FIRST STEP LEICESTER
THE UNITED KINGDOM

How to provide support to boy and male survivors in order to deal with the emotional impact of sexual exploitation and abuse.
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The illustrations on the cover of this report depict environments and situations relevant to the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys in UK.

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONTEXT OF DOCUMENTATION</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHODOLOGY FOR THE DOCUMENTATION OF PRACTICE</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAIN CHALLENGES IN WORKING WITH BOY AND MALE SURVIVORS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPROACH OF FIRST STEP LEICESTER IN WORKING WITH MALE SURVIVORS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE RIGHT MATCH FOR COUNSELORS AND SURVIVORS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE HUMAN AND TECHNICAL RESOURCES NECESSARY FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION AND POSSIBILITIES FOR EXPANSION OF WORK</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONTEXT OF DOCUMENTATION

Given that programmatic responses to identify and meet the particular needs of boys are scarce, ECPAT International launched the Global Boys Initiative (GBI) to explore the sexual exploitation of boys and the services available for their protection. The Global Boys Initiative embarked on a series of research projects in countries around the world to shed light on understanding the scale of sexual exploitation taking place with boys, vulnerability and risk factors, barriers to disclosure and access to services, and what we need to improve prevention and response strategies. With the completion of the Initiative’s first phase of research, we can now speak with confidence on a number of pressing issues related to the sexual exploitation of boys, successfully consolidating what we know to influence and frame the agenda for programming, advocacy and new research. We know that the sexual exploitation of boys is a global problem and have gathered information on key drivers, risk situations, gender norms, barriers to access, among other things. We are now focusing on how to address these challenges and how to support boys and service providers in the fight against sexual exploitation.

In July 2022, we began a process of mobilising ECPAT members, partners and practitioners working with boys in different regions of the world to inform them about the GBI, explore possibilities for implementing the Initiative at country and regional levels, and capitalise on members and partners’ experiences in working with boys.

In discussions with First Step Leicester in the United Kingdom, several points of interest and learning were identified as relevant to the success of the GBI nationally and globally. These included the documentation of the work with boy and male survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation and how to provide assistance that helps the survivors in dealing with the emotional impact cause by these issues.

To this end, the aim was to document the working practices of direct assistance to boy and other male survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation in the United Kingdom in order to capitalise on these experiences, to encourage learning from other organisations in other countries around the world, and to feed into GBI’s practical knowledge – thus contributing to answering the global question: “how can we work with male children at risk or survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in a gender-sensitive approach?”
**INTRODUCTION**

First Step Leicester (FSL) is an organisation run for male survivors (aged 13+) and their supporters of sexual abuse and rape founded in 1997. It provides free confidential services to boy and man survivors of sexual abuse and their supporters living in the city of Leicester and the surrounding counties of Leicestershire and Rutland to enable survivors to make the “first step” towards feeling less isolated through increased personal power to make choices. FSL’s vision is a society where male survivors feel safe to share their experiences and are supported to move their lives forward.

FSL offers specialist counselling and emotional support for boys aged 13-18 years and to man survivors who have experienced child sexual abuse or other forms of sexual violence, including sexual exploitation. FSL also offers an advocacy service where survivors can be supported in accessing social protection, legal, reintegration, professional and education services, inter alia. The counselling sessions are offered weekly for free during a period of 6 months and support is provided in identifying more service options following this timeframe, including peer support groups at FSL or referrals to specialised services.

It is important to note that FSL seeks to provide a free, confidential and safe counselling service that does not represent a substitute to a full child protection case management process, but rather an additional instrument in the process of recuperation and resilience of boy survivors. The services provided to boys are therefore confidential and safe, and referral mechanisms are activated upon rigorous risk assessments of the individual situation of each child and where referrals could protect the child from an immediate or important danger to his full safety.

