1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EESC strongly condemns all child sexual abuse and welcomes the Commission's commitment to strengthen Europe's resolve to fight child sexual abuse by presenting a new Directive on combating sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, as well as child pornography.

1.2 In a previous opinion (1) the EESC made recommendations on the proposed Directive. While prevention is an aim of the Directive, it is insufficiently addressed within it. Prevention on multiple levels is the key to the protection of children. Victims of child sexual abuse suffer not only an intolerable violation of their right to physical integrity but also life-long horrific social, emotional and psychological consequences. The present additional opinion seeks to put forward recommendations for prevention.

1.3 The EESC reiterates its call for all Member States, as well as the European Union, under the new Treaty of Lisbon, to sign and ratify, as a matter of urgency, the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (2) and the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (3), to strengthen the ability of the EU to prevent child sexual abuse.

1.4 The European Union must build a consistent, unified approach to the prevention of child sexual abuse across Member States. The EESC urges the European Commission to drive the implementation of a European Union Prevention Strategy Against Child Sexual Abuse to establish a firm vision through which the Member States of the European Union aspire to protect and empower its children. The objectives of the Strategy should fall under the following four strands:

1. Education
   — Educational Awareness Programmes for Children
   — Training and Support for Professionals and Volunteers
   — Training for Media
   — Positive Parenting Programmes
   — Safe Internet Usage

2. Law Enforcement and Other Support Structures
   — Vetting
   — Missing Children's Helpline
   — Missing Child Alert System
   — International Law Enforcement System

3. Civil Society's Role
   — Further funding to develop existing programmes
   — Public awareness campaign

(1) EESC opinion on Combating the sexual abuse, sexual exploitation of children and child pornography, repealing Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA, OJ C 48, 15.2.2011, p. 138-144.
(2) Czech Republic and Latvia have not signed this Convention; 15 Member States have not ratified it: http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/ChercheSig.asp?NT=201&CM=&DF=&CL=ENG.
4. Research and Standards

— European Clearinghouse

— Views and Opinions of Children

— Internet Security Standards and Removal of Child Sexual Abuse Content.

1.5 The measures contained in this opinion are not exhaustive (5). The EESC commends the work of many civil society actors, particularly NGOs, in putting in place prevention measures. The best practice examples are too many to list here but invaluable for others to learn from. To that end the EESC has produced a database with information (6).

2. Background and Objectives

2.1 The central aspiration of preventive measures must be the eradication of child sexual abuse. All policies must be underpinned by the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In line with the Convention, a child is defined as a person below 18 years.

2.2 Child sexual abuse can take many forms: incest and sexual abuse, pornography, prostitution, trafficking, corruption and sexual assault within children's own peer group (6). Abuse needs to be tackled on multiple levels: local, national, European and global. But preventive measures should be coordinated and consistent across the board. Preventive measures need to be constantly monitored to ensure they are in line with evolving structures and best practice and that they respond to newly-emerging opportunities to abuse children (such as new technologies).

2.3 Children are particularly vulnerable to all forms of abuse and are more likely to be victimised than adults when it comes to general crimes, including assault and rape. Though statistics are lacking, available data suggests that about 1 out of 5 children in Europe are victims of sexual abuse at least once during their childhood (7). It is estimated that the perpetrator is known to the victim in 70-85 % of cases, so preventive measures should take this fact into particular account. Both boys and girls are affected as are all ethnicities and communities. Some research suggests that sexual abuse often starts at the age of 12-13 years yet many child prevention strategies focus mainly on younger children. ‘Vulnerable’ children are typically at highest risk of abuse, including children with disabilities, children in care, separated and trafficked children, children with drug and alcohol related problems, those who are socially deprived and those who have already experienced abuse.

2.4 The EU recognises children's rights in Article 3 (TEU) of Treaty of Lisbon and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, specifically in Article 24, which lays down a positive obligation to ensure the protection of children in the child's best interests. This has been translated into targeted policy on the promotion, protection and fulfilment of children's rights (8).

