

Responding to child sexual exploitation

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 19 December 2013 Updated 9 January 2025

Written by College of Policing

35 mins read

This guidance has been written following a series of high-profile cases (Operation Span, Operation Retriever and Operation Bullfinch) in 2012/13 which highlighted the need for a consistent approach to identifying risks and safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation. It is designed to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation (CSE) matters, increase reporting, disrupt offender activity and increase safeguarding measures to help protect children and young people from being sexually exploited.

CSE is a form of child abuse and this guidance should, therefore, be read in conjunction with [APP on child abuse](#), forthcoming guidance on working with vulnerable people and [CPS \(2013\) Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse](#).

Definition of CSE

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.

Violence, coercion and intimidation are common. Involvement in exploitative relationships is characterised by the child's or young person's limited availability of choice, as a result of their social, economic or emotional vulnerability.

A common feature of CSE is that the child or young person does not recognise the coercive nature of the relationship and does not see themselves as a victim of exploitation.

Risk factors

Any young person regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity and sexuality can be at risk of being sexually exploited. However, there are a number of factors that can increase a young person's vulnerability (see also [victim account](#)).

These include children or young people who:

- [go missing](#) – especially on regular occasions from home or care
- live in a chaotic or dysfunctional family
- have a history of domestic abuse within the family environment
- have a history of abuse (including familial [child sexual abuse](#), risk of [forced marriage](#), risk of [honour-based violence](#), [physical](#) and [emotional](#) abuse and [neglect](#))
- have experienced or are experiencing problematic parenting
- have parents who misuse drugs or alcohol
- have parents with health problems
- are young carers within the family unit
- experience social exclusion as a result of poverty
- have experienced recent bereavement or loss
- have unsupervised use of social networking chat rooms/sites
- have mental ill health
- have social or learning difficulties
- have low self-esteem or self-confidence
- are unsure about their sexual orientation or are unable to confide in their family about their sexual orientation
- misuse alcohol and/or drugs
- have been or are excluded from mainstream education
- are involved in gang activity
- attend school with other young people who are sexually exploited
- are friends with individuals who are sexually exploited
- do not have friends in the same age group
- are being bullied
- live in care, foster care, hostels and/or bed and breakfast accommodation – particularly when living out of their home area

- are homeless
- have associations with gangs through relatives, peers or intimate relationships
- live in a gang neighbourhood

This is not an exhaustive list, nor have the vulnerabilities been listed in order of importance.

Children from loving and secure homes can also be victims of sexual exploitation.

The characteristics common to all victims are not always their age, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation, but their powerlessness and vulnerability.

Warning signs

Despite the increased profile of CSE and improvements in how the police work with partner agencies, CSE cases are still under-reported.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner conducted a two-year inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. Their 2013 report, **If only someone had listened**, highlights that sexually exploited children are not always identified even when they show signs of being victims.

Numerous warning signs were identified in the Office of the Children's Commissioner 2012 interim report, **I thought I was the only one, the only one in the world**, which can indicate that a young person is being forced or manipulated into sexual activity and is a victim of sexual exploitation.

Practitioners need to be aware of these warning signs and recognise that a victim does not have to exhibit all of the warning signs to be a victim of sexual exploitation. Concerns should be heightened if the number of warning signs increases.

At a force level, officers should be using the warning signs to work proactively with other agencies. This will help to profile local risk and identify children who are exhibiting the warning signs, indicating that they are already being sexually exploited. Appropriate assessment and action can then take place.

Warning signs can be categorised under the following headings.

Emotional and behavioural development

Signs include:

- changes in temperament or suffering from depression, mood swings or changes in emotional wellbeing
- secretive behaviour
- peers and friends – association with other young people involved in exploitation and having older boyfriends/girlfriends
- getting involved in petty crime such as shoplifting or stealing

Education

Signs include:

- being absent and truanting or showing signs of disengagement, for example, lack of interest and frequent poor behaviour
- considerable change in performance

Identity

Signs include:

- appearing with unexplained gifts or new possessions
- change in appearance, for example, different clothes

Family and social relationships

Signs include:

- children or young people who become estranged from their family
- sudden hostility towards family members
- becoming physically aggressive towards family and friends
- going missing for periods of time or regularly returning home late
- involvement in exploitative relationships or association with risky adults
- young people being found in towns or districts where they have no known connection
- young people who have more than one boyfriend or who share their boyfriend
- children or young people seen entering or leaving vehicles driven by unknown adults
- becoming detached from age-related activities and social groups
- being sexually active

