



Safeguarding Children at Risk of Exploitation

All Services

(This procedure does not apply to BFSWS)

Guidance & Procedure

This procedure sets out how staff, foster parents, and adopters who support children and young people must identify, respond to, and report concerns relating to **Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)**.

As part of Polaris community, the term 'foster parent' is preferred but it is recognised that 'foster carer' is also used in legislation and within the community. The term '*Adopters*' is used throughout procedures but depending on the context, it may refer to potential adopters, prospective adopters, or those adopters for whom an adoption order has already been granted.

The term *child* refers to anyone under the age of 18. Where information applies specifically to older children, the term *young person* is used.

In Scotland, an adult is legally defined as anyone aged 16 or over, while the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 defines a child as under 18. Therefore, both Child Protection and Adult Protection frameworks apply to those aged 16–18. Following consultation with the relevant Local Authority/Trust, agencies should normally implement Child Protection procedures unless advised that Adult Protection legislation is more appropriate.

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Purpose

This document provides both mandatory procedural requirements and practice guidance to support foster parents, adopters, caregivers, and staff in recognising, responding to, and reporting child exploitation.

It explains how concerns relating to child exploitation are identified, reported, shared, and responded to in a consistent, child-centred way.

Child exploitation involves the use of a child for another person's advantage, gratification, or profit, and often results in unjust, harmful, or abusive treatment. Such exploitation can have a significant negative impact on a child's physical and mental health, education, and moral, social, or emotional development.

Child exploitation is commonly categorised into two main forms:

- **Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)**
- **Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)**

Note: Child Sexual Exploitation is defined consistently across UK statutory guidance, with nationally published definitions. The Crime and Policing Act introduced new offences and,

while there is not a single definition, professionals now have a clearer understanding of the offence. The government has also committed to introducing a legal definition of child criminal exploitation which will sit alongside existing legislation in new guidance.

CSE and CCE frequently involve similar patterns of grooming, manipulation, coercion, and power imbalance. Children may be targeted in the same ways, moved into unsafe situations, or controlled through fear, threats, or rewards. Because of this, some indicators of risk will appear across both forms of exploitation.

This procedure and guidance separates CSE and CCE to support clarity; however, overlap is expected and intentional. Each section identifies the signs most strongly linked to that specific type of exploitation, while recognising that many children experience both simultaneously.

What is Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)?

As Child Sexual Exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse, mandatory reporting duties apply. Staff and carers must follow the Mandatory Reporting section of the Safeguarding Children Procedure in all cases where sexual abuse is known or suspected.

Definitions of CSE for all nations are set out in Appendix 1. Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It involves a child or young person being coerced, manipulated, or deceived into sexual activity in return for something they perceive they need or want, such as money, gifts, drugs, affection, or status.

Young people may be encouraged to believe they are in a genuine, loving, or consensual relationship, which can make the exploitation difficult to recognise. This process—known as *grooming*—is a form of abuse. Children may trust the individual exploiting them and may not realise they are being harmed.

Exploitation does not always involve physical contact. It can occur online or through the use of technology, including the exchange of images or communication of a sexual nature.

Some children and young people are trafficked within or into the UK for the purpose of sexual exploitation. They may be moved to different locations and pressured or forced into sexual activities, sometimes involving multiple perpetrators. Sexual exploitation can also occur in the context of criminal or gang-associated activity.

Those who exploit children may use threats, intimidation, violence, or financial control to maintain power. This can include lending money that cannot be repaid, using blackmail, or creating a sense that the child has no alternative but to comply.

Perpetrators can be of any age, gender, background, or relationship to the child. They may present themselves as a friend, mentor, or romantic partner. Young people who are being exploited may also be pressured to recruit or introduce other children.

Although the legal age of consent is 16, young people aged 16 and 17 can still be victims of sexual exploitation. CSE is a complex form of abuse that is often difficult for families to identify and challenging for young people to recognise or disclose.

The Polaris Community operates across more than one UK nation. Safeguarding practice must therefore be carried out in line with the relevant national statutory guidance and local safeguarding arrangements in the country in which the child is placed.

(See Appendix 1 – National Definitions of Child Sexual Exploitation.)

Types of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

Child sexual exploitation can occur either **in person** or **online**. Individuals who perpetrate CSE may attempt to build trust, create dependency, or use threats, intimidation, or violence to gain control before the exploitation takes place. This process can happen very quickly.

