Department for Education

Child sexual exploitation

Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation

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Introduction

Child sexual exploitation is a crime with devastating and long lasting consequences for its victims and their families. Childhoods and family life can be ruined and this is compounded when victims, or those at risk of abuse, do not receive appropriate, immediate and on-going support. The first response to children, and support for them to access help, must be the best it can be from social workers, police, health practitioners and others who work with children and their families.

In *Putting Children First* (July 2016) the Government set out its ambitions to support vulnerable children to lead safe and positive lives, to become successful adults and to have the kind of happy childhood that we want for all our children. We want children and families to have confidence in turning to practitioners for help and protection from abuse, neglect and exploitation. This help and protection should be provided in a timely, enduring and flexible manner, and be the best it can possibly be. This requires children, parents and carers affected by child sexual exploitation to feel part of the solution and confident they will be believed. Practitioners should work together to reduce the immediate risk of harm to children and collaborate to develop long term strategies to improve children's life chances.

This applies as much to child sexual exploitation as to other forms of abuse or neglect. The hidden nature of child sexual exploitation and the complexities involved means professional curiosity, and always being alert to the issue, is vital.

About this advice

This advice is non-statutory, and has been produced to help practitioners, local leaders and decision makers who work with children and families to identify child sexual exploitation and take appropriate action in response. This includes the management, disruption and prosecution of perpetrators.

This advice replaces the 2009 guidance *Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation*. It should be read alongside *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (most recent updates available on gov.uk) which continues to provide statutory guidance covering the legislative requirements on services to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, including in relation to child sexual exploitation.

A child is anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. Throughout this advice the terms 'child' and 'children' are used to refer to all those under the age of 18.

Who is this advice for?

This advice is intended to help all those working with children, and their parents and carers, to understand child sexual exploitation and what action should be taken to identify

and support victims. The online annexes to this document set out work to tackle perpetrators, another critical element of an holistic response.

Section A is for everyone whose work brings them into contact with children and families, including those who work in early years, children's social care, health, education (including schools), the police, adult services and youth offending teams. This section sets out first the background to the nature of child sexual exploitation, followed by a series of guiding principles. It is relevant to those working in the statutory, voluntary or the independent sectors, and applies in relation to all children and young people irrespective of whether they are living at home with their families and carers or away from home.

Section B is for those in strategic and management roles who are planning responses to child sexual exploitation within local authorities and other agencies working in partnership. It is relevant for Local Safeguarding Children Boards and any new arrangements required in legislation. However, all practitioners may find this information useful to support effective front-line practice on child sexual exploitation.

This advice is not intended to be a 'step by step' approach to addressing child sexual exploitation. It sets out the definition of child sexual exploitation; highlights potential vulnerabilities and indicators of abuse; and sets out appropriate action to take in response, using professional judgment and curiosity. Although it focuses on child sexual exploitation, the principles outlined here are those set out in *Working Together* covering all forms of exploitation, abuse and vulnerability in childhood and adolescence. The signs of abuse rarely present in clear, unequivocal ways (The Munro Review of Child Protection, 2011). What is important is that those working with children and families understand the totality of a child's experience in order to assess the nature and level of risk faced by children and respond swiftly and proportionately.

Section A – advice for all practitioners who work with children

What is child sexual exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. Sexual abuse may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside clothing. It may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in the production of sexual images, forcing children to look at sexual images or watch sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet).

The definition of child sexual exploitation is as follows:

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

Like all forms of child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation:

- can affect any child or young person (male or female) under the age of 18 years, including 16 and 17 year olds who can legally consent to have sex;
- can still be abuse even if the sexual activity appears consensual;
- can include both contact (penetrative and non-penetrative acts) and non-contact sexual activity;
- can take place in person or via technology, or a combination of both;
- can involve force and/or enticement-based methods of compliance and may, or may not, be accompanied by violence or threats of violence;
- may occur without the child or young person's immediate knowledge (through others copying videos or images they have created and posting on social media, for example);
- can be perpetrated by individuals or groups, males or females, and children or adults. The abuse can be a one-off occurrence or a series of incidents over time, and range from opportunistic to complex organised abuse; and
- is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the abuse. Whilst age may be the most obvious, this power imbalance can also be due to a range of other factors including gender, sexual identity, cognitive ability, physical strength, status, and access to economic or other resources.