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1 The age is stated by the children during the assessment session.
2 Supporters are the families of the boy and man survivors, which can include parents, caregivers and partners.
METHODOLOGY FOR THE DOCUMENTATION OF PRACTICE

The documentation of this case study was realised with the use of an assessment and learning tool developed by ECPAT International’s Research and GBI’s teams. The assessment and learning questionnaire was used to guide the interview with the counselling service team and management. The questions included in the questionnaire aimed at collecting information on what practices seem effective according to the organisation in providing emotional support and counselling to boy and man survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation and what key elements need to be considered in addressing the complex and unique challenges that boys face in accessing support. The methodology was applied during a visit to the centre run by FSL, in which direct observations could be conducted on the physical space and resources.

The research conducted in the framework of the GBI tells us that boys do indeed face unique challenges in accessing support and protection services, with the lack of specific services available to them as one of the main barriers. This case study focuses therefore on how the availability of a free and accessible counselling service facilitates boys’ capacity to deal with the consequences and emotional impact of sexual abuse and exploitation. This case study also looks into the specific challenges that many men face when seeking out help on matters related to child sexual abuse, considering that gender norms prevent a high number of boys from reaching out for support faster.

“Men do talk in the right environment and in a safe space.”
Main challenges in working with boy and male survivors

The community of Leicester is unique as it represents a very multicultural community, in which themes related to sexuality, abuse and exploitation can be difficult to address – considering the beliefs and norms of many of the existing communities. In this respect, the majority of clients accessing the services of FSL still remain white boys and men, in spite of the service being accessible to all male citizens. The organisation is trying to increase its visibility amongst these communities in its efforts to ensure that all citizens are aware of the service and its functioning. Boys and men often times face challenges in knowing that there might be services available for them, and services known for issues of sexual abuse and exploitation tend to have a strong feminine outlook, preventing them from thinking that they can also access these services. This, in turn, affects the number of referrals that could be made towards FSL as well.

To mitigate the impact of these challenges, FSL developed a website that is accessible for boys and men and that provides the full spectrum of information on the services offered by its personnel, as well as materials to understand further the issue of child sexual abuse and its emotional impact. The website provides step-by-step resources and materials (articles, videos, publications, etc.) that guide the survivors through the process. This helps survivors in obtaining a deeper understanding of the services provided and the overall process of counselling. The website, defined as “soft masculine”, is inclusive and perceived as tailored for boys and men. The use of images of other men and boys has also been perceived as useful for clients who are searching for information on their situation, as it normalises that sexual abuse and exploitation can occur to males.

In regards to the specific services offered to boys (13+), the website also provides a section containing a step-by-step explanation of the specific services provided to boys and the process of intake in a language that is comforting and accessible to children.
Approach of First Step Leicester in working with male survivors

The vision of FSL is that each individual has the right to respect, to be believed, and to an environment that is safe. The counselling service of FSL is located in the centre of the city of Leicester and offers a “place where you can talk to someone who is not involved in your life, someone who has no preference concerning your decisions. First Step is not about telling you what to do or how to run your life, but it is about exploring your difficulties with another person”.

The centre where boys can access support and services run by FSL is a safe and calm space with a very discreet access to the premises. It is designed to create a relaxing and warm atmosphere, where boys and men coming in in situations of distress can feel that they can be safe. The centre has a reception and several counselling rooms, which are also designed to be confidential, safe and relaxing areas where clients can receive their sessions. The construction and distribution of the centre is aligned with the support provided by its personnel through the different areas. Considering that boy and man survivors come in nervous, stressed and anxious, the personnel of the centre ensures that the warmth of the design is accompanied by a human and empathetic attitude upon their arrival, as described below.

