting children and young people in effective ways, ensnaring, isolating, and controlling away from families and support networks, without people to look out for them or recognise the signs that they are being exploited 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.

In recent years the issue of CSE has become a prominent problem for many international jurisdictions to address. Some governments on the World stage have made combatting the issue a major priority, citing it as a "national threat" (Cameron, 2015). Others refer to CSE as a "top priority" (Dutton, 2018).

In 2023, United Nations Special Rapporteur Mama Fatima Singhateh conducted an official visit to Australia. Presenting her findings in 2025, she expressed concern that certain vulnerable populations are at a higher risk of exploitation and inconsistent oversight of children placed in out-of-home facilities. Such children, she states, "are often at risk of assault, sexual exploitation and abuse, frequently by adult men,

including by organized paedophile rings that actively target children and young people in residential care. Young people are also at risk of abuse by predators who single out missing children as victims. Children in out-of-home care facilities are open to influence by peer circles and may be offered drugs, money and other incentives to leave the care facilities. In such circumstances, sexual abuse and assault are common occurrences, and the harm to First Nations children and young people is compounded," (UN, 2025).

Australia does not currently have a consistent national definition for CSE making it difficult for practitioners and agencies to effectively identify, monitor and respond (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). Much of the discourse and language relating to CSE within a social policy and law enforcement context, focuses on online grooming or child exploitation material (CEM), both of which, while important issues, distract from CSE that takes place physically in the community (Townson, 2019).

Despite the lack of consistent definition, there is broad acknowledgement and recognition of a definition in use by The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), which states;

"Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse that occurs when an individual or group attempts to or succeeds in coercing, manipulating or deceiving a child into contact or non-contact sexual acts:

- a) in exchange for something including, but not limited to, money, gifts or accommodation or less tangible goods such as affection or status, and/or*
- b) for the financial advantage, increased status or other reward for the person/people exploiting the child.*

A child over the legal age of consent may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual act appears consensual."

A lack of consistent definition also allows for victim blaming, labelling discourses around child sexual exploitation and vulnerable young people to perpetuate. Overseas jurisdictions have found that adopting a clear definition better supports solution focused approaches to disrupting abuse and criminal behaviour, while ensuring that public discourse around this issue is shaped in a trauma informed way. This in turn helps uphold a children's rights approach, and encourages a collective, community response that is proactive rather than reactionary.

The 2021 Victorian Commission for Children and Young People *Out of Sight* inquiry report highlighted concerning patterns of children and young people who were absent or missing from residential care, at risk of exploitation, abuse, assault, and rape. Stakeholders engaged in the inquiry described a range of scenarios, including organised paedophile rings actively targeting children and young people in residential care, through to *"the odd guy and his mates"* who opportunistically exploit and assault vulnerable children and young people, who are absent or missing from residential care. This is supported by 2021 research undertaken by the

Australian Federal Police which revealed that young people aged 13 to 17 in out-of-home care make up less than 1 per cent of the youth population in Australia and yet make up more than 70 per cent of missing youth reports. Of these, females and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth were identified as being most at risk and there were many cases of under-age girls associating with older youths known to police as well as numerous accounts of them being returned to care homes by unknown adults.

In the context of Queensland children missing from care, an emergency audit was undertaken in 2025 by the Queensland government to find hundreds of children identified as being missing from state-sanctioned residential care. A total of 772 children were identified to be missing from foster, kinship or residential care services. 144 of the cohort had been involved in the youth justice system in some way, with 51 on bail and 81 on a justice order. Some of those were simultaneous on bail and subject to a justice order (Fellows & Mulveney, 2025).