Online exploitation

When exploitation occurs online, a child or young person may be pressured, persuaded, or forced to:

- share or upload sexual images of themselves
- take part in sexual activities via webcam, livestreaming, or video recording
- engage in sexualised conversations or exchanges

Once an abuser obtains images, recordings, or messages, they may use them to threaten, coerce, or blackmail the young person into further harmful activity. These materials may also be shared with others or distributed online, increasing the harm and the child's sense of fear or shame.

Exploitation linked to gangs or groups

Within gangs or organised groups, sexual exploitation may be used as a means of:

- asserting authority or control
- initiating new members
- using sexual violence or threats as a form of punishment or intimidation

Children or young people may be invited or taken to parties or gatherings—often with peers or adults—where they may be given drugs or alcohol. In these environments, they can be

pressured, assaulted, or sexually abused by one or multiple individuals. Such abuse is degrading, can be violent, and is deeply harmful.

It is essential to recognise that a child or young person cannot consent to sexual activity if they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or if they are being manipulated, intimidated, or controlled.

Signs of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

Recognising child sexual exploitation can be challenging. Many indicators can be misunderstood as typical adolescent behaviour, which is why it is vital to remain alert to changes or patterns that cause concern.

Possible indicators of exploitation

A child or young person may show one or more of the following signs:

- Engaging in sexual behaviour that is inappropriate for their age or context
- Showing fear or anxiety around specific people, places, or situations
- Being unusually secretive or withdrawn
- Sudden, unexplained changes in their mood, behaviour, or personality
- Shifts in family dynamics, including conflict or distancing
- Possessing money, items, or gifts they cannot explain (e.g. hotel key cards, new clothing, technology, jewellery)
- Physical indicators of harm, such as unexplained injuries
- Noticeable changes in appearance, hygiene, or style of dress
- Misuse of drugs or alcohol
- Diagnosis of a sexually transmitted infection
- Seeking emergency contraception unexpectedly
- Becoming pregnant

Additional concerning behaviours

There may also be more subtle or behavioural signs, such as:

- Having a significantly older partner they describe as a boyfriend or girlfriend
- Staying out late, going missing, or spending nights away without explanation
- Developing new friendships or social groups, particularly with older individuals
- Frequently going missing from home, care, school, or college
- Spending time with peers or adults known to be vulnerable or involved in antisocial behaviour
- Association with gangs or group-related activity
- Involvement in criminal behaviour such as theft, drug dealing, or carrying substances

What is Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)?

Child criminal exploitation is a form of child abuse in which a child or young person is manipulated, coerced, or forced into carrying out criminal activities. This may involve any type of unlawful behaviour, and the child may be controlled through intimidation, grooming, threats, or the promise of reward.

Children who are criminally exploited can experience a wide range of harms, including physical, emotional, psychological, and financial harm. Exploitation may occur in person, online, or through networks of individuals or organised groups.

The Polaris Community operates across more than one UK nation. Safeguarding practice in relation to Child Criminal Exploitation must be carried out in line with the relevant national statutory guidance and local safeguarding arrangements in the country in which the child is placed.

(See Appendix 2 – National Guidance on Child Criminal Exploitation.)

Recent legislative changes have strengthened criminal offences and police powers in relation to weapons, serious violence, retail crime, and organised criminal activity. These changes may increase the likelihood of children and young people being identified through enforcement activity. Where a child is involved in criminal behaviour, staff must consider whether this reflects coercion, grooming, or exploitation, and ensure that safeguarding responses take precedence over criminal justice processes.

Types of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)

There is currently no single statutory definition of child criminal exploitation, although the government has committed to introducing a legal definition through updated guidance.

While the term is sometimes used interchangeably with *county lines*, county lines activity represents only one aspect of CCE. Children and young people may be exploited in a range of criminal activities beyond drug-related networks.

Criminal exploitation can involve any situation where a child is manipulated, pressured, or forced to commit offences for the benefit of others. This may include activities such as theft, begging, organised shoplifting, trafficking, financial exploitation, or involvement in violence. Exploitation can occur within peer groups, organised crime groups, gangs, or through adults who target vulnerable children.