This centre is the place where clients come in to receive an initial assessment, following a first contact. Referrals of survivors can be done by individuals themselves, or by other child protection and protection system actors. The first contact with FSL normally happens via telephone. The first phone call is essential in the construction of rapport with the client and the personnel of FSL ensure that this initial contact is protected and creates a feeling of safety for boys and men, while encouraging them to visit in person:

- The first conversation over the phone is constructed over the right balance of listening to the survivor and avoiding putting pressure on them. Every individual person might have different approaches and feelings during the phone call, and the personnel of FSL acknowledges that. Some boys and men might want to fully disclose their experience, some others only to obtain more information on the services. The personnel focuses thus on ensuring that they are willing to listen to their experience and what they want to share, but do not need all the details of the situation during the call: “we do want to hear you, but do not want to retraumatise you”. This is important as it ensures that the survivors’ needs to share are not dismissed, but also that the first call does not represent another triggering experience;
- From the first call, the personnel uses a very soft tone in which they clarify who they are, reaffirm that they believe the survivor, thank them for calling and making this first step and ensuring that the conversation is confidential and safe;

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3 Survivors can call several times to receive more information on the services and the process before coming in for an assessment session with the staff.
- Many boys or men might not want to provide their real names during this first contact. The personnel then proceeds to explain to them what the services are about and how the process works, while ensuring that they can also provide a fake name along with their contact number. The personnel provides information for the initial in person assessment and confirms that sending of a text message confirming the location, the time and ensuring confidentiality. Confidentiality is ensured by using general language in the text message that does not refer to the specific assistance and issue of abuse and exploitation affecting the survivor;

- The call needs to be direct, yet compassionate. According to their experience, FSL personnel understood that they need to transmit a sense of who they are and inspire safety in survivors;

- It is also important to use language that does not remind the abuse or the violence. In general, the personnel avoids using the word “rape” with boys and men as it can be considered too strong and scary for survivors in that specific moment of initial contact.

For those interested, the booking of the in person initial assessment is done quickly and the reception of clients is done with warmth and empathy. When boys and men come in for their initial assessment, the levels of fear, shame and stress can be quite high. The reception personnel, along with the rest of the staff, ensure that they remember the name of the survivor, that they make them feel at ease and that they receive a good welcoming. This step is essential, considering that many survivors who walk in are very anxious and have been feeling like that for weeks or months. The most important step is to therefore to calm them down and make sure that the level of stress decreases and that they settle down. The personnel welcomes that with a comforting and warm attitude, offers a cup of tea or water, and might do some small talk to distract the focus from the situation, while waiting to receive the assessment.

“Removing yourself from the clinical side. Not asking for problems or data. If you remove that, and just focus on an empathetic understanding, it does make a difference”.

The initial assessment is also conducted in a light-touched manner and does not look into obtaining the details with the boy or man survivor. For many of them, this would be the first time that they are able to start processing what happened or to go through the experience of receiving this kind of support services, and this consideration is clear for the personnel of FSL when conducting the first assessment:

- Some survivors might not be able to understand what happened precisely to them as an offence, so that the staff reads out a series of questions to them to identify the kind of abuse that they suffered. The staff explains what they mean by each offence, but without going into details;

- Some survivors might also not be able to use words to describe the offence, and FSL developed a way where boys and men can tick boxes to fill the information on what happened in an easier way. This practice seems particularly effective with adolescent boys, who are often times embarrassed to disclose any kind of information on different aspects of their sexuality. In this respect, it has been noted that for some boys discussing about sexuality and experiences they are going through in their adolescence can be even more embarrassing than disclosing the situation of abuse or exploitation;

- Counselling might not be the right way forward for some boys and men, and so other options (including referrals) are provided.
“The delivery is important. Showing empathy and understanding that they are telling a stranger basically, it is essential. For them to come in it is a huge thing, and the staff needs to understand that”.

Avoiding going into details about the situation of sexual abuse and exploitation is essential and represents an important learning in the 25 years of work of FSL with survivors. Indeed, the service provided is not necessarily about reaching a full moment of disclosure of abuse, but rather on working on the emotional impact of the abuse or exploitation. Several survivors had already been through the mental health or protection systems, which can be hostile to some extent and retraumatising. Disclosure comes really down to the individual. Some survivors will disclose because they have the need to share what happened to them, while others might only mention it briefly to focus on the trauma and how it has affected their lives and relationships.