The issue of children and young people going missing and its intersectionality with the out-of-home care sector, criminal exploitation was clear within the Queensland's Child Death Review Board 2023-24 annual report. The report referenced the death of a homeless boy (unnamed). He spent hours unsupervised each day after being moved to a short-term residential placement, often returning in the early hours of the morning affected by substances. Before his death, the boy had four different primary placements, spent 12 nights in a watchhouse, and another nine in youth detention. "He was homeless, had no safe place to sleep, was living out of a cardboard box, had no place to shower, no clean clothes and no food to eat," the report says. "Adults would at times exploit the boy, providing him with drugs in exchange for undertaking criminal acts." (Barton, Davis, 2025).

A Bundaberg man has appeared in the Magistrates Court facing charges of knowingly participating in the "provision of prostitution of a child and aggravated supply of dangerous drug to a child". Many of the young people subjected to this abuse were from residential care and are victims of organised crime, manipulated due to their predisposed vulnerabilities and subsequently exploited by being used to provide sexual services to other adults in the community and/or used to facilitate the grooming of other young people. (Courier Mail, September 12, 2023)

As previously stated, the added vulnerability factors for children in residential care mean that this demographic are often targeted and groomed by individual perpetrators or organised gangs of perpetrators, because they are seen as an easy target. Perpetrators focus their recruitment efforts on places where these youths are likely to be, including homeless shelters and group homes (Dierkhising et al, 2020).

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. 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 (Townson, 2021/2022).

Through its work with young people and other organisations across Queensland, Project Paradigm and IFYS have seen many young people targeted and abused in this way, with some cases occurring on a significant scale in locations like Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton, Wide Bay, Ipswich and the Gold Coast.

The relational aspect of child exploitation 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, as though they are simply making poor 'choices', often simply labelled as 'risk-taking

THE 'THERAPEUTIC SYSTEM' WHERE KIDS FALL PREY TO CHILD SEX ABUSERS

Reporter: Katri Uibu, May 13, 2025, ABC News

A recent ABC News article reported on the story of Saachi Stoneley, under the care of the Queensland child protection department from the age of 14. While living in residential care homes for children in state care, she was preyed on by men selling the promise of drugs and counterfeit love.

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

The texts, sent across 10 days to Benjamin 'Benji' Stansmore, instructed:

"Hello please tell saachi to call me so I don't have to call the police."

Saachi's mother Siobhan had for months alleged to the police, the department and Be the Change that Stansmore was raping her child.

When Siobhan found out about this "inappropriate" exchange — and the worker's perceived reluctance to engage the police — she took it up with the department responsible for placing Saachi with Be the Change.

To her disbelief, the department explained it away as a safety check

behaviours', rather than recognising the sophisticated power and control dynamics of coercive control created by the adults who are exploiting them.

Project Paradigm are deeply concerned that whilst child sexual exploitation remains undefined, statutory agencies, support services and invested authorities will fail to

prevent, disrupt, and respond to children and young people effectively, minimising the existence of CSE or framing incidents as 'extreme outlying cases' outside of the expected norm.

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) are closely linked forms of abuse that often overlap, with perpetrators using similar tactics of coercion, manipulation, and violence to exploit children under 18. Both forms share similar perpetrator tactics, victimology, and shared indicators. Often children and young people are criminally exploited before they are sexually exploited, so recognition of both forms and their impact is crucial.

Criminal exploitation (CCE)


Baidawi et al poignantly illustrates that the exploitation of children through criminal activity by controlling adults or older youth, to effectively shield themselves from prosecution, is not a new phenomenon in her 2020 article, *Criminal Exploitation of child protection involved youth*. Baidawi et al cites Charles Dickens' famous 19th century novel *Oliver Twist*, which painted a grim picture of the existence of gangs of child pickpockets in the 1800's controlled by abusive adults as a prime example, often reflected in modern day times through the term 'Faganism', in reference to the adult perpetrator orchestrating the criminal activity. Whilst this example is a fictional representation it does reflect a broader societal practice whereby the exploitation, recruitment and control of children and young people into criminal activities exists.