- receiving phone calls and/or text messages from unknown adults
- children or young people who appear to be recruiting others into exploitative situations

Health

Signs include:

- evidence of drug, alcohol and/or substance use – abusers may use drugs and alcohol to help control children and young people
- unexplained physical injuries or suffering from physical injuries (for example, bruising suggestive of either physical or sexual assault)
- children or young people who are self-harming and demonstrating suicidal thoughts and tendencies
- recurring sexually transmitted infections
- pregnancy or seeking an abortion
- children or young people displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviours, such as being over familiar with strangers or sending sexualised images via the internet or mobile phones
- changes in physical appearance (for example, losing weight, being malnourished)

Locations of concern

A 2013 study conducted by the NWG Network, [If you Shine a Light you will probably find it](#), identified locations where young people congregate or can be easily accessed by offenders. These include:

- shopping centres
- arcades
- cafés
- areas with no parental supervision
- take-away food outlets
- sheesha (hookah) bars
- alcohol outlets (including corner shops with liquor licences)
- pubs/clubs/hotels
- public parks
- car parks

- public transport hubs
- **budget hotels**
- taxi ranks

This is not an exhaustive list. Depending on the type of exploitation, different locations may apply.

See [other investigative issues](#).

Internet and social media

New technologies and social networking tools and platforms, for example, chat rooms, dating sites or online gaming, present further opportunities for social interaction. They also bring new risks and increase the opportunity for offenders to target vulnerable young people. Offenders access social media platforms, for example, Facebook, Blackberry messaging (BBM) and Twitter to identify young people whom they can groom.

Technology can facilitate sexual exploitation of children. Where abusive images have been posted on, or shared via, the internet, there is little control over who can access them. This can lead to repeat victimisation. The NWG Network 2013 study, **If you Shine a Light you will probably find it**, also identified that GPS technology available for mobile devices can be used to identify the location where a photograph was taken, which may increase the risk to the victim. The software can be downloaded freely and provides the coordinates of where the digital image was taken, to within a matter of yards.

CSE can occur through the use of technology without the child realising it. For example, a child or young person is persuaded to post images of themselves on the internet and/or mobile phones. In some cases, the images are subsequently used as a bargaining tool by the perpetrators and threats of violence and intimidation are used as methods of coercion.

Offenders may use technology to exploit children and young people in the following ways:

- harassment and bullying through text messaging
- purchasing mobile phones for victims and sharing their numbers among group or gang members
- randomly contacting children via social networking sites
- using 'friends' lists on networking sites of known victims to target children and young people
- viewing extreme or violent pornography and discussing it during sexual assaults
- posting images of victims with rival gang members to invite a sexual assault as punishment

- filming and distributing incidents of rape
- distributing Blackberry PIN numbers for lists of girls labelled as 'easy'

The [**Thinkuknow**](#) website provides information for children and young people on how they can protect themselves online. Parents, carers and teachers can also use the website to understand how they can help to protect children in their care while they are using the internet.

For further information see [**ACPO \(2013\) Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse – National Problem Profile**](#) [RESTRICTED] (this link is available to authorised users who are logged on to College Learn)

Types of exploitation

The act of CSE is generally a hidden activity and is much more likely to occur in private dwellings than in public venues. However, the act or method of coercion by the perpetrator(s) can take place on the streets.

The following examples (based on the Barnardo's 2011 report, [**Puppet on a string – The urgent need to cut children free from sexual exploitation**](#)) describe the different types of exploitation offenders use and how children can be coerced.

1. Inappropriate relationships

These usually involve one offender who has inappropriate power or control over a young person (physical, emotional or financial). One indicator may be a significant age gap. The young person may believe they are in a loving relationship.

2. Boyfriend model

Here the offender befriends and grooms a young person into a 'relationship' and then coerces or forces them to have sex with friends or associates. The boyfriend may be significantly older than the victim, but not always.

3. Peer-on-peer exploitation

This refers to situations where young people are forced or coerced into sexual activity by peers or associates. Sometimes this can be associated with gang activity but not always.

4. Gang-associated CSE

A child or young person can be sexually exploited by a gang, but this is not necessarily the reason why gangs are formed. Types of exploitation may include using sex as a weapon between rival gangs, as a form of punishment to fellow gang members and/or a means of gaining status within the hierarchy of the gang.