The difference and innovation in the service provided by FSL can be found in the fact that there is no need to disclose, thus creating a space for survivors to be able to do the work on the emotional consequences of the abuse.

“Some clients might come in and then we say that they do not need to disclose. We just say that we provide counselling but without having to talk about the abuse. It is all about the emotional impact and what they do or do not want to share”.

Another feature of the approach is the high threshold of confidentiality throughout the different steps of the assistance programme. Boys and men are not asked for details and the services are designed to respond to their specific trajectories and concerns in this sense. In addition, for those boys and men who are not stable enough to access the counselling programme, FSL offers a preliminary emotional support intervention.
While exploring questions of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, the personnel of FSL asks the survivor’s pronouns and explains that the reason for collecting that kind of information is to make sure that they receive the best assistance possible and that they use the right language. Adolescent boys in the English society are more aware nowadays of gender questions and it was observed that they feel more confident in talking about their orientation or identity. The personnel thus asks more general questions, such as: “how do you feel today?”, or “what is your orientation today?” acknowledging that it is fine and that it can change without any consequences. The element of the evolving society⁴ naturally helped in this process and the counsellors need to be up to date with these changes and the right language and terminology to use with boys. Boys do not need to educate counsellors in this respect, and counsellors need to have a minimum level of language and knowledge when assisting boys, and need to be able to display that to them. For instance, asking for pronouns and not assuming the sexual orientation of the survivor are helpful practices in this sense.

⁴ More discussions on these issues in the media, schools, communities that led to a more open minded approach of society towards these questions.
The right match for counselors and survivors

The 6 months of weekly counselling sessions are offered by trained counsellors, which might refer and report concerns and issues of individual clients – with their will and consent – to other actors in the case management system. As emotions and needs change during the process, some survivors might want to report their case to authorities because they might feel that it is the right moment to do so. This can be part of the recovery and empowerment process. As reporting is not the ultimate goal of the process, counsellors provide the option to do so, but also manage expectations of survivors on what reporting entails and the different steps of the process.

The assignment of survivors to the counsellors of FSL is based on a combination of considerations that are explored during the initial assessment on the basis of each individual specific circumstances and expressed needs. During the first assessment, the personnel asks about potential triggering factors that can be anticipated or mitigated in the counselling process. For instance, the personnel asks whether the boy or man survivor prefers to be matched with a female or male counsellor, as the survivor might associate the male figure of the counsellor with the aggressor. In this sense, questions on the physical appearance or age of the aggressor can also help in ensuring the right match, avoiding to assign counsellors that might present similar features. This is of course not always possible, and clients who do express a preference for a type of counsellor might have to wait if their preferred option is not available at the time being. This is clearly explained to survivors.

Part of the recovery process also involves a component in which some survivors might start receiving counselling from a female worker to potentially switch to a male worker at a later stage, if they considered that this would be an important step for them. Learning how to tolerate this situation in an environment that is considered safe can indeed support the healing process. This would not necessarily happen during the first counselling process, as it could be detrimental to the therapeutic process. However, it could be an option if a survivor came back for further counselling at a later date.

“Can I feel comfortable again in being with a man in a closed room, when the abuse happened in similar circumstances?”
The matching of the client with the counsellor is done by the supervisor of the service, who is able to also take into consideration aspects of the personality, experience and attributes of the counsellor when doing the matching. The supervisor makes the decision aiming to find the right balance and to avoid fracture. For instance, some survivors might need to have a more direct counsellor, while others might need to have someone with a less straightforward style of communication. The supervisor needs to therefore develop a relationship of trust with the counsellors and the ability to understand their personality and communication characteristics. All counsellors are trained on empathetic attitudes and communication, and the matching can sometimes be more about the age group and the personality of the counsellor, rather than their gender necessarily.