This includes organised retail theft or shoplifting, where children may be directed to steal goods, transport stolen items, or generate income for others. Children may be controlled through threats, intimidation, or fabricated debts, placing them at risk of further exploitation and criminalisation.

Signs That a Young Person May Be Experiencing Criminal Exploitation

Guidance from national safeguarding bodies indicates that certain behaviours or changes may suggest a child or young person is being criminally exploited. These signs do not confirm exploitation on their own, but they should prompt professional curiosity and further assessment.

Possible indicators include:

- Regularly going missing from home, school, or care settings
- Travelling to places with no clear reason, including unfamiliar areas, coastal towns, market towns, or other parts of their city
- Being unwilling to explain their movements or providing vague or inconsistent accounts
- Possessing money, clothes, jewellery, phones, or other items they cannot reasonably explain
- Receiving large numbers of calls or messages, often at unusual hours
- Having multiple mobile phones or SIM cards, including devices used for encrypted or app-based communication
- Becoming anxious, secretive, or defensive about online activity, or receiving/sending unexplained payments, gifts, or gaming currency
- Withdrawal from friends or sudden changes in behaviour, personality, or language
- Forming relationships with older individuals or groups, or relationships marked by control or intimidation
- Unexplained injuries that may indicate violence or coercion
- Carrying weapons or items that could be used as weapons
- A significant decline in school engagement or academic performance
- Isolation from usual social circles, spending time with new or unknown peers
- Interest in, or association with, gang culture
- Self-harm, deteriorating mental health, or dramatic changes in emotional wellbeing

These signs should always be considered within the wider context of the child's life, and concerns should be escalated through safeguarding procedures without delay.

County Lines

County lines refers to a form of child criminal exploitation where organised criminal groups or gangs use children and young people to transport, store, or distribute drugs, as well as to move money linked to drug supply. Children may be directed to travel within their local area or be sent to other parts of the country, including smaller towns, rural areas, and coastal communities.

This type of exploitation can take place anywhere in the UK. It is illegal and is recognised as a serious form of child abuse. Children involved in county lines activity are often targeted because of their vulnerability, and may be groomed, coerced, or threatened into taking part.

Carrying Weapons

Children and young people who are criminally exploited may be exposed to, or pressured into handling, a range of weapons. This can include knives, firearms, and harmful substances such as sprays or corrosive liquids. They may also be instructed to store weapons for others or transport them between different locations.

Some children may carry a weapon because they feel unsafe or believe it is necessary for their own protection. Research shows that young people are disproportionately affected by incidents involving knives, highlighting their increased vulnerability.

Being found in possession of a weapon is recognised as a potential indicator of criminal exploitation. Repeated possession may lead to criminal consequences such as detention or custodial sentences, depending on the child's age and the circumstances. While involvement with the justice system can sometimes allow access to support, it can also be distressing, impact trust in services, and contribute to ongoing cycles of exploitation.

Where a child or young person is found in possession of a weapon, including in circumstances involving arrest or police investigation, this must be treated as a potential safeguarding indicator. Police action or criminal investigation does not negate the possibility of exploitation and must trigger immediate review of the child's risk assessment, safety planning, and safeguarding arrangements.

Other Forms of Forced Criminal Activity

Children and young people may be coerced, directed, or threatened into taking part in a variety of criminal activities for the benefit of others, including:

- participating in *cuckooing* or forced home invasion, where properties are taken over to facilitate criminal operations
- cultivating cannabis or other illegal substances
- committing theft, shoplifting, pickpocketing, or begging to generate income for those exploiting them

These activities frequently involve significant risk, trauma, and long-term harm.

Financial Exploitation

Financial exploitation is a form of child criminal exploitation where a child or young person is pressured, manipulated, or threatened into handling money on behalf of someone else. This may involve the child being used to conceal, transfer, or manage funds that benefit the exploiter.

Children may be made to move or store money through:

- physical cash, often passed between locations or individuals
- their existing bank accounts, which may be accessed or controlled by the exploiter
- cryptocurrency accounts or digital wallets, used to move money anonymously
- new bank accounts opened in the child's name, which are then taken over by the person exploiting them

This type of exploitation can expose children to financial harm, criminal consequences, and long-term difficulties with banking or credit.