5. Organised/networked sexual exploitation or trafficking

Young people (often connected) are passed through networks, possibly over geographical distances, between towns and cities where they may be forced/coerced into sexual activity with multiple men. Often this occurs at 'parties', and young people who are involved may recruit others into the network. Some of this activity is described as serious organised crime and can involve the organised 'buying and selling' of young people by offenders. Organised exploitation varies from spontaneous networking between groups of offenders, to more serious organised crime where young people are effectively 'sold'.

Definition of gangs and groups in respect of CSE

The Office of the Children's Commissioner has defined CSE in gangs and groups in its [2013 report](#)

This includes:

- gangs – mainly comprising men and boys aged 13-25 years old, who take part in many forms of criminal activity (for example, knife crime or robbery) who can engage in violence against other gangs, and who have identifiable markers, for example a territory, a name, or sometimes clothing
- groups – involves people who come together in person or online for the purpose of setting up, co-ordinating and/or taking part in the sexual exploitation of children in either an organised or opportunistic way

The Office of the Children's Commissioner's [2013 report](#) and Barnardo's 2013 publication [The tangled web – How child sexual exploitation is becoming more complex](#) suggest that organised sexual exploitation and/or trafficking by groups is a sophisticated and complex area of CSE. However, CSE is not just gang related. Young people can be exploited, and are vulnerable to different levels of intimidation, and physical, and/or sexual violence from other exploitative

sources.

National NPCC definition of group-based CSE

- group-based – a network is defined as two or more individuals (whether identified or not) who are known to (or associated with) one another and are known to be involved in or to facilitate the sexual exploitation of children and young people. Being involved in the sexual exploitation of children and young people includes introducing them to other individuals for the purpose of exploitation, trafficking a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation, taking payment for sexual activities with a child or young person or allowing their property to be used for sexual activities with a child or young person.

See also [Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross-Governmental Report including further evidence and good practice case studies.](#)

Female gang members

Where abuse takes place in a gang environment, female members may perceive the abuse as normal, as well as accepting it as a way of achieving a respected status/title within the gang.

Peer-on-peer abuse

When a young person is exploited by their peer(s), the abuser is the same age, or close in age to them. At the very least, everyone directly involved in the abuse is under 18 years of age.

Many of the warning signs and indicators of CSE tend to refer to adult perpetrators, for example, associations with older boyfriends/girlfriends, relationships or associations with risky adults and/or entering or leaving vehicles driven by unknown adults. In peer-on-peer exploitation, schools and youth clubs are also locations where children and young people can be exploited. To help disrupt cases of peer-on-peer exploitation, consideration may need to be given to:

- the impact on the school environment when both perpetrators and victims are in the same school
- managing investigations when associates linked to perpetrators are able to threaten victims and witnesses
- additional measures required to prove lack of consent when all those involved are less than 18 years

Methods of coercing victims

The vulnerability of many victims makes them particularly susceptible to the grooming tactics used by offenders. Most victims are groomed to a certain extent by their exploiter, who will use various persuasive methods to control them and keep them in exploitative situations. This may include encouraging the victim to play a participatory role in the production of indecent images and/or to recruit other victims to participate in the activity.

Offenders exploit their victims further by creating or exacerbating vulnerabilities that they have in order to retain control over them. Vulnerabilities include disengagement from friends and family, detachment from services and challenging or criminal behaviour.

The following methods can also be used to coerce a victim:

- presents – especially in the grooming phase
- food treats
- rewards, for example, mobile phone top-ups
- giving the child or young person attention (for example, listening to them or showing an interest in them or what they are doing)
- false promises of love and/or affection
- false promises of opportunities, for example, modelling, photography, acting
- alcohol
- drugs – either supply or paying off drug debt
- paying off debt
- mental manipulation
- blackmail
- fear
- physical violence

This is not an exhaustive list and not all the methods listed will be used, or occur in the order above.

For further information see:

- **[ACPO \(2013\) Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse National Problem Profile \[RESTRICTED\]](#)** (This link is available to authorised users who are logged on to

College Learn)

- [**CEOP \(2013\) Intelligence Assessment: Contact Child Sexual Abuse: A Baseline Assessment \[RESTRICTED\] \(This link is available to authorised users who are logged on to College Learn\)**](#)
- [**APP on Child abuse>county lines child criminal exploitation**](#)

Offenders

The majority of CSE offenders are male and their ages can range from school age (for example, peer-on-peer or gang-related abuse) to the elderly. However, women and victims of CSE can be groomed to recruit and coerce other victims into CSE.

The demographic of offenders varies in terms of ethnicity, social background and age.