Within the context of present-day circumstances, Project Paradigm consults weekly on cases of children and young people across out-of-home care and the wider community who are being exploited criminally, used to commit a myriad of offences ranging from less serious crimes (such as shoplifting) to serious motor-vehicle theft, drug dealing, assault, and sexual offences. We have seen cases where young people have been forced to steal cars that are intended by adult criminals to be used in higher level crimes such as robberies, an issue not unique to Queensland. Discussions through our work with NSW police in the Western suburbs of Sydney have demonstrated the use of similar methods by organised crime gangs there.

Research on child criminal exploitation is more developed internationally, particularly in the UK. The Howard League for Penal Reform (2020) found that:

“Children in residential care are targeted by people carrying out criminal activities because they have the kinds of vulnerability and lack of adult oversight that make them most susceptible to grooming and control.”

Criminally exploited children are often forced into transporting and selling drugs, manipulated into becoming indebted to their exploiters and are vulnerable to violence and exploitation from rival drug networks (Hudek, 2018). Additionally, children are frightened of repercussions, either to themselves or family members, if they are suspected of being ‘snitches’ or are suspected of, or found to be, trying to escape exploitation (Hudek, 2018).



Project Paradigm recently consulted on a case where a young person in residential care under the age of 13 had been found in possession of vapes and marijuana ‘provided’ to them by unknown individuals in the local community. The young person had been provided with a ‘shopping list’ of items they were required to steal. Items on the list included knives, clothes, vapes and food. This young person also had a history of being sexually exploited.

Serious violence can be normalised with children carrying knives as a warning to others or to protect themselves. The use of debt bondage can render children increasingly desperate in their attempts to pay off these debts or retain their status as they feel trapped in a situation where there is no help available to them (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). These kinds of scenarios depict what would be defined as a form of slavery under the *Commonwealth Modern Slavery Act 2018*.

With no formal definition of CCE, many statutory agencies lack local protocols and policies to adequately address the issue and even those that do may misinterpret or misconstrue the presentation of criminal exploitation when it is encountered. Project Paradigm are very concerned that in the current climate, with such a strong focus in



CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION OCCURS:

“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*
- *FOR THE FINANCIAL OR OTHER ADVANTAGE OF THE PERPETRATOR OR FACILITATOR*
- *THROUGH VIOLENCE OR THREAT OF VIOLENCE”*

(UK Home Office, 2019)

the common discourse being on the behaviours and actions of the individual child, vulnerable children are framed as hardened career criminals, and recidivist offenders, with little acknowledgement that there may be sophisticated exploitation by organised criminal gangs operating in the background.

Contemporary issues across residential out-of-home care

Project Paradigm concurs with the sentiments shared by Queensland Family and Child Commission concerning key findings contained within their 2025 *Buyer beware: How economic forces are shaping Queensland's residential care market* paper, key findings, which identify areas for concern that directly impact the out-of-home care space implicitly.

Growing Costs and surging numbers

Recent figures reveal the number of children in residential care has surged 85 per cent over the last five years, with Queensland Government documentation released by Premier, David Crisafulli revealing that the budget for residential care services for this financial year (2024-2025) is \$1.12 billion (Queensland Government, 2025), with forecasted costs to exceed \$7 billion by 2030, (QFCC, 2025).

Lack of available foster carers

Reports of financial hardship and growing departmental demands are forcing traditional foster carers away from the sector (QFCC, 2024). Carer retention is becoming a growing problem, with departmental demands "exceeding the volunteer position," including the requirement for visitations to take place during business hours, impacting the professional livelihoods of carers. Other issues identified include the loss of paid employment, lack of superannuation, issues impacting the ability for children and young people to engage in extracurricular activities with ease, abrupt transitions and changes to care arrangements, lack of support and understanding, a lack of transparency in information pertaining to the behavioural and support needs of prospective children and difficulty accessing additional supports like specialist medical intervention and treatment (Testa, 2025),(Blucher, 2025).