2.5 The EESC welcomes the recent publication by the European Commission of an EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child. Based on principles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Agenda places the rights of the child at the centre of policy in key areas, including internet safety and protection from trafficking.

2.6 A key objective of this opinion is to highlight that ‘prevention’ measures are possible and much good work is being done in this area by many stakeholders. The EESC commends the work of many civil society actors, particularly NGOs, in putting in place prevention measures. The best practice examples are too many to list in this opinion but invaluable for others to learn from, to build on expertise and mobilise civil society action. To that end the EESC has produced a database with the information (9).

3. General Comments – Preventive Measures

3.1 Preventive measures should be holistic, child-centred and happen as early as possible with a minimum level of intervention. There are many excellent initiatives to be endorsed. The EESC calls on the European Commission to adopt and enforce a European Union Prevention Strategy Against Child Sexual Abuse that harnesses a coordinated vision across Member States, based on objectives contained in the four strands below.

3.2 The EESC acknowledges that fighting the crime of child sexual abuse is extremely challenging. This form of abuse is often invisible due to its inherently clandestine nature and because of low levels of reporting amongst victims out of complex feelings of shame, fear or out of ignorance of their rights. The internet and other technologies provide new opportunities for abusers and for the production and distribution of child pornography. Freedom of travel provides opportunities for abusers to target the most vulnerable children. Abusers are becoming more sophisticated and organised, and younger

(5) They have been produced in consultation with the Children's Rights Alliance Ireland, a coalition of over 90 NGOs working to secure the rights and needs of children in Ireland, by campaigning for the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (www.childrensrights.ie) as well as European NGOs working in the field.


(8) Ibid.

(9) For example, the EU Youth Strategy which adopts a cross-sectoral policy approach to youth issues and strengthens cooperation in policy-making: http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/youth/ef0013_en.htm.

(10) See footnote 6.
children are increasingly at risk. Around 10% of cases come to
the notice of child protection services (10). Those who sexually
abuse children are from all backgrounds and most abusers have
not been convicted of any sexual abuse offences (11).

3.3 Primary prevention to intervene before child abuse
occurs should be targeted at the most vulnerable children
who are at risk of on-going and future abuse. Direct
measures such as public education and early intervention are
a first step only – measures to prevent secondary victimisation
to break the ‘cycle of abuse’ where this occurs, should also be
delivered. The treatment of abusers and potential abusers must
also be a focus.

3.4 While most abuse occurs within the family or
community setting (12), abuse can be a highly-organised crime
involving multiple abusers. There are extremely lucrative profits
to be made; human trafficking is the third largest international
crime globally (13). There are approximately 2.5 million victims
of human trafficking worldwide (14). It is estimated that 43% of
whom are sexually exploited and almost half of whom are
children (15). Child sexual abuse is often a borderless crime
that must be dealt with beyond national borders.

3.5 The participation of children and young people is vital to
ensure that their views are listened to and integrated into
preventive strategies. There are many such models already in
operation (16). The use of young people’s language encourages
children to talk more openly about the issue and to help break
this taboo.

4. Strand 1: Education

4.1 The EESC recommends that all children in Member
States are provided with educational awareness programmes
on child sexual abuse. It is critical to inform children in an
age-appropriate way and empower children to speak out
about sexual abuse.

4.2 Education programmes have proven to be a successful
primary prevention strategy in other domains. They provide an
excellent opportunity for prevention and are ideal ways to
promote reporting. Where possible, educational awareness
programmes can be integrated into existing programmes, such
as the ‘Stay Safe’ (17) and SPHE (18) programmes. Programmes
should:

— Be developmentally-appropriate, incorporate healthy sexual
development and avoid victimisation to increase the
empowerment of children.

— Be specifically targeted at children rather than parents, with
a particular focus on older children.

— Allow for targeted prevention approaches for the most at-
risk children.

— Link with child-friendly, direct-access counselling,
complaints and reporting mechanisms (19).

— Link with necessary back-up services that have sufficient
staffing levels.

— Be regularly monitored and evaluated in line with emerging
best practice.