Perpetrators of Child Criminal Exploitation

Individuals who exploit children for criminal purposes do not always operate within organised crime groups or gangs. While some perpetrators are connected to structured networks, others act alone or within family and community settings. Children may be exploited by adults they know, peers, or individuals who target vulnerable young people for personal gain.

Organised Crime

Organised crime groups (OCGs) are typically structured networks made up of individuals engaged in serious criminal activity. These groups often have significant resources, operate in a coordinated way, and may function across local, national, or even international areas.

Children and young people can be targeted and exploited by OCGs for a range of purposes. For example, in county lines activity, organised criminal groups may involve children in the movement or supply of drugs in order to protect their own members from direct involvement and to increase profits. Using children enables perpetrators to distance themselves from frontline criminal activity while placing the risk and harm onto young people.

Gangs

Gangs—or “urban street gangs”—generally operate on a smaller and more localised scale than organised crime groups, though there may be overlap or connections between the two. These groups can exert significant influence within their communities and may target vulnerable children and young people for involvement.

Perpetrators may use incentives such as drugs, alcohol, status, or belonging to draw young people into gang-related activity. In some cases, children may be associated with a gang simply because of where they live, who they spend time with, or family connections. They may not see themselves as gang members, even if they are being exploited or involved in criminal activity.

Children and young people can also be groomed, pressured, or coerced into taking on roles of responsibility within a gang structure. In some situations, they may be deliberately placed in debt—for example, through fabricated drug debts—creating a form of control often referred to as *debt bondage*.

Conflict between rival groups can place young people at significant risk. Violence linked to territorial disputes or retaliation can lead to serious harm or fatalities, including for children who are not directly involved but are caught in unsafe situations.

Impact of Child Exploitation

Child exploitation can expose children and young people to many different kinds of harm. Alongside the immediate risks of intimidation, violence and unsafe situations, the impact can be long-term and far-reaching.

Children who are exploited may experience lasting effects on their physical and emotional wellbeing, their development, and their future opportunities. Exploitation can disrupt education, damage relationships, and create barriers to trusting professionals or engaging with support services. The consequences can remain with a young person into adulthood, affecting their mental health, their sense of safety, and their ability to access help when they need it.

Physical Abuse and Violence

Children and young people who are criminally exploited may be exposed to significant physical danger. This can include direct physical abuse, serious acts of violence, and in extreme cases, life-threatening harm.

Some of the physical risks and harms associated with criminal exploitation include:

- being pressured or forced to use, handle, or consume drugs
- experiencing physical assaults
- involvement in serious violence, including incidents involving knives or firearms
- exposure to harmful substances, such as corrosive liquids, used as weapons
- risk of fatal injury

Children may also be coerced into harming others, including carrying out assaults on behalf of those exploiting them. Acts of retaliation are often used as a method of control, and the fear of violent consequences—such as being punished for “snitching” or refusing instructions—can prevent young people from seeking help or leaving the situation.

In some forms of criminal exploitation, children are forced to transport drugs in ways that pose significant risks to their health. This may involve swallowing drug packages or carrying them internally, which can be extremely dangerous and potentially life-threatening if the substances leak or rupture.

Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Professionals must be aware that sexual abuse and sexual exploitation can affect children and young people of **any** gender or sexual orientation. These forms of abuse may occur alongside child criminal exploitation, and in some cases, children—particularly girls—may be targeted for sexual exploitation as part of the wider pattern of control.

Sexual abuse and exploitation can happen within criminal exploitation in various ways, including:

- being pressured, coerced, or forced to engage in sexual activity with the perpetrator or others, sometimes for financial gain
- being required to “repay” fabricated drug debts or meet other demands through sexual acts, often after being made dependent on substances
- being groomed into believing they are in a romantic or special relationship, which is then used to manipulate and exploit them

In some situations, children are made to carry drugs in invasive ways involving their body. This practice—where substances are inserted into the rectum or vagina—is a serious form of sexual abuse and can pose severe health risks, including potentially fatal consequences if the drugs leak or rupture.

Missing from Home

Going missing is a significant indicator of exploitation, and children who regularly run away are at heightened risk of being moved into unsafe environments by exploiters. It is therefore essential to consider how any planned actions may affect a child’s safety, ensuring we do not unintentionally increase the likelihood of them going missing or being drawn further into exploitative situations.