Child sexual exploitation is a complex form of abuse and it can be difficult for those working with children to identify and assess. The indicators for child sexual exploitation can sometimes be mistaken for 'normal adolescent behaviours'. It requires knowledge, skills, professional curiosity and an assessment which analyses the risk factors and personal circumstances of individual children to ensure that the signs and symptoms are interpreted correctly and appropriate support is given. Even where a young person is old enough to legally consent to sexual activity, the law states that consent is only valid where they make a choice and have the freedom and capacity to make that choice. If a child feels they have no other meaningful choice, are under the influence of harmful substances or fearful of what might happen if they don't comply (all of which are common features in cases of child sexual exploitation) consent cannot legally be given whatever the age of the child.

Child sexual exploitation is never the victim's fault, even if there is some form of exchange: all children and young people under the age of 18 have a right to be safe and should be protected from harm.

One of the key factors found in most cases of child sexual exploitation is the presence of some form of exchange (sexual activity in return for something); for the victim and/or perpetrator or facilitator.

Where it is the victim who is offered, promised or given something they need or want, the exchange can include both tangible (such as money, drugs or alcohol) and intangible rewards (such as status, protection or perceived receipt of love or affection). It is critical to remember the unequal power dynamic within which this exchange occurs and to remember that the receipt of something by a child/young person does not make them any less of a victim. It is also important to note that the prevention of something negative can also fulfil the requirement for exchange, for example a child who engages in sexual activity to stop someone carrying out a threat to harm his/her family.

Whilst there can be gifts or treats involved in other forms of sexual abuse (e.g a father who sexually abuses but also buys the child toys) it is most likely referred to as child sexual exploitation if the 'exchange', as the core dynamic at play, results in financial gain for or enhanced status of, the perpetrator.

Where the gain is only for the perpetrator/facilitator, there is most likely a financial gain (money, discharge of a debt or free/discounted goods or services) or increased status as a result of the abuse.

If sexual gratification, or exercise of power and control, is the only gain for the perpetrator (and there is no gain for the child/young person) this would not normally constitute child sexual exploitation, but should be responded to as a different form of child sexual abuse.

How common is child sexual exploitation?

The signs and indicators of all forms of abuse can be difficult to detect and child sexual exploitation is no exception. A variety of factors can make it difficult to accurately assess how prevalent child sexual exploitation is. Many children who are sexually exploited may have been victims of other forms of abuse; the grooming methods that may be used can mean that children who are sexually exploited do not always recognise they are being abused, which can also affect detection rates. What is clear is that child sexual exploitation can occur in all communities and amongst all social groups and can affect girls and boys. All practitioners should work on the basis that it is happening in their area.

Who is vulnerable to child sexual exploitation?

Any child, in any community: Child sexual exploitation is occurring across the country but is often hidden so prevalence data is hard to ascertain. However, areas proactively looking for child sexual exploitation are uncovering a problem. All practitioners should be open to the possibility that the children they work with might be affected.

Age: Children aged 12-15 years of age are most at risk of child sexual exploitation although victims as young as 8 have been identified, particularly in relation to online concerns. Equally, those aged 16 or above can also experience child sexual exploitation, and it is important that such abuse is not overlooked due to assumed capacity to consent. Account should be taken of heightened risks amongst this age group, particularly those without adequate economic or systemic support.

Gender: Though child sexual exploitation may be most frequently observed amongst young females, boys are also at risk. Practitioners should be alert to the fact that boys may be less likely than females to disclose experiences of child sexual exploitation and less likely to have these identified by others.

Ethnicity: Child sexual exploitation affects all ethnic groups.

Heightened vulnerability factors: *Working Together* makes clear the requirements for holistic assessment. Sexual exploitation is often linked to other issues in the life of a child or young person, or in the wider community context. Practitioners should be alert to the fact that child sexual exploitation is complex and rarely presents in isolation of other needs and risks of harm (although this may not always be the case, particularly in relation to online abuse). Child sexual exploitation may be linked to other crimes and practitioners should be mindful that a child who may present as being involved in criminal activity is actually being exploited.