4.3 The EESC urges Member States to make child sexual
abuse prevention training mandatory for all professionals and
volunteers working with children, especially in the law
enforcement, health and (formal and non-formal) education
sectors. Professional organisations, trade unions and social
partners all have a role to play as do religious, sport and
recreational organisations. There should be appropriate
support mechanisms provided for personnel working with
child victims, including regular supervision and psychological
support.

4.4 The EESC recommends that the media be provided with
education programmes. Ethical guidelines on reporting should
also be developed.

4.5 Positive parenting programmes should be available to
support parents and families to avoid child sexual abuse from
occurring. Parents should be provided with information on
preventive measures in pre-natal and maternity care settings.

(11) Finkelhor, The Prevention of Childhood Sexual Abuse (2009),
p. 178.
(12) See footnote 6.
(14) Speech by Viviane Reding on ‘A renewed commitment to children’s
do?reference=SPEECH/10/550&format=HTML&aged=1&language=
EN&guiLanguage=en.
(15) For example, Council of Europe’s ‘Kiko and the Hand’.
(16) Speech by the Deputy Secretary-General of the Council of Europe,
5th EU Forum on the Rights of the Child, Italy (November 2010):
www.coe.int/t/dc/presse/pressnews/20101129_disc_sga_en.asp.
(17) Finkelhor, The Prevention of Childhood Sexual Abuse (2009),
p. 178.
(18) ECPO International, Factsheet – Sex Trafficking of Children in the
UK.
(19) For example, Report by the Special Rapporteur on the sale of
children, child prostitution and child pornography and by the
Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence
against Children on child-friendly counselling, complaint and
reporting mechanisms: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/
hrcouncil/docs/16session/A-HRC-16-56.pdf. Also, UN ECOSOC’s
Resolution 2005/20 Guidelines on Justice in Matters involving
Child Victims and Witnesses of Crime: www.un.org/docs/ecosoc/
4.6 The EESC supports initiatives including the European Commission’s Safer Internet Programme (20), the Insafe (21) and INHOPE (22) networks to promote safe internet usage by children and all members of society (23).

5. **Strand 2: Law Enforcement and Other Support Structures**

5.1 The EESC recommends a consistent approach amongst Member States on law enforcement, information-sharing and cooperation between police services and registered international organisations. This should include bi-lateral cooperation agreements, more effective IT tools for tracking, and better vetting mechanisms. Delays in the courts can act as a deterrent to the reporting of abuse. To avoid lengthy waiting times, priority should be given to cases of child sexual abuse. Serious consideration should be given to having victimless court processes. Appropriate training of law enforcement personnel in the area of child sexual abuse is urgently needed and the creation of interviewing protocols helps avoid secondary victimisation. Consistent Europe-wide standards will help prevent abusers moving across Member States. On a global level, the recent Operation Rescue by Europol and others, identifying more than 200 children (24), showed how the European Union can lead the way.

5.2 It is imperative that there is a consistent approach to the vetting of all those working with children to close loopholes between Member States. There should be mandatory screening of individuals for child protection offences, including screening for ‘soft information’ (information about people who have been identified as a risk to children but who have not got a criminal conviction for child abuse). As in its previous opinion (25), the Committee refers to the Multi-Agency Protection Arrangements Model (26).

5.3 A Europe-wide missing children’s helpline number has been assigned, but is only operational in 16 Member States; the remaining 11 Member States must take immediate action to ensure that a good-quality hotline service is available (27). This service must be adequately resourced and linked with necessary back-up services. Consideration could also be given to extending this service beyond the EU.

5.4 While there are effective working models in individual Member States (28), the EESC recommends the establishment of a coordinated Europe-wide Missing Child Alert System across Europe, similar to Amber Alert in the US (29).

5.5 The EESC reiterates its call for the establishment of an international law enforcement body dedicated to investigate child sexual abuse around the world, to identify victims and prosecute abusers (30).