Unlicensed care providers

QFCC (2025) identifies that 80 per cent of current unlicensed care providers are for-profit entities, raising concerns about how providers are prioritising quality and children's safety. Unlicensed providers, received more than \$474 million in state government funding in 2024, which dwarfed the number of licensed providers. Unlicensed providers were not subject to regulatory standards, with some children reporting "disturbing" experiences, (Meacham, 2025).

Under-investment in the workforce

QFCC (2025) has identified a highly casualised workforce many with entry-level skills insufficient to manage the complexities of compounding needs and complexities.

Available Solutions

Project Paradigm in partnership with Queensland Family and Child Commission and PeakCare developed an initiative to improve the outcomes for children and young people who go missing from out-of-home care.

The Safe and Sound in Queensland: Enhancing Safety for young people who go missing from care toolkit provides suggested action steps for frontline workers and other professionals to utilise when young people they work with go missing and contains tips on what to do before, during and after an episode of missing occurs.

Last year, the initiative distributed over 1000 hard copy versions of the toolkit with the aim of ensuring that every provider of out-of-home care, licensed or unlicensed in Queensland gets at least one copy for each of their residential units and additional copies for use by their foster and kinship care services.

Project Paradigm, with input from young people created two simple and easy to understand pocket guides aimed at children and young people aged 12 years and over. The pocket guides include information about how to stay safe when running away from home and how to help a friend who has disclosed sexually assaulted.

Conclusion

It is clear that the link between child safety and youth justice systems is a complex and nuanced problem in Queensland, as highlighted by the examples provided throughout this submission. It is the view of Project Paradigm and IFYS, that the profound intersections between youth crime and the criminal and sexual exploitation of children are too compelling to ignore. On this basis we are calling on the Queensland Government to properly acknowledge the nuanced experiences of vulnerable children and young people in our communities, especially those residing in out-of-home care, when giving consideration to any proposed initiatives, with a specific focus on addressing the push and pull factors associated with CSE and CCE.

It is our view that the Child Safety Commission of Inquiry presents as both a critical window of opportunity and cross-roads whereby government can play a crucial role in making enduring changes to the out-of-home care system. Whilst acknowledging and addressing the unique vulnerabilities of children and young people where the issues of youth crime and child exploitation overlap. This includes improving awareness and resourcing educational activities for professionals and communities. Such community capacity building would create opportunities to intervene much earlier in the life trajectory of young people who might otherwise be susceptible to involvement in criminal activity and accompanying abuse and exploitation.

This submission was prepared for and on behalf of IFYS LTD and Project Paradigm by:

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Further submission by Project Paradigm, IFYS to the Commission of Inquiry into the Child Safety System, in response to specific follow up questions

Q.1 The origins of Project Paradigm:

Project Paradigm is a program of IFYS Limited. IFYS Limited (**IFYS**) at inception was a youth shelter on the Sunshine Coast over 45 years ago. Much of the focus of IFYS' 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, IFYS was one of only five (05) 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. The organisation delivers a range of specialist support and intervention programmes for children, young people, and families. In 2021 in recognition of the growing issue of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Australia and in response to the organisation regularly identifying cases of CSE through its work with young people, IFYS made the decision to proactively pursue activities aimed at disrupting CSE and supporting better outcomes for young people at risk by launching Project Paradigm.

Q.2 The importance and significance of defining Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) within the Australian context:

Australia does not currently have a consistent national definition for CSE making it difficult for practitioners and agencies to effectively identify, monitor and respond, a problem identified historically by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in 2016 and earlier in national research conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology in 1998.

In its findings, the Royal Commission also noted that the absence of a nationally consistent definition impacted on the ability to capture data relating to prevalence of CSE and accompanying key trends and themes, making it challenging for statutory agencies to be able to disrupt perpetrator activities and remove victims from harm sooner. Such was the significance of this issue during the Royal Commission's investigations, a key recommendation relating specifically to the need for a nationally

consistent definition was made (Recommendation 12.14). Much of the discourse and language relating to CSE within a social policy and law enforcement context, focuses on online grooming or child exploitation material (CEM), both of which, while important issues, distract from CSE occurring physically in the community.