Clear written records of agreed actions, decisions, and responsibilities must always be maintained. This enables staff to evidence what has been done, what has occurred, and what the next steps will be.

The *Child Missing or Away Without Authorisation Procedure* should be followed in all cases, recognising that missing episodes often overlap with exploitation and may signal that a child is being controlled, coerced, or relocated.

Any unauthorised absence should be treated as a critical incident and recorded in line with the relevant Monitoring and Notifiable Events Procedure. Accurate recording is essential, as it helps identify any patterns or regularity in a child being absent without permission, or missing.

Return Home Interviews (or equivalent) must be offered to all children. The LA child's Social Worker is responsible for ensuring that these interviews are completed. Some agencies leave the responsibility to the LA to carry out the interviews and conduct their own visit to confirm that the child is safe and well, but this is not referred to as a Return Home Interview. However, a coordinated approach is necessary, and professional judgement should be used to determine who is best placed to speak with the child in order to complete a timely, independent Return Home Interview.

For Polaris Children's Services (PCS), the Local Authority (LA) Social Worker, or the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) if out-of-hours, would be notified. Staff would then follow LA guidance on how to proceed. A Critical Incident Report would be completed by the staff member.

For Scotland - The National Missing Person Framework 2025 does not specify the LASW is responsible. The appropriate agency responsible for conducting a return discussion should be identified and agreed by local multi-agency partnership and ideally outlined within a local missing protocol.

Exposure to Unsafe Environments

This issue is relevant across all services particularly where children experience instability or go missing.

Children who are sexually or criminally exploited may be moved to, or kept in, unsafe accommodation during missing episodes. This can include temporary housing such as hotels, short-term lets, or unfamiliar properties. In some cases, children may be placed in addresses linked to exploitation, including properties that have been taken over by others for criminal activity (known as *cuckooing*).

This risk should be considered:

- when a child goes missing or is frequently absent
- when there are unexplained changes in behaviour, routines, or associations

- during post-care and leaving-care planning, where reduced supervision or housing vulnerability may increase risk

The indicators such as repeated missing episodes, unclear explanations of where a child has been staying, sudden access to money or items, reluctance to return to placements, or signs of fear or coercion are all important signs to look out for.

Children may feel unable to leave these unsafe places because the people exploiting them have deliberately isolated them from family, friends, and other support networks. They may also be threatened with harm to themselves or their families if they attempt to escape or tell anyone what is happening. As a result, children can become trapped in exploitation, believing they have no safe way out.

Mental Health Problems and Trauma

Children and young people who are criminally exploited may develop new mental health difficulties or see existing issues worsen as a result of the abuse and coercion they experience. The impact on emotional wellbeing can be significant and long-lasting.

Young people may experience:

- feelings of fear, isolation, anger, or helplessness
- changes in behaviour, including aggression or becoming withdrawn
- intense anger or sudden mood swings
- difficulty trusting others, increased suspicion, or hypervigilance
- anxiety, low mood, or symptoms linked to depression, self-harm/suicide attempts
- substance misuse

The criminal activities they are forced to participate in can be traumatic in themselves. These experiences may also lead to distressing interactions with services such as the police or social care, which can reinforce feelings of mistrust or fear and make it harder for them to engage with support.

Professionals should also be aware of the emotional impact that comes with recognising that someone they trusted has exploited or abused them. Coming to terms with this betrayal can be deeply traumatic and may require specialist support.

Criminalisation

Children and young people who are criminally exploited may be viewed or treated as offenders if professionals do not recognise that the behaviour they are displaying is a result of abuse. When exploitation is not identified, children may be criminalised instead of being safeguarded, which can prevent them from receiving the protection and support they urgently need.

Exploitation can also shape how children see themselves. They may start to believe the negative labels used against them or feel responsible for their situation. This can influence how they behave with professionals and how those professionals interpret their actions. If the possibility of exploitation is not considered early, or is overlooked altogether, children may be drawn deeper into the criminal justice system rather than being supported as victims of abuse.

It is essential that all professionals understand that involvement in criminal activity does not negate a child's right to safeguarding. A child who has been coerced, groomed, or forced to commit offences is first and foremost a victim.

The expansion of criminal offences and enforcement powers increases the risk that exploited children may be misidentified as offenders. It is essential that professionals maintain a clear distinction between offending behaviour and exploitation, ensuring that children are safeguarded as victims of abuse rather than subject to punitive responses.