In comparison with what is known about types of CSE, far less is known about the characteristics of CSE offenders. The [**Office of the Children's Commissioner's 2013 report**](#) acknowledges that agencies rarely record data about perpetrators of CSE, and the information they do record is often incomplete or inconsistent.

It is difficult for agencies to develop a profile of this type of offender and for victims to identify them. For example, if young people are sexually exploited via social media tools, the true identity of the offender may be hidden and it may not be apparent to the victim that there is more than one offender. Offenders may also use aliases or nicknames to conceal their identity.

A victim's ability to identify an offender may be impaired by drugs and alcohol given to them during the commission of the offence.

Police officers should be aware that the offender may be a member of the victim's family. The family home is not, therefore, always a place of safety for the victim. Officers should ensure that children are returned home only where it is safe to do so. Where there are concerns about the involvement of, or repercussions from family members, children should be spoken to privately.

Offenders groom victims in order to manipulate them. This includes distancing them from friends and family to control them. The power and control exerted by the offender is designed to increase the dependence of the victim as the exploitative relationship develops. Offenders often use flattery and attention to persuade victims to view them as a 'boyfriend'.

Some offenders get satisfaction from exerting control over victims through coercive and manipulative behaviour. It is believed that this is done not only to commit offences, but also as an end in itself. In this respect, the psychological profile of this type of offender appears to resemble that of a domestic violence offender.

For further information see [**ACPO \(2013\) Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse – National Problem Profile \[RESTRICTED\]**](#) (this link is available to authorised users who are logged on to College Learn).

Victims

Male and female victims of sexual exploitation may not disclose their exploitation voluntarily. A number of factors (see [**risk factors**](#)) may account for this, including:

- fear of their exploiters
- fearing their sexuality will be questioned
- loyalty that they believe they have to their exploiters
- failing to perceive themselves as a victim of exploitation (owing to the methods of coercion/grooming the offender(s) uses)
- believing that they are in a consensual relationship and perceiving sexual activity as a normal part of the relationship
- being unable to express the exploitation/abuse
- believing they have acted voluntarily
- negative perceptions or fears that they have about authorities
- not being aware of the help that is available to them
- the fear of not being believed
- feeling ashamed or embarrassed about what is happening or what has happened to them
- the fear of bringing shame to their family because of cultural/religious beliefs

A perception that a young person is troublesome, rather than troubled, can affect their credibility and influence whether that individual seeks help. It can also make them fiercely resistant to offers of support. In such cases investigators should consider how they can overcome issues of credibility (see [**CPS \(2013\) Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse**](#)). Rejecting help is more likely if the young person feels that they have been let down in the past by those who should have been protecting them. See also [**delayed reporting of CSE**](#).

The police should work with advisory services or agencies, where possible, to help raise awareness among young people and local communities about the risks of sexual exploitation, and how they can seek help. This will:

- ensure that young people who are already at risk or experiencing sexual exploitation know where to seek help
- reassure them that their complaints will be acted on and dealt with appropriately

For information on the demographics of CSE victims, see [**ACPO \(2013\) Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse – National Problem Profile \[RESTRICTED\]**](#) (this link is available to authorised users who are logged on to the Managed Learning Environment.

For further information see:

- [**NSPCC \(2013\) No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse**](#)
- [**The Office of the Children's Commissioner for England \(2013\) 'It takes a lot to build trust': Recognition and Telling: Developing earlier routes to help for children and young people**](#)

Consent

The fact that a young person is 16 or 17 years old and has reached the legal age of consent should not be taken to mean that they are no longer at risk of sexual exploitation. These young people are defined as children under the [**Children Act 1989**](#) and [**2004**](#), and they can still suffer significant harm as a result of sexual exploitation. Their right to support and protection from harm should not, therefore, be ignored or downgraded by services because they are over the age of 16, or are no longer in mainstream education.

For further information see:

- [**Consent in the CPS legal guidance on Rape and Sexual Offences, Chapter 3**](#)
- [**Sexual activity**](#)
- [**Sexual activity with consent**](#)

Boys and young men

The risk of boys and young men becoming victims of sexual exploitation by both male and female offenders is underestimated and less well understood than those relating to girls and young women. Boys and young men also face additional barriers to disclosing their experience because they may be coerced into engaging in heterosexual and homosexual sexual activity (even though they are heterosexual) as part of their abuse. Barriers include:

- fearing that their sexuality/masculinity will be questioned
- being perceived as being gay when they are not
- worrying that they will not be believed
- not perceiving themselves as a victim because their abuser is female

Impact of sexual exploitation on the victim

Sexual exploitation can seriously affect a victim's life into adulthood. The trauma of the exploitation may affect an individual's:

- ability to form loving and trusting relationships
- confidence and self-esteem (which can lead to self-harming, eating disorders, drug abuse and/or criminal activity)
- mental and physical health
- education
- capacity and ability to be a parent

Victims may also suffer sexual and reproductive health problems as a result of the exploitation they have suffered.