Practitioners should not rely on 'checklists' alone but should make a holistic assessment of vulnerability, examining risk and protective factors as set out in the statutory guidance *Working Together.*

Sexual exploitation can have links to other types of crime. These include:

- Child trafficking;
- Domestic abuse;
- Sexual violence in intimate relationships;
- Grooming (including online grooming);
- Abusive images of children and their distribution;
- Drugs-related offences;
- Gang-related activity;
- Immigration-related offences; and
- Domestic servitude.

The following vulnerabilities are examples of the types of things children can experience that might make them more susceptible to child sexual exploitation:

- Having a prior experience of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse;
- Lack of a safe/stable home environment, now or in the past (domestic violence or parental substance misuse, mental health issues or criminality, for example);
- Recent bereavement or loss;
- Social isolation or social difficulties;
- Absence of a safe environment to explore sexuality;
- Economic vulnerability;
- Homelessness or insecure accommodation status;
- Connections with other children and young people who are being sexually exploited;
- Family members or other connections involved in adult sex work;
- Having a physical or learning disability;
- Being in care (particularly those in residential care and those with interrupted care histories); and
- Sexual identity.

Not all children and young people with these vulnerabilities will experience child sexual exploitation. **Child sexual exploitation can also occur without any of these vulnerabilities being present.**

Potential indicators of child sexual exploitation

Children rarely self-report child sexual exploitation so it is important that practitioners are aware of potential indicators of risk, including:

- Acquisition of money, clothes, mobile phones etc without plausible explanation;
- Gang-association and/or isolation from peers/social networks;
- Exclusion or unexplained absences from school, college or work;
- Leaving home/care without explanation and persistently going missing or returning late;
- Excessive receipt of texts/phone calls;
- Returning home under the influence of drugs/alcohol;
- Inappropriate sexualised behaviour for age/sexually transmitted infections;
- Evidence of/suspicions of physical or sexual assault;
- Relationships with controlling or significantly older individuals or groups;
- Multiple callers (unknown adults or peers);
- Frequenting areas known for sex work;
- Concerning use of internet or other social media;
- Increasing secretiveness around behaviours; and
- Self-harm or significant changes in emotional well-being.

Practitioners should also remain open to the fact that child sexual exploitation can occur without any of these risk indicators being obviously present. Practitioners should also be alert to the fact that some risk assessments have been constructed around indicators of face-to-face perpetration by adults and may not adequately capture online or peer-perpetrated forms of harm. It is also important to remember that risk assessments only capture risk at the point of assessment and that levels of risk vary over time, and that the presence of these indicators may be explained by other forms of vulnerability rather than child sexual exploitation.

The first step for practitioners is to be alert to the potential signs of abuse and neglect and to understand the procedures set out by local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. Those working with children and families should access training through those multi-agency arrangements to support them in identifying vulnerability, risk and harm. This will help practitioners to know what action to take and to develop a shared understanding about what best practice looks like.

How are children sexually exploited?

Child sexual exploitation takes many different forms. It can include contact and non-contact sexual activities and can occur online or in person, or a combination of each.

The following illustrative examples, although very different in nature and potentially involving different sexual or other offences, could all fall under the definition of child sexual exploitation:

- A 44 year old female posing as a 17 year old female online and persuading a 12 year old male to send her a sexual image, and then threatening to tell his parents if he doesn't continue to send more explicit images;
- A 14 year old male giving a 17 year old male oral sex because the older male has threatened to tell his parents he is gay if he refuses;
- A 14 year old female having sex with a 16 year old gang member and his two friends in return for the protection of the gang;
- A 13 year old female offering and giving an adult male taxi driver sexual intercourse in return for a taxi fare home;
- A 21 year old male persuading his 17 year old 'girlfriend' to have sex with his friends to pay off a drug debt;
- A mother letting other adults abuse her 8 year old child in return for money;
- A group of men bringing two 17 year old females to a hotel in another town and charging others to have sex with them; and
- Three 15 year old females being taken to a house party and given 'free' alcohol and drugs, then made to have sex with six adult males to pay for this.

These examples are not exhaustive: other forms of child sexual exploitation occur and new forms continue to develop. Nor are they mutually exclusive – some children will suffer abuse across a range of scenarios, either simultaneously or in succession.

