

**Submission
No 23**

**INQUIRY INTO CRIMES (SENTENCING PROCEDURE)
AMENDMENT (GOOD CHARACTER AT SENTENCING)
BILL 2026**

Organisation: Project Paradigm
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PROJECT PARADIGM[®]

WORKING TO END CHILD EXPLOITATION

Project Paradigm welcomes this opportunity to make a submission in support of reforms to remove good character references from sentencing.

Project Paradigm is an independent program established by the Integrated Family and Youth Service (IFYS), which delivers a range of specialist support and intervention programs for children, young people and families across Queensland, including multiple residential care services throughout the state. Much of the focus of IFYS's work when it was founded nearly 40 years ago was aimed at addressing what was referred to as 'opportunistic prostitution' or 'child prostitution', which is now termed Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). CSE is a significant issue of concern for children and young people in residential care (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). 40% of Victorian children who were missing from residential care were found to be victims of sexual exploitation at the hands of adult men in 2021 (Commission for Children & Young People [Victoria], 2021).

In recognition that CSE is as a persistent problem affecting the safety and wellbeing of children and young people in residential care services across Queensland, and more broadly Australia, Project Paradigm was established to focus on prevention and intervention for children at risk of or experiencing child sexual 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.

Project Paradigm is writing in support of the recommendations articulated by the NSW Sentencing Council in the, "Good Character at Sentencing" report.

Responsibility and causation of sexual exploitation is often assigned to the child as an outcome of 'risky' behaviour, or 'risky choices' (Jackson, 2014; Lloyd, 2022). Since the element of 'exchange' infers a benefit to the child, the definition itself evokes victim blame (Jay et al., 2022). Child sexual exploitation often occurs under the guise of a relationship, so children subjected to it are regularly considered to be active in the

sexual exploitation, and to give consent (Dodsworth, 2022). Due to the influence of grooming, often the child may not consider what is happening as harmful, and they are unlikely to identify as a victim (Roberts et al., 2024). When older children are subjected to sexual exploitation, they are perceived to be ‘consenting active agents making choices, albeit constrained, about their relationships’ (Pearce, 2014, p.163). A focus on the child or young person’s behaviour, and flawed perceptions of consent in child sexual exploitation means that it is not uncommon for the responsibility for the harm they experience to be attributed to the victim. This perception influences interventions which are then responsive to the actions and characteristics of the victim, distracting attention from the actions and tactics of the perpetrator. In this scenario, allowing a CSE offender’s good character to mitigate a sentence further trivialises and rationalises the perpetrator’s actions.

Victim blaming language, intentionally or unintentionally uttered in the sphere of CSE is commonplace, often reinforcing the shame and guilt felt by the victim or survivor and creating barriers between children and professionals, who may think that their experience of sexual abuse will not be believed or supported (The Children’s Society, 2024). Psychological grooming will often involve the perpetrator skilfully using manipulative means to alienate a child, amplifying their vulnerabilities, unmet needs and creating emotional deficits. Perpetrators can indoctrinate victims into believing that they are complicit to their abuse and the offending is in some way their own fault. Put simply, it is their own “bad character,” that has led to their victimisation.

It is with this backdrop that we perceive good character references as highly traumatic tools, and contributing to victims’ inability to recognise their victimisation, inflicting additional harm to child victims-survivors. They serve to generate a positive narrative of the perpetrator in contrast to their offending, carrying some weight by way of mitigation of sentence. It is our position that in this instance, contrasting victim blaming language that children experience, to weaponizing language to positively reframe and position an offender emboldens abusers and isolates child victims further.

In the context of grooming, perpetrators are masterful in creating a moral “good character,” persona within the respective community, organisation, or family they intend to perpetrate within, typified by quickly becoming a trusted, helpful, and "upstanding" individual—a "pillar of the community" (Safe Kids Thrive, 2026). Perpetrators are then able to quash any allegations of abuse or inappropriate conduct, which are subsequently ignored, dismissed, or met with disbelief. Reliance on good character references only serves to illuminate the groomer’s skill and ability to manipulate community opinion and susceptibility to believing their characters falsehood, making these good character references particularly inappropriate and ineffectual in child sexual abuse cases.

Removing reliance on good character references is essential to ensure that sentencing focuses on prioritising objective, admissible facts and less on subjective, unreliable references. Consequently, legal outcomes are fair, consistent, and justifiable.

Withdrawing a reliance on good character references also ensures that a focus is placed on to the perpetrator, ensuring that offenders are held fully responsible for their actions, preventing them from using their reputation, community standing, or professional achievements to minimise their culpability.

In closing, it is our stance that, crucial to any review and subsequent change at a judicial level in the context of 'good character statements,' there must be a clear acknowledgment of those factors which perpetuate the harm and suffering of children and young people.

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