Even when children or young people appear to have recovered or overcome the psychological, physical and emotional effects suffered from the sexual exploitation, they may still be unable to stay in the area where they live if it has associations with the abuse against them. This can lead to family break-ups or the victim being isolated from family and friends.

The National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC) provides support to adults who have experienced any form of childhood abuse.

The Survivors Trust is a national, umbrella agency for more than 135 specialist rape, sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse support organisations throughout the UK and Ireland. Their

core aim is to empower survivors of rape, sexual violence or childhood sexual abuse by supporting and improving effective responses to survivors.

Victims' families

Parents and carers may be the first to notice any changes in a young person's behaviour which may give cause for concern. The information a parent or carer can provide may be valuable evidence to help build a case against the offender. This can include:

- intelligence on suspects
- third party accounts supporting the allegations
- evidence showing the suspect in contact with the victim (for example, via texts or social media platforms)
- DNA evidence, clothing and mobile phones

If the victim's family contacts the police, they should be actively supported and referred to relevant support agencies.

Sometimes the exploitation of children and young people will not be particularly evident to parents or carers because the activity is being concealed from them. Young people are often groomed or encouraged to be secretive about the places they are going to and people they are seeing (usually arranged via mobile phones or the internet). See [offenders](#).

Impact of sexual exploitation on families

Sexual exploitation can have a significant impact on families and can affect their health, work life, family relationships, economic stability and social life. Parents and carers often feel distraught, traumatised and guilty for not having protected their children from being sexually exploited. The stress of the situation can limit their capacity to respond to the needs of their children and to deal with crises that occur following the exploitation. The sexual exploitation of one child in the family can place other siblings at significant risk of being groomed and exploited too.

[Parents against sexual exploitation \(Pace\)](#) works with parents and carers of children who are, or are at risk of, being sexually exploited by perpetrators outside the family. Pace offers guidance and training to professionals on how CSE affects the whole family.

For more information on agencies that could provide support to families of a CSE victim, see:

- Enough Abuse
- third-sector agencies

Repeat victimisation

There are some features of repeat victimisation of CSE victims which are distinctive. CSE victims may return to perpetrators for a range of reasons, for example, as a result of grooming, out of fear, drug addiction, needing accommodation, out of a sense of loyalty or perceived affection towards their perpetrators. Specific interventions and routes to support young people to escape may be required.

These can include:

- counselling and therapy
- children's services and local safeguarding boards
- supportive family units
- third sector agencies, for example, Pace

For more information see forthcoming APP on working with vulnerable people.

Legislation and the law

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 introduced a range of offences that recognised the grooming, coercion and control of children.

- Section 14 arranging or facilitating the commission of a child sex offence (child under 16).
- Section 15 meeting a child following sexual grooming (child under 16) – amended by The Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015.
- Section 47 sexual exploitation of children.
- Section 48 causing or inciting sexual exploitation of a child.
- Section 49 controlling a child in relation to sexual exploitation.
- Section 50 arranging or facilitating sexual exploitation of a child.

Section 2 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 creates new offences relating to trafficking into, within or out of the UK for sexual exploitation. These replace the repealed orders that existed under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, section 57, 58 and 59.

The Act includes three broad categories of sexual offences against children.

1. Offences against children under the age of 13 (ss 5 to 8).

Sexual activity with a child under the age of 13 is an offence regardless of consent or the defendant's belief of the child's age. The offences are:

- rape
- assault by penetration
- sexual assault
- causing or inciting a child under 13 to engage in sexual activity

The offences carry a maximum sentence of life imprisonment or 14 years' imprisonment, depending on which offence applies.

2. Offences against children under the age of 16 (ss 9 to 15).

These offences apply regardless of whether the child consented to the sexual activity but, unlike the offences relating to children under 13, an offence is not committed if the defendant reasonably believed that the victim was 16 years or over. The offences are:

- sexual activity with a child
- causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity
- engaging in sexual activity in the presence of a child
- causing a child to watch a sexual act
- arranging or facilitating the commission of a child sex offence
- meeting a child following sexual grooming (under s 15 an offence is committed if an adult meets or communicates with a child on at least one occasion, and then meets the child, arranges to meet the child or (the adult or child) travels for such a meeting, where the adult intends to commit a sexual offence)

These offences carry a minimum sentence of 10 or 14 years' imprisonment, depending on which offence applies. Where the offender is under 18, the maximum sentence is 5 years' imprisonment. If any of these offences is committed against a child under 13, the defendant's belief of the age of the child is irrelevant.