Most child abuse occurs within the home. In cases of child sexual exploitation the risk of harm is generally external or in the community.

Child sexual exploitation may occur without the child being aware of events, or understanding that these constitute abuse. Online exploitation includes the exchange of sexual communication or images and can be particularly challenging to identify and respond to. Children, young people and perpetrators are frequently more familiar with, and spend more time in, these environments than their parents and carers. Those who work with and care for children can struggle to remain up-to-date with the latest sites and potential connection points, so practitioners should always seek specialist support if unsure about online environments. Online child sexual exploitation allows perpetrators to initiate contact with multiple potential victims and offers a perception of anonymity, with children and young people, and perpetrators, potentially saying and doing things online they wouldn't do offline. Where exploitation does occur online, the transfer of images can be quickly and easily shared with others. This makes it difficult to contain the potential for further abuse.

Children can be perpetrators as well as victims

Children can be both experiencing child sexual exploitation and perpetrating it at the same time. Examples might include a child who is forced to take part in the exploitation of another child under duress, or a child who is forced to introduce other children to their abuser under threats to their family's safety. These situations require a nuanced

approach that recognises and engages with the young person's perpetration within the context of their own victimisation.

Children who perpetrate child sexual exploitation require a different response to adult perpetrators. Responses may involve criminal justice pathways at times, however every child who displays harmful sexual behaviour should also have their safeguarding and welfare needs actively considered in line with *Working Together*.

Different agencies should work together to: (a) identify any prior victimisation and understand how this has contributed to the perpetration; and (b) map the environments and contexts in which peer-perpetrated child sexual exploitation occurs, looking at the social norms or power dynamics at play which may have influenced the perpetration of abuse. Dependent on the issues emerging, this will likely need both an individually-based response and wider work to address harmful social norms or power dynamics that enable the abuse to occur.

How does child sexual exploitation affect children?

The long-term consequences of any form of child abuse can be devastating and early identification and providing support as soon as problems emerge is critical.

Child sexual exploitation damages children and like any form of abuse it can have long-lasting consequences that can impact on every part of a child's life and their future outcomes. Child sexual exploitation has been shown to affect:

- Physical (including sexual) and mental health and well-being;
- Education and training and therefore future employment prospects;
- Family relationships;
- Friends and social relationships, current and as adults; and
- Their relationship with their own children in the future.

Child sexual exploitation is complex and children are often reluctant to disclose experiences of exploitation due to misplaced feelings of loyalty and shame. Many may not recognise what they are experiencing as abuse or that they require support or intervention, believing they are in control or in a healthy consensual relationship.

Online annexes to this document set out in greater detail the context of adolescent development and risk.

How to respond: working with young people

Child sexual exploitation is never the victim's fault: As stated above, all children and young people have a right to be safe and should be protected from harm.

> *"What I want is staff who sit down and talk to you calmly and they don't judge you … you want someone to understand why you did what you did"*
>
> *"Instead of shouting at me and saying 'why did you do it?' …[They should be] letting you get your point across first, then putting their point across and about how they see it differently, instead of just saying that was wrong" (young person cited in Warrington 2013)*

Early sharing of information is key to providing effective help where there are emerging problems. As above, it is essential to have in place effective child protection services and procedures for sharing information. For guidance on sharing information, which includes a myth-busting guide, see *Information Sharing: Advice for practitioners* providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers. Wherever possible practitioners should share confidential personal information with consent. However, where there are concerns that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, practitioners should be willing to disclose information without consent where the public interest served by protecting the child from harm outweighs the duty of confidentiality. Section B below sets out the framework that is required to support effective practice.

Safeguarding children is everyone's responsibility. As above, all practitioners should assume that in the course of their work with children they will encounter children at risk of sexual exploitation. All practitioners working with children and families need to **know where to get help**: Local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements will set out the process for referring concerns about the welfare of children to local authority children's social care. Anyone can make a referral and ask for advice. If a child is considered to be in immediate danger the police should be contacted.