Recognising Child Exploitation

Any child or young person, regardless of their background, upbringing, or circumstances, can be at risk of exploitation. However, certain factors in a child's life may increase their vulnerability and make them more likely to be targeted by individuals or groups seeking to exploit them.

Child exploitation does not follow a single pattern. The process can vary widely and may involve grooming, coercion, manipulation, threats, or violence. Children may be approached in person, online, through peers, or by adults they already know. Exploiters often adapt their tactics to the individual child's circumstances, making recognition complex and requiring professional curiosity and vigilance.

The Process of Exploitation

Child exploitation can be carried out by individuals or groups and can involve perpetrators of any gender, background, or nationality. Although methods vary, exploitation typically involves a significant power imbalance in which adults—or older young people—target and manipulate a child for their own benefit.

Common Stages in the Exploitation Process

Exploitation often follows a pattern that may include:

- Identifying and targeting a child
Children may be approached by adults or by older young people who are themselves being exploited. Those perceived as vulnerable are more likely to be singled out.

- Building a relationship or connection
Perpetrators may offer something the child needs or desires, such as money, food, clothing, attention, protection, a sense of belonging, or the feeling of being valued.
- Establishing control
Once trust is gained, exploiters use coercion, manipulation, intimidation, threats, violence, or grooming tactics to trap the child in the situation and make it difficult for them to leave.

Online Exploitation

Digital platforms provide an additional route through which perpetrators can groom, control, or recruit children into criminal activity. This can happen in several ways, including:

- Using social media to glamorise or normalise criminal lifestyles, making them appear exciting, lucrative, or socially desirable
- Posting seemingly legitimate job offers that entice children into criminal roles without initially revealing the true nature of the activity
- Engaging with children through gaming platforms, where in-game currencies, rewards, or status may be used to manipulate or pressure them
- Using technology to track or monitor a child's movements, location, or communications, restricting their freedom and increasing their dependency on—or fear of—the exploiter
- Online exploitation can occur alongside face-to-face exploitation, or be used to maintain control over children who are geographically distant
- Where sexual extortion involves a child, it is treated as a form of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), even when the offender's primary motivation is financial rather than sexual gratification. The coercive use of sexual images constitutes sexual abuse. Sexual extortion in which offenders coerce, threaten, or manipulate a young person into providing sexual images or engaging in behaviour that can then be used to blackmail them for money, further images, or other forms of control. Offenders often operate through social media, gaming platforms, or messaging apps, using false identities to gain trust before issuing threats. Any concerns related to sexual extortion must be treated as safeguarding and criminal matters and reported in line with the Online Safety practice guidance and procedures.

Who Is Vulnerable to Child Exploitation

While any child or young person can be at risk of exploitation, research shows that certain circumstances or experiences may increase a child's vulnerability and make them more likely to be targeted by perpetrators.

Recent National Referral Mechanism data shows that around 75% of referrals flagged as county lines exploitation involve male children. Children in care, those experiencing

economic vulnerability, or substance misuse issues are particularly at risk. Government statistics in 2025 reported that CCE was a factor for 16,250 children in their care assessments.

Factors that may raise the level of risk include:

- experiencing neglect or physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- living in an unsafe or unstable home environment, including exposure to domestic abuse
- social isolation, difficulties forming relationships, or limited support networks
- feeling marginalised, excluded, or disconnected from peers or wider society
- economic hardship or poverty, which may create pressure or make children more susceptible to financial manipulation
- homelessness or insecure accommodation
- associations with others involved in gangs or criminal activity
- having a physical or learning disability, which may make it harder to recognise or resist exploitation
- existing mental health challenges
- substance use or dependency
- being in care or having a history of involvement with the care system
- exclusion from mainstream education, including suspensions or permanent exclusions
- previous contact with the criminal justice system

Permanent exclusion from school is recognised as a particularly significant risk factor. Losing access to structured education, peer support, and trusted adults can leave a young person feeling rejected or isolated. Perpetrators may exploit these vulnerabilities by offering a sense of belonging, purpose, or identity that the young person feels they have lost.

Persistent absence, reduced school engagement, or disengagement from education should be treated as potential indicators of increased vulnerability to exploitation, in line with strengthened national expectations on attendance and wellbeing.