It is our experience that the lack of a nationally consistent definition relating to CSE perpetuates victim blaming and labelling discourses. Overseas jurisdictions have found that adopting a clear definition better supports solution focused approaches to disrupting abuse and criminal behaviour, while ensuring that public discourse around this issue is shaped in a trauma informed way. This in turn helps uphold a children's rights approach, and encourages a collective, community response that is proactive rather than reactionary.

Q.3 How the residential care model and its dynamics help to 'facilitate' CSE and CCE and exploiting children in out of home care

Vulnerability factors for young people living in residential care mean that this demographic are often targeted and groomed by individual perpetrators or organised gangs of perpetrators, because these young people are seen as an easy target. Perpetrators focus their grooming and recruitment efforts on places where these youths are likely to be, including homeless shelters and group homes (Dierkhising et al, 2020).

In 2023, United Nations Special Rapporteur Mama Fatima Singhateh conducted an official visit to Australia. Presenting her findings in 2025, she expressed concern that certain vulnerable populations are at a higher risk of exploitation and noted inconsistent oversight of children placed in out-of-home facilities. Such children, she stated, *"are often at risk of assault, sexual exploitation and abuse, frequently by adult men, including by organized paedophile rings that actively target children and young people in residential care. Young people are also at risk of abuse by predators who single out missing children as victims. Children in out-of-home care facilities are open to influence by peer circles and may be offered drugs, money and other incentives to leave the care facilities. In such circumstances, sexual abuse and assault are common occurrences, and the harm to First Nations children and young people is compounded,"* (UN, 2025).

Perpetrators work to establish controlling relationships (friendship or romantic) 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. 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 – child criminal exploitation (CCE) (Townson, 2021/2022).

The ‘relational’ aspect of child exploitation 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, as though they are simply making ‘poor choices’, often labelled as ‘risk-taking behaviours’, when in actual fact there are sophisticated power and control dynamics of coercive control created by the adults who are exploiting them.

Project Paradigm are deeply concerned that whilst CSE remains undefined, statutory agencies, support services and invested authorities will fail to prevent, disrupt, and respond to children and young people effectively, minimising the existence of CSE or framing incidents as ‘extreme outlying cases’ outside of the ‘expected norm’.

CSE and CCE are closely linked forms of abuse that often overlap, with perpetrators using similar tactics of coercion, manipulation, and violence to exploit children under 18. Both forms share similar perpetrator tactics, victimology, and indicators. Often children and young people are criminally exploited before they are sexually exploited, so recognition of both forms and their impact is crucial.

Q.4 What specific interventions you would recommend that could be put in place at residential care services

- Clear definition of CSE and CCE adopted across Queensland Government, appropriate and encompassing of the models of CSE/CCE that are observed.
- Risk assessment tools and intervention work tailored to exploitation that are broadly adopted and integrated by relevant government departments (Child Safety, Police, etc) and all out-of-home care sector services.
- Endorsement of the *Safe and Sound* missing tool kit across all relevant government departments and out-of-home care providers.
- Intensive training for all Child Safety and general duties Queensland Police Service (QPS) staff to ensure that those responding to calls for service are aware of the indicators of exploitation and equipped with appropriate language to use.
- Appropriate interventions and trauma informed approaches to children at risk of or experiencing exploitation.
- Targeted, multi-agency working groups with a specific focus on supporting disruption of perpetrators and preventing both CSE and CCE – the current SCAN

framework has failed time and time again to adequately address this and is too generalised in its scope.