> ***Any practitioner* working with a child who they think may be at risk of child sexual exploitation should follow the guidance set out in *Working Together* and share this information with local authority children's social care. You should refer any concerns about a child's welfare to local authority children's social care. If you believe a child is in immediate risk of harm, you should contact the police.**

Managers of services should ensure they are facilitating this type of sharing culture within their agencies and across their local multi-agency partnerships.

- All practitioners working with children and families should respond in ways that are:
- **Child-centred**: recognising children and young people's rights to participate in decisions about them in line with their maturity, and focusing on the needs of the child. Other considerations, such as the fear of damaging relationships with

children or adults, get in the way of protecting children from abuse and neglect. Practitioners should view a referral as the beginning of a process of inquiry, not as an accusation. Victims may be resistant to intervention and some may maintain links with their abusers, even after attempts to help protect them;

- **Developed and informed by the involvement of a child's family and carers wherever safe and appropriate:** a holistic assessment will take account of the wishes and feelings of children and the views of their parents/carers;
- **Responsive and pro-active**: everyone should be alert to the potential signs and indicators of child sexual exploitation, as well as other forms of abuse, and exercise professional curiosity in their day to day work. It is better to help children and young people as early as possible, before issues escalate and become more damaging;
- **Relationship-based:** practitioners should establish and maintain trusting relationships with children and young people, and continue to exercise professional curiosity and create safe spaces for disclosure; and
- **Informed by an understanding of the complexities of child sexual exploitation:** it is important to avoid language or actions that may lead a young person to feel they are not deserving of support or are in some way to blame for their abuse.

"All young people can be worked with. It's about finding the right worker..[and the professional] staying strong, staying tough and going along the roller-coaster ride with the young person…The worker needs to always be there to support you whenever you need it…It doesn't go away overnight. It takes time." (young person quoted in the consultation exercise for this advice, 2016)

What does the particular nature of exploitation mean for practice?

It is important that continued contact is not misinterpreted as informed choice or an indication of absence of harm. Practitioners should maintain their relationships with children and young people, and continue to exercise professional curiosity and create safe spaces for disclosure. Continued contact with perpetrators should be seen as part of the complex power dynamic of the abusive relationship, similar to that in some situations of domestic abuse. Practitioners should continue to reach out to victims and not make the offer of services dependent on formal disclosure. Many victims are only able to disclose after the provision of support, often months or even years down the line.

"I was throwing hints to people an all. I was throwing hints 'cause I didn't want it comin' out of my own mouth. I wanted people to work it out … I was getting myself drunk so I could come out with it, 'cause I couldn't say it when I was like sober. I was like 'I can't say it'" (young person cited in Beckett 2011)

Parents/carers, teachers, youth workers, other professional workers or, as is often the case, a mixture of the above may have a valuable perspective to add. This will inform the contextual understanding and help to identify changes that represent something more than adolescent behaviours (see online annexes covering adolescent development) and make sense of the range of vulnerabilities the child or young person may be facing. As *Working Together* makes clear, it is important all such perspectives, alongside that of the child/young person, are incorporated in all risk assessments.

Working with families

Parents and carers can feel excluded in work with children and young people who are, or who are at risk of being, sexually exploited by perpetrators external to the family. Where assessment shows it is safe and appropriate to do so, parents and families should be regarded as a part of the solution. It is crucial to work with them not only to assess the risks of harm faced by the young person or child but to help them understand what the young person has experienced, the risks they face and how they can be supported and protected. The parents may need direct support and help to improve family relationships and keep their child safe.

Section B – advice for managers and strategic leaders

Local authorities have overarching responsibility for safeguarding all children in their area. Their statutory functions under the 1989 and 2004 Children Act(s) include specific duties in relation to children in need and children suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm (under sections 17 and 47 of the Children Act 1989).

Local agencies, including the police and health services, also have a duty under section 11 of the Children Act 2004 to ensure they consider the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people when carrying out their functions.

Under section 10 of the Children Act 2004, these agencies are required to cooperate with local authorities to promote the wellbeing of children and young people in each local authority area. Practitioners are responsible for ensuring they fulfil their role and responsibilities in a manner consistent with the statutory duties of their employer.