Government-commissioned research shows a strong link between exclusion from education and vulnerability to criminal exploitation. The Department for Education–funded review on exclusion and child exploitation found that permanent exclusion can act as an escalation point on an existing risk trajectory, whereas regular school attendance provides a significant protective effect.

The national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel has also reported that children suffering serious harm through criminal exploitation often have disrupted relationships with education, emphasising the crucial role schools play in protection.

Together, this evidence reinforces that losing access to school increases exposure to perpetrators and heightens the risk of severe harm

How to Respond when a child tells you about exploitation

In line with *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, the following principles must be followed if a child discloses exploitation:

- Listen calmly and take what the child says seriously
- Reassure the child that they have done the right thing by telling you
- Do not ask leading questions or press for details — allow the child to share what they want to say
- Do not express shock, disbelief, or judgement
- Do not promise to keep secrets
- Explain, in an age-appropriate way, what will happen next and who the information will be shared with to help keep them safe
- Record the information shared as soon as possible, using the child's own words, and report it immediately in line with this procedure

Matching and Placing

(not applicable to PCS)

- It is important that, at the point a foster placement, adoptive placement, residential placement, or supported accommodation placement is being considered for a child or young person, any known or potential risks of sexual or criminal exploitation are identified, assessed, and recorded as part of the matching and placement process
- A placement should only be made where carers, staff, or providers are assessed as capable of managing the identified risks, with appropriate safeguards and support in place. Consideration should also be given to whether additional training, resources, or specialist support are required to enable the placement to safely meet the child or young person's needs
- When considering a placement, it is essential to take account of the local environment, including neighbourhood factors and any relevant community or Local Authority intelligence. Where a proposed placement is declined by the Local Authority due to concerns about location-based risk or identified exploitation "hotspots", referral teams must ensure this decision is clearly recorded, for Fostering, this will be on Charms under the progress item "*Referral – Offered – Location declined by LA (exploitation)*"

Review and Updating of Risk Assessments

Each child or young person must have an individual risk assessment. This risk assessment must be reviewed and updated regularly throughout the placement, including:

- at the point of placement and thereafter at least 6 or 12 months in line with individual agency requirements
- following any significant incident, or safeguarding concern
- when there is a change in the child's behaviour, circumstances, or associations
- when new information or professional intelligence becomes available.

Any increase in identified risk must result in immediate review of safeguarding measures and escalation in line with this procedure.

PCS are not responsible for completing the risk assessments for the placement. However, they would work with the LA and review and complete safety plans with parents/carers if their child is going missing regularly to manage these situations.

Procedure to follow

Children and young people involved in criminal activity as a result of exploitation are victims of abuse. All actions taken under this procedure must prioritise safeguarding, welfare, and protection, and must not be delayed or displaced by criminal justice processes.

What to Do If You Are Concerned About a Child being exploited

All actions must be taken in line with this procedure and the principles set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children (Department for Education), including early sharing of information, a child-centred approach, and appropriate multi-agency working.

1. Report Immediately

- Foster parents, adopters, and staff must contact their Supervising Social Worker, LA Social Worker or equivalent as soon as a concern arises by telephone and to Out of Hours if necessary
- **If the child is in immediate danger**, call **999** without delay, then notify the child's Social Worker as soon as it is safe to do so.

2. Do Not Investigate or Promise Confidentiality

- Do not attempt to investigate the concern yourself, question the child in detail, gather evidence, or confront any alleged perpetrators

- Do not take actions that could place the child or others at further risk
- Do not promise confidentiality. Reassure the child that you have listened and explain that the information must be shared with professionals who can help keep them safe, in line with safeguarding guidance

3. Inform Line Management

- The concern must be shared immediately with the SSW, line manager or equivalent, who must inform their Manager without delay by telephone or Out of Hours if necessary.

The Manager will provide oversight, guidance, and ensure safeguarding procedures are followed.

4. Referral to the Local Authority

- The Manager or SSW or equivalent must make a safeguarding referral to Local Authority Children's Services immediately by telephone or Out of Hours if necessary.
- Children's Services will determine next steps, which may include a strategy discussion, Section 47 enquiries, multi-agency meeting, or police involvement, in accordance with *Working Together to Safeguard Children* or equivalent process in line with relevant nation's CP procedures)

5. Follow the Notifiable Events Process (not applicable to PCS)

- The SSW or Manager must complete all required internal Notifiable Events reporting, in line with organisational and regulatory requirements.