Another learning developed through the counselling process and related to the matching is the question of avoiding establishing a relationship of power between the counsellor and the survivor. Survivors experienced abuse and exploitation, in which the perpetrator took all the power. Counsellors need to provide assistance from a human perspective, rather than from an academic one. Quoting research, discussing academic papers or formal definitions on psychological assistance or abuse puts the counsellor in a formal and power relationship that is not appreciated by survivors, who rather thrive on a more equal relationship in terms of knowledge. FSL provides complementary resources to survivors who want to learn more and be able to put words on their experience at their own pace. Brochures, leaflets and other publications have proven to be useful tools to distribute to clients who might want to know more, without receiving a “lecture”. Many of the informative resources provided by FSL answer questions related to the reactions that boys and men might have in front of abuse.

“Why am I reacting like this? Why is this happening to me? They can learn by themselves, and it is about empowering them in this sense”.

For boys under the age of 16, the personnel of FSL would want to speak to a caregiver to ensure that they know that their child is accessing counselling there and obtain their consent. If the boy expresses that he does not want their parents or guardians to be involved, FSL asks for the reasons of that choice and invites the child to discuss possibilities on how to move forward with the process. For those boys who come in with their parents or guardians and want to have them involved in the counselling process, FSL keeps into consideration the full socio-ecological child protection model. The personnel does therefore ensure that psychosocial support can be provided to caregivers as well. Acknowledging that feelings of stress, fear and shame might also affect the caregivers is important, as these would also in turn influence the therapeutic process for the boy himself. The situation needs to be balanced for everyone and providing support to caregivers helps the individual counselling session with boys.

The positive results of the counselling programme are also achieved through complementary activities implemented by FSL such as the survivor group. The survivor group includes the organisation of private events with counsellors, clients, some partners and families, and help in taking away the shame and creating a sense of community and of hope. They are about finding strength in sharing a common experience.
To conduct its work, the organisation counts with three permanent staff managing the implementation and administration of the different services and several counselors that conduct the counselling and emotional support work. Counselors come in in their second year of placement from an academic institution (as a minimum), or they are either fully qualified to a diploma level or above. For them to be able to work for FSL, they need to submit an application form in which they are required to be specific about their motivation and reasons to be working in counselling for boy and men survivors. The selection process is rigorous and includes interviews about their personal history, their triggers and the work conducted on their own trauma and experiences. All of them must attend therapy and regular supervision and comply with the internal policies of FSL.

The selection phase looks into questions of mental stability and well-being of each individual counselor. Some of the questions asked hence include points such as: “how are you coping with stressful events in life?”, “what do you do to decompress?”, and “what’s your life?” These questions aim at looking at the overall mental status and balance of these professionals to ensure that they are fit to work with clients with complex needs and they will not collude in this sense. The induction process includes training on working with boy and man survivors of sexual abuse (in its different forms) and on how to challenge their own internalised biases on these issues. The in person mandatory training includes modules on:

- Questions of shame, fear and anxiety
- Questions of masculinity, sexuality, gender identity and expression;
- The basis of trauma and trauma-informed care, as well as how to understand child sexual abuse and the reactions that boys and men might have specifically in this regard;
- Complementary online modules (to be followed at their own pace) deepening knowledge on child abuse, disassociation, and mental health issues (including suicidal ideation).

5 The number of counsellors depends on the availability of personnel provided by academic institutions and by the needs of the organisation.
6 Along with the British Association for Counselling Codes of Ethics and Practice for Counsellors
FSL has learnt that these placements and trainings do not work if these are not able to hit the counselors at a profound level, in which they can really empathise with boys and men – and not only operate from an academic perspective.

