



# Practitioner Briefing #4: Developing the multi-agency sexual exploitation (MASE) meetings to respond to peer-on-peer CSE

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## Introduction

In 2013 The London Child Sexual Exploitation Operating Protocol was launched to set out the procedures for safeguarding children and young people from Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). Included within this was the outline for a Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation meeting (MASE) that was to be adopted by all London boroughs to 'agree the operational activity to tackle CSE threats,' and run alongside existing safeguarding procedures ([London CSE Operating Protocol 2015](#)).

Historically CSE has generally been perceived as a form of abuse that is perpetrated by adults against children, with responses having developed around this model. As we learn more about CSE, we are seeing that peer-on-peer child sexual exploitation, when all individuals involved are under the age of 18, is far more prevalent than initially understood ([Beckett et al 2014](#)) ([Barter et al 2009](#)).

Recent police data reveals that over 55% of CSE cases known to London's Metropolitan Police Service feature peer-on-peer CSE ([MOPAC 2015](#)). Our work in sites sees that figure rise to 85% in some London boroughs. Given the prevalence of peer-on-peer CSE in it is useful to consider if current processes and procedures, including the MASE, require additional development in order to more effectively respond to peer-on-peer CSE.

## Background

The MsUnderstood Partnership (MSU) is currently supporting nine London boroughs to develop their response to peer-on-peer CSE and other forms of peer-on-peer abuse. As part of this MSU has observed MASE meetings across the boroughs and been involved in local and Pan-London discussions about its development.

The content of this paper was originally presented at a Pan-London Learning Seminar attended by MASE chairs and co-ordinators from 20 London boroughs. This accompanying briefing paper, aims to consider how evidence about peer-on-peer CSE and other forms of abuse can inform the development of the MASE, applying the MSU's contextual approach to explore the following areas:

1. The structure and remit of the MASE meeting
2. How the MASE shares information with other multi-agency meetings

3. Developing disruption options for peer-on-peer CSE 'perpetrators' under the age of 18

## **A contextual approach to peer-on-peer CSE**

Primarily it is important to remember that peer-on-peer CSE is just one form of abuse and violence that young people experience from their peers. Therefore, if we want to develop the most effective response, it is necessary to consider the wider context in which peer-on-peer CSE takes place, which includes:

- Understanding how peer-on-peer CSE relates to other forms of violence and abuse that young people experience, including gang and serious youth violence, teenage relationship abuse (if under 16), domestic abuse (if over 16), sexual bullying and harmful sexual behaviour ([Firmin and Curtis 2015](#))
- Identifying and the mapping trends to identify the environments/contexts in which peer-on-peer CSE and other forms of harm and abuse occur, including peer-groups, schools and neighbourhoods ([Firmin and Curtis 2015](#)) ([Firmin 2015](#))

## **Remit of the MASE**

A useful place to start this contextual thinking in relation to the MASE, is to look at the aims and structure of the meeting itself as set out in the guidance. These include safeguarding CSE victims, disrupting perpetrators, targeting locations and sharing information between relevant agencies and the local safeguarding children's board ([London CSE Operating Protocol 2015](#)).

Although MASE meetings operate differently across boroughs, MSU's site support identified a number of general trends, including how meetings often focus on discussing and safeguarding individual victims. This more traditional approach to safeguarding allows for discussions about individuals but can be limiting when we apply it to what we know about peer-on-peer CSE. This is primarily because we believe an effective response to peer-on-peer CSE requires an understanding of the harmful environments and contexts the exploitation is happening within ([Firmin and Curtis 2015](#)). For example, peer-on-peer CSE and other forms of abuse often involves and impacts multiple young people, who are linked via their peer-group, school or places in their neighbourhood e.g., use the same park or get the same bus. Therefore, if the focus of the MASE is primarily on individual victims it can **miss** the opportunity to:

1. identify all the young people affected
2. develop plans to intervene within the contexts and locations the abuse is taking place within, including with the wider peer-network
3. design disruption tactics that target all the young people involved and affected, including young people suspected of 'perpetrating' or facilitating peer-on-peer exploitation

Therefore, it is useful to consider how MASE meetings can adopt a structure that encourages thinking beyond individuals and moves towards identifying environments of concern – including identifying and mapping peer groups and locations where peer-on-peer CSE is occurring, so that multi-agency interventions within the environment can be planned and implemented.

### **Linking with other multi-agency processes**

In order to maximise on the opportunity to share information across agencies it is useful to consider the following:

1. Which agencies need to attend the MASE and what information can they share with the meeting? Particularly thinking about who holds information on the environments/contexts as well as information on individual victims. For example, who is best placed to provide information about trends related to schools and education providers? It maybe that the gangs team/youth offending service is best placed to provide information on peer-groups and locations of concern, supported by the community safety team.
2. How does the MASE link to other processes and panel meetings that discuss young people affected by peer-on-peer CSE other forms of peer-on-peer abuse - for example the MARAC, gangs panel meeting, YOS's Risk and Vulnerability Panels and education's Fair Access Panel. How is information currently shared between the various panel meetings and does anything need to be put in place to improve information sharing about concerns with peer-groups, schools and neighbourhoods?