3. Offences against children under the age of 18.

There are a number of sexual offences in the Act that apply to all children under the age of 18. These include sexual offences where there is abuse of a position of trust (ss 16 to 24) and familial child sex offences (ss 25 to 29).

When children and young people who are at risk of CSE are found at repeat locations, orders such as the [Child Abduction Notices](#) (formerly known as Harbourer's Warnings) should be considered.

See also APP on management of sexual offenders and violent offenders.

Other legislative Acts and Orders

The following Orders, Warnings and Notices can be used to help disrupt the exploitation of children and young people:

- Sexual Harm Prevention Order (SHPO) – sections 103A to 103K Sexual Offences Act (2003)
- Sexual Risk Order (SRO) – Sexual Offences Act (2003) sections 122A to 122K
- Harassment Warnings (Police Information Notices) – see also [APP on stalking or harassment](#).
- [Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014](#)
- [Child Abduction Warning Notices](#) (formerly known as Harbourer's Warning Notices)
- [Police protection](#) – the Children Act 1989 s 46

Hotel notices

The Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 provides three new provisions for the investigation of child sexual exploitation offences. [Sections 116, 117 and 118](#) allow the police to issue a notice requiring the owner, operator or manager of relevant accommodation to disclose information where intelligence indicates the premises are being or have been used for the purpose of child sexual exploitation. This includes preparatory or other activities connected to child sexual

exploitation.

The police, where they reasonably believe child sexual exploitation is taking place, can request the owner, operator or manager to provide information about their guests. This includes the name and address, and other relevant information, for example, age. The information supplied can be used as intelligence to support the investigation of any criminal offences which may have been or are being committed on the premises, thereby helping to identify paedophile rings and other organised groups involved in child sexual exploitation.

For further information see:

- [**Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 Sections 116, 117 and 118**](#)
- [**Home Office \(2014\) Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill Fact sheet: Child sexual exploitation at hotels**](#)

Procedure

A police officer of at least the rank of inspector may serve a section 116 notice on an owner, operator or manager requiring them to provide information. The notice specifies the information that should be provided, how frequently, and over what period of time. The specified period will be no more than six months, although a subsequent notice may be served on the expiry of that period.

The officer must reasonably believe that the hotel has been or will be used for the purposes of child sexual exploitation, or conduct that is preparatory to, or otherwise connected with, child sexual exploitation.

The hotel operator commits a section 118 criminal offence if they fail to comply with the notice without a reasonable excuse. It is also an offence to provide information without taking reasonable steps to verify it, or knowing it to be incorrect. They will not commit an offence if there were no reasonable steps they could have taken to verify the information.

Prosecution of these offences will be heard in the magistrates' court, with a maximum penalty on conviction of a level 4 fine (currently £2,500). A person served with a notice has a right of appeal to the magistrates' court under section 117 of the Act.

Investigating CSE cases

CSE is not a specific criminal offence. It encompasses a range of different forms of serious criminal conduct and a number of individual offences.

In assessing whether a child or young person is a victim, or at risk of becoming a victim, of sexual exploitation, careful consideration should be given to the following:

- a child under the age of 13 is not legally capable of consenting to sex (it is statutory rape) or any other type of sexual touching
- sexual activity with a child under 16 is an offence
- it is an offence for a person to have a sexual relationship with a 16 or 17-year-old if they hold a position of trust or authority in relation to them
- where sexual activity with a 16 or 17-year-old does not result in an offence being committed, it may still result in harm or the likelihood of harm being suffered
- non-consensual sex is rape, whatever the age of the victim
- if the victim is incapacitated through drink or drugs, or the victim, or his or her family, has been subjected to violence or the threat of it, they cannot be considered to have given true consent and, therefore, offences may have been committed
- CSE is an issue for all children under the age of 18 years and not limited to those in a specific age group

CSE investigations require a proactive approach to explore the nature and patterns of sexual exploitation locally, and to share information with partner agencies about those at risk and potential offenders.

Investigators should liaise with the CPS at the earliest opportunity to seek appropriate advice as this can help to outline an effective investigative strategy which will strengthen the prosecution case.