An effective local multi-agency plan to combat child sexual exploitation requires clear leadership, guidance and support, delivered according to the overarching *Working Together* principles. It requires contributions from all multi-agency partners in accordance with local multi-agency arrangements. The effectiveness and implementation of multi-agency plans and arrangements to tackle child sexual exploitation should be monitored by the Local Safeguarding Children Board or its successor body. This should include ensuring joint-agency training is available.

Those planning an effective local multi-agency response to child sexual exploitation should follow the process for managing risk of harm to children and putting their needs first, as set out in *Working Together*.

Specifically, an effective response is one that:

- Is collaborative and multi-agency (including statutory, voluntary and community sectors) with clear roles and responsibilities and clear lines of communication and accountability;
- Has clear and purposeful leadership across local safeguarding partners;
- Is locally informed and based on an up-to-date understanding of the local problem profile, but also informed by national learning;
- Is underpinned by effective information sharing and intelligence sharing. All multi-agency partners should follow the guidance set out in *Working Together,* for example taking part in strategy discussion and child protection conferences;
- Locates child sexual exploitation within a wider context of risk and harm, and moves beyond a case by case response to identify wider patterns of concern;

- Encompasses preventative, protective (immediate safeguarding) and responsive approaches, focusing on both victims and perpetrators (and recognising the potential for overlap between the two);
- Provides help and ongoing support that is responsive to individual need, strengths-based in approach and available over the longer-term (recognising that disclosure, resilience-building and recovery can take time);
- Supports staff to 'work with risk,' where required, in order to support a young person to become an active partner in their recovery and reintegration and achieve longer term meaningful change rather than temporary enforced compliance;
- Provides a response to children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours that recognises their vulnerabilities and needs, is holistic and provides early help and specialist services to these children and young people and their parents/carers; and
- Provides a system for flagging or applying appropriate markers on to systems in order to ensure effective record keeping and retrieval and assist information sharing (this should be based on the policy definition of child sexual exploitation and not just the criminal offences of that name).

The child sexual exploitation context

- **Viewing child sexual exploitation within a wider continuum of exploitation, violence and abuse**: Child sexual exploitation is not a catch all category for all forms of sexual harm in adolescence. It should therefore be viewed within the wider continuum of sexual abuse and other relevant issues such as trafficking, modern slavery, domestic abuse and other gendered violence and going missing. The necessary focus on child sexual exploitation should not overshadow a focus on other manifestations of abuse.
- **Abuse outside of families:** Though child sexual exploitation can occur in the family, in most cases the response to exploitation may require services to consider a broader perspective than intra-familial child abuse. The response may need to address risk of harm posed outside the family home and draw in partners such as local businesses, licensing authorities, and other sectors. This reflects the context in which perpetrators are operating.
- **Agencies should move beyond a reactive approach:** (one that removes the individual from harm) to one that also addresses the existence of harm and/or proactively prevents that harm.
- **Local understanding:** Every area should have its own data and intelligence, of which child sexual exploitation should form a part. Local multi-agency plans should be based on an inter-agency assessment of the local profile of perpetration. This

requires effective local arrangements for sharing and collating intelligence and other information about communities, environments, perpetrators and victims.

- **Engaging with diversity:** The evidence base demonstrates that some cohorts of children and young people – males, children with disabilities, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender and Black and Minority Ethnic children, for example – may be less likely to have their abuse identified or responded to. Local areas should ensure responses are accessible, relevant and sensitive to the needs of all children and young people.
- **Cross-area working:** Cases of child sexual exploitation frequently cross local authority, police force and even country boundaries in terms of the movement of both perpetrators and victims. A singular area focus cannot therefore adequately capture patterns of harm and risk.
- **Inter-agency working:** While significant progress has been made here, challenges remain. Important areas for improvement include:
    - the practical implementation of information sharing guidance;
    - common risk assessment processes, as set out in *Working Together*, that follow an evidence-based model which looks at risk factors, vulnerability, protective factors and resilience and which prioritises professional judgement and does not rely on simplistic scoring;
    - clarity about professional roles and thresholds for action across universal, targeted and specialist services;
    - more effective sharing and recording of intelligence;
    - better co-ordination of statutory and voluntary sector services; and
    - more streamlined management of multiple agencies' engagement with victims and their families.