6. Record Everything

- Clear, accurate, and timely records must be made by the carer and SSW, including:
 - What was seen, heard, or disclosed (using the child's own words where possible)
 - Dates, times, and locations
 - Who was informed and when
 - Actions taken and decisions made
- Records must include any updates to the child's risk assessment, including the rationale for changes, actions taken, and decisions made. Any concern relating to exploitation must trigger a review and update of the child's individual risk assessment, alongside referral and safeguarding actions.

7. Cooperate with External Agencies

- Staff and carers must cooperate fully with Children's Services, police, and other relevant agencies.
- This includes attending meetings, sharing information appropriately, and following any risk management or safety plans put in place to protect the child.
- Information sharing with the police and other agencies must be lawful, proportionate, and in line with data protection requirements, and should always be undertaken for the purpose of safeguarding and reducing risk to the child.

References and Key Guidance

This procedure should be read alongside the following current statutory guidance and national resources, which provide the framework for safeguarding responses to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).

Statutory and National Guidance

- **Working Together to Safeguard Children** (Department for Education)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2>
- **Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit** (Home Office)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-exploitation-disruption-toolkit>
- **Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines Guidance** (Home Office)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criminal-exploitation-of-children-and-vulnerable-adults-county-lines>

National Practice and Specialist Resources

- **NWG Network – Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation**
<https://www.nwgnetwork.org/>
- **National Crime Agency – County Lines**
<https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines>
- **Children's Commissioner – Safeguarding responses to criminal exploitation and serious violence**
<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/>
- **Scottish Government – Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy**
<https://www.gov.scot/policies/human-trafficking/trafficking-and-exploitation-strategy/>

Further Reading

The following publications provide important learning, historical context, and insight into system responses to exploitation. They do not replace current statutory guidance.

- Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham
- Ofsted – “Time to Listen”: A joined-up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children
- Ofsted – Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery (addendum)
- Office of the Children’s Commissioner – “See Me, Hear Me” Framework

Review Dates

Date	Version	Summary of Changes Made
	First version	

Appendix 1 - Definitions of CSE

The definition of child sexual exploitation in **England** is:

‘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 sexual activity appears consensual. Child Sexual Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.’

DfE Statutory Guidance, 2017 ‘Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation

The definition in **Scotland** is:

‘Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse in which a person(s), of any age takes advantage of a power imbalance to force or entice a child into engaging in sexual activity *in return for something* received by the child and/or those perpetrating or facilitating the abuse. As with other forms of child sexual abuse, the presence of perceived consent does not undermine the abusive nature of the act.’

Scottish Children and Families Directorate, 2016. Child sexual exploitation: definition and summary

The definition in **Northern Ireland** is:

‘Child Sexual Exploitation is a form of sexual abuse in which a person(s) exploits, coerces and/or manipulates a child or young person into engaging in some form of sexual activity in return for something the child needs or desires and/or for the gain of the person(s) perpetrating or facilitating the abuse.’

SBNI 2014, adopted from CSE Knowledge Transfer Partnership NI

The definition in **Wales** is:

‘Child Sexual Exploitation is the coercion or manipulation of children and young people into taking part in sexual activities. It is a form of sexual abuse involving an exchange of some form of payment which can include money, mobile phones and other items, drugs, alcohol, a place to stay, ‘protection’ or affection. The vulnerability of the young person and grooming process employed by perpetrators renders them powerless to recognise the exploitative nature of relationships and unable to give informed consent.’

Appendix 2: National Guidance on Child Criminal Exploitation

England

- *Working Together to Safeguard Children*
- *Criminal Exploitation of Children and Vulnerable Adults: County Lines Guidance* (Home Office)
- Modern Slavery Act 2015
- Crime and Policing Act 2026

Scotland

- Child Protection Committee guidance on Criminal Exploitation
- National Child Protection Guidance for Scotland
- Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015

Wales

- *Safeguarding Children from Exploitation* guidance
- Wales Safeguarding Procedures
- Modern Slavery Act 2015

Northern Ireland

- SBNI guidance on Criminal Exploitation
- Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act (NI) 2015