For further information see:

- [**CPS \(2013\) Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse**](#)
- [**Victim and witness interview strategies in CSEA cases \(this link is available to authorised users who are logged on to College Learn\)**](#)
- [**Strategic support**](#)

- [**College of Policing \(2015\) Deployment of family liaison officers in child sexual exploitation or abuse cases \(this link is available to authorised users who are logged on to College Learn\)**](#)
- [**Managing the risk of suicide for persons under investigation for online child sexual abuse and exploitation \(June 2019\)**](#)

Material

Investigators should obtain relevant material from partner agencies and third parties as soon as possible. Delays can sometimes occur between submission and receipt of the requested material. Where necessary, signed consent should be obtained from the victim, their parent or carer for access to relevant records, for example, medical records, family or civil proceedings. For further information, see [**working with partners**](#).

Third-party material can also help to find corroborative evidence to support or disprove the allegation. This can include observations by carers relating to changes in the victim's behaviour or evidence of grooming (for example, receiving gifts) but can also come from other sources, for example, 999 tapes, house-to-house enquiries or photographs. For further information see [**corroborative evidence**](#).

For further information see [**Evidence gathering**](#).

Intelligence

Investigators should be aware that victims and offenders are mobile and will move or be moved between force areas. Proactive investigations may help to develop an intelligence picture.

Proactive investigation methods could include:

- targeting suspected offender vehicles, for example, PNC markers
- the use of [**automatic number plate recognition \(ANPR\)**](#) to track suspected vehicles
- targeting relevant premises (for example, party houses and [**hotels**](#))
- reviewing repeated missing episodes
- cell site analysis
- monitoring social networking sites
- patrolling/targeting locations of concern

- improving awareness among neighbourhood policing teams

Developing an intelligence picture enables timely and proportionate assessment, thereby reducing the harm which would otherwise be caused to the young victims and their families.

Reluctant victims

When the victim does not want to pursue an allegation, the investigation should focus on the allegation and the offender. Strategies should be pursued which progress a prosecution that does not rely on the support of the victim, eg, using CCTV and seizing relevant forensic evidence, either from the victim or offender, or approaching partner agencies to build an intelligence picture.

Other investigative issues

Links to other crime types

The sexual exploitation of a child or young person will almost certainly involve the commission of a crime, or have the potential for a crime to be committed.

In cases of sexual exploitation, links to other types of crimes are common. These include:

- anti-social behaviour
- human trafficking – including children being moved in, out of or within the UK
- domestic violence/abuse
- sexual violence in intimate relationships
- grooming – both online and face-to-face
- drugs-related offences
- gang and youth violence
- immigration-related offences
- domestic servitude
- honour-based violence and forced marriage
- child abuse
- missing persons
- rape and other sexual offences
- production, possession and distribution of Indecent images of children

Identifying and linking offences relating to CSE at an early stage ensures that effective safeguarding and risk management processes can be implemented. This helps to prevent abuse and minimise any long-term psychological, emotional and physical effects suffered by the victim.

Victims presenting as suspects

Sometimes, CSE victims commit criminal offences. This might be in an attempt to pay back money 'owed' to the perpetrator, to purposely attract the attention of law enforcement in an attempt to get away from the exploitative situation they are in and/or as a means of 'surviving'. In some cases victims may appear to be part of the offending by recruiting others into the exploitation. This may occur in an attempt to deflect some, if not all, of the abuse onto others. Investigators should look beyond the obvious facts when a child or young person is presented to them as an offender, or has been arrested for a criminal offence (or repeated offences).

For further information see:

- [**Telling victims about other allegations**](#)
- [**Victim and witness identification**](#)

Delayed reporting of CSE

Children and young people who are sexually abused or exploited often find it difficult to report their ordeal at the time the incident occurred. This may be because of fear of not being believed or feeling ashamed about what has happened to them. They may also not realise they are [**a victim**](#).

It is, therefore, not surprising that some allegations of sexual abuse and/or exploitation are reported a considerable period of time after the abuse took place. This could be due to the victim deciding that they have the courage to report their abuse, and wanting to make authorities aware. It can take a victim of sexual abuse/exploitation years to summon up the courage to report what has happened to them to the authorities. The validity of an allegation should not be doubted just because there is a delay between when the crime(s) took place and when it is reported.

Interviewers should be aware that initial disclosures are usually incomplete. Victims might choose to leave the worst disclosure until last, to test whether they will be believed. It can take time and several interviews to develop trust and encourage full disclosure.