- Enhancing children's and young people's **resilience and strengthening the protective factors** around them are critical strands of prevention. Resilience is about being able to overcome adversities and avoid negative consequences. It is not a character trait; it involves both internal capabilities and external resources. Resilience is therefore never a substitute for support.
- **Openness to learning and improvement**: There has been considerable learning in recent years around how better to identify and respond to child sexual exploitation. Sources of support and how to access learning in this area can be found in the online annexes.

Prevention

The harmful effects of child sexual exploitation are serious and far-reaching for victims, their families and wider communities. The ideal is therefore to prevent the abuse happening in the first place. This section focuses on how we can protect children and young people through awareness-raising and resilience-building work.

A local multi-agency plan should:

- Educate all children and young people about the nature and risks of child sexual exploitation and other forms of related harm (both online and offline) and how to access support;
- Recognise that children and young people can be both victims and perpetrators of child sexual exploitation;
- Promote the resilience of children and young people and their families and strengthen the protective factors around them;
- Identify and support those settings, such as schools and colleges, in which children and young people can form healthy and safe relationships;
- Supplement universal initiatives with targeted work with groups of particularly vulnerable children and young people, such as those in care, whilst being careful not to stigmatise specific groups;
- Provide complementary messages to parents and carers about risks to their children (online and offline) and how to access support if they have concerns.
- Consider the levels of knowledge and understanding of the wider workforce, so that everyone working with children and young people can play their role in prevention; and
- Educate the wider community so they can identify and report concerns and seek support.

Although messages and methods of delivery will vary according to the nature and needs of the audience, all education and awareness raising initiatives should:

- Be grounded in an evidence-based understanding of child sexual exploitation (both online and offline);
- Challenge myths and misconceptions about who is perpetrating and experiencing this form of abuse;
- Send a clear message that all forms of child sexual exploitation are abuse;
- Recognise the potential overlap between victims and perpetrators;
- Challenge any victim-blaming and promote the rights of all victims to protection and support;

- Provide information on where and how to report concerns and access support; and
- Be inclusive and accessible to the intended audience, in terms of language and delivery methods and ensure information is tailored and relevant to diverse groups such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Black and Minority Ethnic and/or deaf or disabled children and young people.

Educating practitioners

- **Readiness of the professional workforce**: *Working Together* recognises that everyone who works with children has a responsibility for keeping them safe – that includes all those those who work in social care, adult services, education, health settings, early years, youth work, youth justice, the police, and voluntary and community workers. Local safeguarding arrangements should provide high-quality training and other learning and developmental activities that are rooted in evidence, tailored to different professional groups and responsive to local learning needs.
- **Staff support and supervision**: Creating the right organisational environment and ensuring good quality professional leadership and practice supervision are essential for developing and sustaining effective practice. Supervision can help to:
    - ensure progress and actions are reviewed so cases do not ‘drift’;
    - maintain focus on the child or young person;
    - test the evidence base for assessment and intervention;
    - address the emotional impact of the work on the practitioner; and
    - support reflective practice and help practitioners recognise where personal values and attitudes might be leading to risky practice, assumptions or ‘blind spots’.

All practitioners working with children and young people, whether in specialist or universal roles, should:

- Ensure they are aware of local multi-agency protocols in relation to child sexual exploitation;
- Recognise learning and development around this as an essential part of their role;
- Discuss learning needs in relation to child sexual exploitation with their supervisor or manager;
- Identify and access training opportunities that reflect their professional role (online annexes provides an overview of key messages that training should cover);
- Reflect on learning from training and other activity with their manager, and consider how it will impact on practice;

- Review their learning needs over time, striving to continuously improve their knowledge, skills and understanding; and
- Actively engage in supervision and use it as an opportunity to test out thinking, have practice constructively challenged and discuss support needs.

Professional training and local protocols should clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of different practitioners in safeguarding children from harm (see *Working Together*). Training should address the complexities of identifying and responding to child sexual exploitation, emphasising:

- Practitioners' safeguarding responsibilities and local reporting routes;
- Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse;
- Child sexual exploitation can take many different forms (online and offline) and affect any child or young person;
- All under 18s are entitled to protection and support and that safeguarding duties do not depend on a child or young person's desire to be safeguarded;
- The need to understand the impact of trauma on behaviour and presentation;
- The need to look beyond presenting behaviours and exercise 'professional curiosity';
- The need to apply professional judgment, supported by effective supervision and robust tools, in decision-making and practice;
- The power of professional reactions to facilitate or close down access to support and protection;
- The practical implementation of information sharing guidance where there are concerns about child sexual exploitation; and
- The development of practical skills in facilitating conversations with children and young people, and with their parents/carers.