All personnel have access to self-care and support opportunities, and this represents a key element of success of the approach of FSL in its work towards survivors. High workload and pressure reduces one’s resilience and increases the amount of stress, affecting in turn the quality of the assistance provided to boys and men. To avoid these situations, counsellors have access to external clinical supervision. Supervisors provide information to the management team on the general well-being of counsellors and to which counsellors may need more support. The organisation is trauma informed for its staff too, and keeps into proper account potential concerns related to the personnel’s mental health, and how personal issues and triggers could manifest during work. The counsellors know that they can decompress and raise concerns when the levels of pressure are high. The relationship between the management staff and the counsellors needs to be one of trust. At FSL, trust and decompression moments are created through informal and relaxing moments, in which counsellors can share what is going on in their lives outside of the work environment. These informal interactions allow the management to notice signs of stress or exhaustion and to receive feedback on the counsellors’ status on a regular basis.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the organisation now offers Zoom and phone counselling sessions for clients who might prefer those options. For boys and men who feel important levels of anxiety in accessing in person the service, or do not feel safe in travelling to the centre, they can now receive support remotely. The issue of granting access to everyone is also taken into account by FSL with the availability of a budget to support the hidden costs as the transportation costs of survivors and their supporters to receive assistance. This is particularly relevant for boys, who sometimes might lack the resources to face transportation costs.
Conclusion and possibilities for expansion of work

FSL is perceived as a respected and trusted organisation in the community and in the wider protection system, and its staff participates regularly in local coordination and referral mechanisms – including in collaboration with specific social and civil society services for issues of gender-based violence. Their advocacy with local authorities and the protection system is structured around ensuring the boys and men are also considered in conversations and decisions around issues of sexual abuse and exploitation.

One of the key elements of success of the organisation has been the offer of specialised services to male survivors in the community of Leicester, through free, confidential and accessible counselling. A recent independent external evaluation of the work of the organisation assessed the impact that this service had on survivors and the improvements that it brought to a high number of boys and men over the course of time, spanning from improved family and affective relationships, to better education and professional performances, and to the prevention of suicide attempts. The staff of the FSL adopts a transparency and honesty policy from the beginning of the process with each survivor, where they are informed about the steps of counselling, but also about its limitations (in terms of potential outcomes and time).

At the end of the counselling process, outcome forms and evaluations are conducted with survivors, with an understanding of the long-term impact of child sexual abuse and the needs that survivors might have following the counselling programme. In this respect, it is important to fully grasp what emotions and needs the counselling process in itself can trigger and entail. Through the process, survivors change, along with their perception of their situation and conditions. Several boys and men are empowered throughout the process, and feel more confident to speak up and take some of the power back. Some want to continue the work and be able to speak out more, involve others, raise awareness on child sexual abuse, and become self-determining. This brought to attention the existing need to provide boy and man survivors with different options to continue with their empowerment process. These options need to allow them to feel that they can have control over their path and make their own choices in this respect.

The experience and learning gathered through the counselling sessions allowed FSL to develop an expertise on how sexual abuse affects specifically boys and men and to construct additional activities around this knowledge. The survivor groups, the advocacy and awareness raising activities that FSL conducts in parallel to the counselling work is therefore built around this expertise and possibilities of expansion are numerous. Ensuring that more people know about their unique services is thus now one of the main goals of the organisation. Creating community awareness around the need that boys and men might have in terms of child sexual abuse and exploitation does in turn create a space for discussion and acknowledgement of the issue.

“If we stay in the shadows, we are replicating the shame”.

“"If we stay in the shadows, we are replicating the shame"."
Recently, FSL participated in the Pride⁷ Leicester⁸, where they were able to be present and raise awareness on their services, with a welcoming response and feedback from the public. One of the strategies used by FSL to provide information to the people who might be more hesitant in getting information directly at the stand, was to develop a QR code that could be accessed from a distance containing all the information on the organisation and its services.

The involvement of FSL in awareness raising activities in new settings was welcomed and supported by the general public, and confirms the extent to which the provision of response services to boys and men on issues of sexual abuse and exploitation can also open the door for discussion and prevention work at the community level.

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⁷ A pride parade is an outdoor event celebrating lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) social and self-acceptance, achievements, legal rights, and pride.

⁸ For more information on the Leicester Pride, please visit: https://www.leicesterpride.com/about-us/