For further information see Disclosing abuse in **NSPCC (2013) No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse, Chapter 3.**

Use of experts

It is common for a victim of CSE to try to protect their abuser (see victim support). This is prevalent when the victim does not perceive that they are, or have been a victim of CSE, that is, they believe they are in a consensual relationship. Experts may help to explain this type of behaviour, which is similar to Stockholm syndrome (for example, feelings of trust or affection the victim feels towards the offender in some cases of kidnapping or hostage-taking).

For further information see **Experts.**

Working with partners

The police need to work closely with statutory and non-statutory partners to develop a coordinated response to any CSE concerns. The best interests of the child, and their welfare and safety should be paramount. Sometimes, partner agencies (such as local education authorities) are the first to notice any early changes in behaviour, for example, disruptive or truant behaviour not visible within the family setting.

Partner agencies are more likely to involve the police as soon as possible if effective relationships have been established. This ensures that information which may be critical to the investigation is not lost. It also means an early disruption plan can be established against the offender. It is vital that information is gathered and collated, even in cases where the young person has not made a formal complaint. In many cases the process of supporting a young person to recognise and understand the exploitative nature of their relationship is lengthy. By the time a formal disclosure is made, crucial information may have been lost. Having an evidence-gathering strategy from the outset can prevent this. See also forthcoming APP on working with partners and **CPS (2013) Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse.**

The police and other agencies involved in identifying and safeguarding sexually exploited children and young people need to recognise that they are unlikely to present themselves as victims of a sexual offence, and are likely to be hostile if asked. The length of time between incidents of exploitation taking place and their disclosure to the authorities does not mean that the witness is

unreliable – this is a direct result of the exploitation.

By working together, the police and partner agencies can provide a range of support for children, families and others. In doing so, they also raise awareness and disrupt activity for the purpose of protecting and safeguarding children and young people. With a greater awareness of the intelligence picture, partners can better understand the extent of the risk posed by offenders.

For further information see:

- [**HM Government \(2018\) Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children**](#)
- [**Safeguarding Children: Working Together under the Children Act 2004 \(in Wales\)**](#)

Victim support

Victims may find it difficult to express their experiences during court proceedings and this can sometimes be interpreted as the victim being uncooperative and difficult.

A range of services is available to assist the victims. These include:

- [**registered intermediaries**](#)
- [**counselling and therapy**](#)
- [**supporting victims**](#)
- protection at court

For further information see:

- [**Code of Practice for Victims of Crime**](#)
- [**CPS \(2013\) Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse**](#)
- [**Victim and witness evidence**](#)
- [**Preparing for a child to give evidence at court**](#)
- Forthcoming APP on working with vulnerable people

Crown Prosecution Service

Early and regular engagement (during an investigation) with a CPS solicitor who understands CSE helps to support the victim and secure a conviction. [**Child sexual abuse**](#) (CSA) is

an important component of CSE – see [**CPS \(2013\) Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse**](#).

The CPS is establishing a network of regional child sexual abuse leads to meet the priority handling of CSA cases. The responsibilities of a child sexual abuse lead include:

- providing expertise, guidance and good practice for colleagues, both locally and nationally, dealing with CSA cases
- being an initial point of contact for the police and other relevant agencies in their region, and providing general advice and guidance in CSA cases when required
- liaison with the police service to help review and develop local investigative practice
- working closely with, and assisting in training, the police and relevant voluntary sector agencies to establish general good practice and procedure

For further information see [**Victim contact with the offender**](#).

Post-trial support

Supporting victims must continue after the court process has concluded, regardless of the outcome. There may still be risks to the victim which need to be reduced and managed. Victims of sexual exploitation may still be vulnerable to the risk of further exploitation, even after the offender has been convicted.

The victim also needs support if the offender is acquitted. Victims find reliving their ordeal in court particularly traumatic and, when an offender is found not guilty, they may feel that the jury has not believed them.

For further information see:

- [**Victims' Right to Review Scheme**](#)
- [**ACPO \(2013\) National Child Sexual Abuse Review Panel Guidelines for Police Forces & the Crown Prosecution Service \(CPS\) \[RESTRICTED\] \(this link is available to authorised users who are logged on to College Learn\)**](#)

Good practice

A [short film](#) was launched in October 2012 by ACPO and the National Policing Improvement Agency (now the College of Policing) to help front-line police officers spot the early signs of group-associated grooming, and support vulnerable children being sexually exploited.

This helps practitioners to:

- recognise the warning signs of CSE
- identify actions to take if it is suspected that a child or young person is being sexually exploited
- develop good practice and advice

Tags

Child sexual exploitation Victim care