Training alone is not sufficient to ensure a skilled and confident workforce, however. Training should be accompanied by:

- Opportunities to learn from other practitioners – for example, shadowing, co-working and peer observation;
- Ongoing high-quality supervision;
- A focus on reflective practice to help practitioners navigate complexity; and
- A recognition of the emotional impact that such work can have on practitioners, and access to support in order to manage this.

Educating children and young people

Although there is not as yet any proven blueprint for the most effective means of communicating messages around child sexual exploitation to children and young people, the evidence base highlights some important principles:

- **The need for early and continuous education**: We are increasingly learning about cases of child sexual exploitation that involve younger children, particularly in the online sphere. If children and young people are not educated about the risk of child sexual exploitation (and other forms of sexual abuse) before perpetrators approach them, they are left unprotected. Schools may want to consider how to build in effective, age-appropriate education, which sensitively supports younger children on these issues and which forms part of a planned programme of study across key stages. This should be accompanied by wider resilience-building work.
- **Use all potential avenues of communication**: Schools, colleges and other educational settings have a critical role to play. Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) lessons are an obvious route for educating children and young people about the risks of child sexual exploitation and other forms of harm, as are pastoral services and school nurse services. Consideration should also be given to how messages can be delivered outside mainstream education, for example, in youth clubs, community settings or the family home.
- **Adopt a holistic approach**: Risk of child sexual exploitation should be addressed as part of a wider programme of work on sexuality and sexual development, choice and consent, healthy relationships, harmful social norms and abusive behaviours and online safety. This should build on existing initiatives (around online safety for example) and ensure messages dovetail across these different programmes of work. Educative work should engage both boys and girls and should address both risk of perpetration and risk of victimisation (and the potential for overlap).
- **Contextual considerations**: Messages around child sexual exploitation should be delivered within a safe non-judgmental environment, by credible individuals who are confident discussing the issues and able to challenge unhelpful perceptions. Where specific vulnerabilities are identified (going missing, gang-association or drug/alcohol misuse, for example) more targeted educative work should be undertaken, while taking care to avoid stigmatisation or labelling. Accessible and appropriate support should be immediately available should any issues of concern be identified during education activity.

Educating parents and carers

Parents and carers have a critical role to play in helping to protect children and young people from child sexual exploitation. They can educate their children about sex, healthy relationships and abuse, enhance resilience, provide a safe base and ensure open

channels of communication. They are also well placed to support early identification by identifying emerging vulnerabilities or potential indicators of abuse and seeking support before risks escalate. In order to support them, practitioners should ensure that parents/carers:

- Understand the risks of both online and offline child sexual exploitation and recognise this as something that could affect their child;
- Know the potential indicators of child sexual exploitation;
- Know where and how to access support;
- Are reassured that services will, as appropriate, work in partnership with them to try to protect their child;
- Have support to manage the emotional impact of child sexual exploitation on their child, themselves and on family relationships; and
- Have support that is tailored to their specific circumstances and needs, for example, support that recognises their culture or faith, and are helped to overcome any barriers such as language.

Educating communities

Harnessing the wider community: Those who do not necessarily 'work with children' also have a contribution to make to tackling child sexual exploitation. Hoteliers, taxi drivers, park wardens, refuse collectors and retail workers (amongst others) may hold vital information about the movement of victims and perpetrators. Emergency services, including the Fire and Ambulance Services, and local community and religious groups can also play a key role. Educating those who work in local services and businesses (including the night-time economy) about what to look for, and how to report concerns, can significantly enhance local disruption and protective capabilities.

This focus should also include members of the wider local community who may observe concerns within their areas – for example, those living near a party house location who may see victims coming and going. Educating people about child sexual exploitation, the things to look out for and where to report concerns, will significantly enhance the protective capabilities of our communities.

Department for Education

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