### **Learning Seminar discussion:**

The group was asked to reflect on the current structure of the MASE meeting, the strengths and challenges of this and how much time is allocated to discussions about:

- safeguarding individuals
- discussing trends, peer-groups, venues etc.
- perpetrator disruption
- sharing information outside of the MASE

Participants' contributions revealed that, in most boroughs, discussing victims individually remains the primary focus of the MASE. However, some boroughs have begun to adopt a more contextual approach to the MASE, applying a greater focus on identifying trends between individuals' cases, perpetrator disruption and information sharing between agencies. The following were identified as reasons behind this decision to move beyond individual case discussions:

- 1. Identifying links between cases:** Through discussing individuals as stand-alone cases it became clear that a lot of the young people were linked and known to each other, including via their peer-group, school, where they live or socialise.
- 2. CSE in the wider context of peer-on-peer abuse:** The realisation that cases of peer-on-peer CSE are linked to other forms of abuse. Therefore, an effective response requires information sharing between agencies that hold information on gang and serious youth violence activity, reports of harmful sexual behaviour and sexual bullying in schools, domestic abuse, missing young people as well as CSE. Therefore, the MASE benefitted from representatives from community safety, gangs teams, education, social care and the voluntary sector attending and sharing information at the meeting.

Feedback from these boroughs was that they find it beneficial to discuss individual cases and action plans outside of the MASE and utilise the MASE to identify trends, share information and plan multi-agency interventions with the aim of disrupting the peer-on-peer exploitation and other forms of abuse.

### **Responding to under18's who abuse their peers**

As more is learnt about how to identify and support victims of peer-on-peer CSE, it is important that we also develop responses to identify and respond to young

people who exploit and abuse their peers, particularly given the prevalence of peer-on-peer CSE and other forms of peer-on-peer abuse in London.

It is important to note that there is currently a lack of national guidance about how to respond to Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) in young people (Hackett 2014, [NICE 2016](#)). This particularly impacts on cases and individuals that do not meet criteria for further police investigation/action, therefore the cases are 'no further actioned' (NFA'd). The question of how to respond to NFA'd cases was a specific concern raised by participants at the learning seminar and requires continued thinking beyond the remit of this briefing paper. This section of the briefing paper will focus on how the MASE can support this process and share some of the learning from local authorities supported by MSU.

In addition to protecting victims, the MASE is also tasked with targeting and interrupting perpetrators of CSE. The MASE guidance refers to a number of disruption tactics that can be applied, including criminal and civil orders and increased policing of particular venues and locations.

In addition to the material in the guidance, it may be useful for the MASE to think about the following questions in relation to targeting and interrupting peer-on-peer CSE

- **Information recording:** How does the MASE record information about young people suspected of exploiting their peers including those identified on MASE referral forms and in discussions? Is this information shared and if so with who? Can this information be used to identify harmful peer-groups, schools, and neighbourhood based locations?
- **Developing non-criminal justice responses and interventions - plans for cases that are NFA'd:** How can the MASE support the development of plans for non-criminal justice interventions, including interventions that target peer-groups and environments of concern? For example, can the MASE recommend professionals working with individuals co-ordinate interventions and focus their work on issues related to HSB including on sex, relationships, power, gender, entitlement, peer influences etc.? In addition, how can the MASE suggest responses to harmful environments, for example supporting a school/education provider to develop its approach to peer-on-peer CSE?

- **Co-ordinating a local response:** Increased understanding of the local peer-on-peer CSE profile is essential to ensure the most appropriate responses are developed for young people exploiting their peers as well as victims. This includes thinking about how the MASE collects and shares information about local trends to ensure that targeted and universal services and the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) are able to respond. This response could involve mapping services that can respond to peer-on-peer CSE in the environments that it is taking place, thinking specifically about services who can offer targeted support to peer-groups, services that work with and support schools and neighbourhood based services – for example detached youth work and community based organisations. How can these services work with specialist harmful sexual behaviour services to ensure that young people receive the right support?

#### **Examples of locally developed responses:**

In addition to the MASE meeting a number of London boroughs have developed separate multi-agency meetings that focus on young people, who are believed to be exploiting their peers. These meetings vary in format but includes:

- sharing and recording information about individuals of concern
- the use of analytical support to link this information to identify problematic contexts, including peer-groups, locations e.g., stairwells, parks or fast food restaurants, as well as schools or alternative education provisions.

As we have seen, local authorities across London are developing their own responses to peer-on-peer CSE, central to this process is the MASE meeting. This briefing is written to support the development of the MASE and guide partners as they think about its structure and remit, how the MASE links to other multi-agency processes and how it can support the development of interventions for all young people involved in peer-on-peer CSE.

If you have any queries on this briefing, or the training that accompanies it, please contact [london@msunderstood.org.uk](mailto:london@msunderstood.org.uk).

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