6. **Strand 3: Civil Society’s Role**

6.1 Preventing child sexual abuse is everybody’s responsibility within society. The EESC recommends that Government agencies and civil society stakeholders continue to work together to implement child abuse preventive measures. The EESC supports initiatives such as the Council of Europe’s ‘1 in 5 campaign’ (31) and ‘The Underwear Rule’ (32). On the NGO level, ‘Stop It Now!’ (33) and specific campaigns such as ‘Cut Them Free’ by Barnardo’s UK (34), as well as ECPAT International and The Body Shop ‘Stop Sex Trafficking of Children and Young People’ campaign (35), are important examples of civil society action.

6.2 Employers, trade unions and other civil society organisations have an important obligation to set a clear standard for workplaces to ensure that child sexual abuse is not tolerated (36). Addressing this crime is a corporate social responsibility matter for employers. Industries, such as the tourism and hotel industry also have an important role to play (37). The EESC is proposing that organisations sign up to the value statement proposed previously by the EESC (38), which is included in the database of good practice in Member States compiled by the

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(21) A European network of Awareness Centres promoting safe, responsible Internet use to young people: www.saferinternet.org.
(23) A similar NGO initiative is run by Child Focus Belgium.
(26) A UK model involving multiple agencies to assess and manage sexual offenders in the community.
(28) For example, Child Alert in Belgium: www.childalert.be.
(29) www.amberalert.gov.
(30) See footnote 1.
(31) The EESC has agreed to translate documents from this CoE campaign into a variety of languages.
(33) UK & Ireland campaign is managed by the Lucy Faithfull Foundation to prevent child sexual abuse www.stopitnow.org.uk. Also www.lucyfaithfull.org.
(35) This global campaign has secured 2.3 million signatures in the EU (22 June 2011).
(36) Article 3, Optional Protocol to the CRC on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.
(37) For example, Accor Hotels, and World Tourism Organisation.
EESC. The EESC (39) reiterates the need for further funding to expand and develop programmes for delivery by civil society partners.

6.3 There should be a global public awareness campaign on reporting child sexual abuse, supported by a free international hotline with an online reporting mechanism (40). This could work in a similar way to the network provided by Child Helpline International. Such a hotline should be linked with necessary back-up services.

6.4 Civil society and governments can heighten awareness of child sexual abuse and contribute towards bringing about a culture of prevention through their active promotion of the World Day for the Prevention of Child Abuse, which takes place every year on 19 November (41).

7. Strand 4: Research and Standards

7.1 The EESC calls for increased research to address the lack of data on child sexual abuse, to gain a clearer picture of the profiles of victims and perpetrators and to share best practice. At present, much data is provided by law enforcement agencies. A European Clearinghouse should be established to inform child abuse prevention research, policy and practice, similar to the National Child Protection Clearinghouse in Australia (42) or the Child Welfare Information Gateway in the US (43). This would build on the work carried out by individual projects, like the European Online Grooming Project or work carried out on a country level, like Child Focus Belgium (44). Common, European-wide definitions would help promote the exchange and improve the comparability of data.

7.2 Research on child sexual abuse should be informed by the views and opinions of children (45).

7.3 The EESC calls for clearly-defined, Europe-wide, internet security standards. In the context of ‘stimulating Internet Service Providers on a voluntary basis to develop codes of conduct and guidelines for blocking access to such Internet pages’ (46), the EESC would stress that the priority must be to remove the content at source and only where this is not possible (outside the EU) to block access to those sites. Within the EU this should be made a legal requirement, if the industry, the ISPs, and economic and financial actors, such as credit card companies, are serious about their commitment to fight this abuse. The EESC encourages providers of social networking to sign up to the Safer Social Networking Principles for the EU (2009) (47).

7.4 The EESC asks the European Commission to coordinate action to enable a consistent approach across the EU.

Brussels, 26 October 2011.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Staffan NILSSON

(39) See footnote 1.
(40) See footnote 25.
(43) www.childwelfare.gov/index.cfm.
(44) www.stopchildporno.be.
(45) Article 12, UN CRC.
(46) See footnote 1.