- Resources and training for government and non-government staff, with clear ongoing in-person training supported to ensure all staff are CSE/CCE informed.
- Considerations given to in house activities/individual support plans across residential care services to ensure that all children and young people are supported, exploring how 'unmet' needs are being currently addressed to reduce the effectiveness of grooming techniques used by perpetrators.
- Scrutiny of all out-of-home care providers regarding CSE/CCE prevention and protection measures.
- More robust recruitment processes for individuals working directly with young peoples at risk, with a strong focus on attracting a skilled trauma informed workforce across the sector.

Q.5 Delivery and take-up of the *Safe and Sound in Queensland* toolkit (and any data/metrics) in addition to detail about the Masterclass developed in partnership with PeakCare

As at the end of 2025, since its launch in April 2024 Project Paradigm had distributed **1200** hard copy versions of the *Safe & Sound in Queensland...* (Townson et al, 2024) toolkit to all licensed residential care providers and many unlicensed providers (this second cohort was difficult to identify in its entirety due to the Dept of Child Safety stating it was unable to share service provider details with Project Paradigm), as well as copies sent to multiple additional stakeholders involved in the safeguarding of children and young people across the state. During the period January to December 2025, **213** electronic copies had been downloaded via the Project Paradigm website. To date the *Safe & Sound* toolkit has not been formally endorsed by the any Queensland government department, despite anecdotal feedback from community stakeholders suggesting the Dept is signposting frontline works to it. This contrasts with the Australian Federal Police's public endorsement of the toolkit through their National Missing Person's Coordination Centre website.

Regarding the CSE Awareness Masterclass developed in partnership with PeakCare, we can confirm as at 23/02/2026 PeakCare had provided feedback stating that **892** people across the state had enrolled to undertake the module since its launch at the end of January 2026. Initial feedback from the people to have completed it suggested it had been very well received and was highly relevant to their work.

It would be our recommendation that the Commission of Inquiry contacts PeakCare for more up to date information relating to the module and its uptake by the sector.

Q.6 Any direct/indirect intersections with the Queensland Police Service (QPS) for your work including any referral points

QPS staff from CPIU, CIB, YCRT and general duties have previously attended our training in a range of locations, including but not limited to Ipswich, Toowoomba, Gympie, Charleville, Sunshine Coast and Hervey Bay. For context, we actively engage in discussions with staff from across the state on the issues of CSE and CCE, however there are no formal referral mechanisms or interagency formal endorsement.

Project Paradigm co-facilitate/chair a monthly CSE stakeholder working group, that seeks to support agencies with a specific focus on children and young people across the Sunshine Coast Region who go missing and/or at risk of child sexual exploitation. Attendees include Child Safety, Youth Justice, Health, CYMHS, relevant NGOs's across the region and youth outreach. Up until September 2025 we had attendance from QPS via the Youth Co-responder team and prior to this, we had CPIU representation until 2025 when QPS ceased to attend. Communication from QPS states that they no longer have capacity to attend these meetings. We continue to co-facilitate the CSE working group and send any intelligence across through the community mechanisms available.

It is our firm stance that the quality of cross agency discussions and intelligence sharing is critical in supporting children and young people across the region, something that is supported by recent research undertaken by Project Paradigm in collaboration with Queensland University of Technology (Rees et al, 2026).

Project Paradigm are in regular communication with the Interdiction for the Protection of Children team and the Forensic Behavioural Services Unit, Child Protection Offender Registry. Project Paradigm presented last year at QPS' Child Abuse & Sexual Crime Group Youth Technologies & Virtual Communities (YTV) conference in partnership with the Queensland Family and Children's Commissioner on, "*Missed Signs – Why focusing on children in out-of-home care who 'go missing' can help reduce incidences of child sexual exploitation,*" where we showcased a joint project with QFCC and Peakcare – *Safe and Sound in Queensland : Enhancing safety for young people who go missing from care.*

Project Paradigm is also involved in an advisory capacity with the Working to Increase Safety in Exploitation (WISE) pilot project being conducted by QPS across the Darling Downs region aimed at increasing the capacity of QPS School Support Officers to improve outcomes for young people involved in criminal exploitation.

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