

Project SOLAH - safer online at home

A multi-agency approach to addressing child suspects of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) offences.

First published

30 July 2025

Key details

Does it work?	Promising
Focus	Reoffending
Topic	Child sexual exploitation and abuse Digital Vulnerability and safeguarding
Organisation	Sussex Police
HMICFRS report	PEEL 2023–25 Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy: An inspection of Sussex Police
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Region	South East
Partners	Police Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation

Key details

Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	September 2021
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people Families Offenders

Aim

Project SOLAH aims to deliver an alternative approach to tackling children suspected of committing CSAM offences. Whereas previously a criminal justice approach would be taken, now Sussex police has partnered with Barnados and YMCA Wise to deliver bespoke interventions that educate child suspects about online dangers and ensure they access necessary support.

Intended outcome

Project SOLAH's intended outcomes are to:

- increase awareness of online safety issues
- increase protective activity from parents and carers
- reduce overall offending and repeat offending
- reduce victimisation
- reduce the harm caused by damaging online activity

Description

The number of referrals of young people to Sussex Police's online child abuse team (OCAT) regarding indecent imagery of children (IIOC) and CSAM from the National Crime Agency (NCA) was increasing. Children and young people (CYP) were accessing social media more frequently and using it to either upload sexual images of themselves or share inappropriate content. Sussex OCAT is a small team, and it was felt to be an inadequate response to send a police officer and staff to a family home, especially given they would not necessarily have the skills or capacity to deal with children sharing IIOC in a holistic way. OCAT only had capacity to attend each household once, explain what had happened and give advice. This was not felt to be the most effective or supportive way to manage these types of offences, it was decided other specialist agencies should be brought in to work with the family over a longer time frame and provide advice on how to manage the incident, ensure internet safety and support their child.

Sussex Police sought funding from the Police Crime Commissioner (PCC) to provide case workers to carry out a programme of face-to-face interventions at the home of the child. They were granted £50,000 per charity per year, lasting until the 31 March 2026. This money funds the charities' work designing and leading the intervention, meaning there is no cost to the force for running it.

The PCC was already working with Barnados and YMCA Wise, who were commissioned to do work in the CYP space. Sussex's OCAT refers child suspects of CSAM and IIOC to these charities when they are deemed suitable, instead of prosecuting. Suitability is down to the discretion of the detective sergeant, but usually it is younger children who have shared age-similar images or self-generated images who are referred under this program. For the most part, OCAT does not prosecute any children unless they have come to notice before, the content of the imagery is of concern, or it has involved first generation images (images unknown to the police, likely created by the perpetrator) or direct harm to another. Children who have already had significant social services intervention will not usually be suitable as Project SOLAH shouldn't cross over with that support. Normally the detective sergeant decides whether a SOLAH response or a standard police intervention is appropriate, depending on suitability.

The detective sergeant is also responsible for contacting the parents, explaining the Project SOLAH intervention to them and providing information on the benefits of engagement with the program.

The SOLAH intervention is designed and run by the charities, with the practitioners given full discretion over the number and content of sessions they deliver to each child. The content of sessions varies based on engagement and complexity, but generally cover the following topics:

- a dedicated case worker who will work with the child to build trust and rapport
- flexible 1:1 sessions giving the child tools to be safer online
- wider group sessions if considered helpful as an option
- guidance on what content is illegal, the law and consequences
- tips on how to deal with peer pressure
- clarity on the risks of exploitation online
- help on how to deal with unwanted contact online
- advice on using safety setting on devices
- tips on building confidence to talk openly about online activity
- advice on what to do if the child shares an inappropriate image of themselves online
- guidance on reporting content to a social media company

Practitioners generally prefer to deliver sessions in-person as they can engage with the child's environment and add value by supporting parents and other family members. However, they can work online if this is deemed more suitable. Group sessions are also sometimes used if practitioners feel they are suitable.

Each charity only has a handful of practitioners, so they do sometimes reach capacity and new referrals must be put on a waitlist. Once a practitioner ends their engagement with a child they inform the force.

The practitioners, police and PCC have regular meetings in order to discuss improvements and referrals. This has tweaked some aspects of who is referred and how information is shared. It has also identified other areas for the charities to focus on in times of slower referrals.

Overall impact

It is difficult to measure outcomes as the intervention revolves around serious online sexual behaviour, however the 123 children who have been referred to Project SOLAH have all received a far more extensive and holistic intervention than what the police were originally offering.

OCAT don't specifically review cases at any intervals after the SOLAH response has been given, but they do monitor cases to see if children come to notice again. So far, no repeat offenders have been identified.

Additionally, the charity practitioners send in case studies which normally consist of testimonials from the children and practitioners outlining the progress that has been made. The case studies show that children are more aware, better equipped to deal with online issues and feel confident to raise issues or disengage. Feedback from families and practitioners has also been hugely positive.

Learning

Capacity has been an issue. Post COVID-19 there were not enough referrals and plans were made to divert funding to other projects. Referrals to Project SOLAH cannot be assured as they depend on NCA referrals to OCAT. Since then, there has been an increase in NCA referrals and now Project SOLAH has the opposite issue of a lack of capacity and a waiting list.

There have also been issues with extremely vulnerable children with neurodiversity, communication needs and trauma which can make it harder to engage. These children require a longer period of engagement from practitioners as it takes time to build rapport and open communication with the child, and these cases are often more complex so take several sessions to unravel the issues at play. This has worsened the capacity issues as there are fewer practitioners available to take new cases.

The number of detective sergeants working to determine suitability for and make referrals to the Project SOLAH program has been increased from one to three, as it's a time intensive role.

There have been some issues with parents not wanting to take part in the intervention. Reasons cited include that time has passed since the incident, and the belief that they can educate their own children and don't need external support. Additionally, some parents feel their children just made a mistake, while others recognise it as a more serious issue. OCAT tries to sell the program as a positive engagement, but ultimately parental attitudes and children's willingness to engage effect uptake. OCAT has made the decision to allow practitioners to contact the family without seeking consent first, as they may be more successful at making contact than the police.

The force found it relatively easy to achieve the necessary funding from the PCC for this program as there was a clear business case put forward which highlighted the concerning statistics. Other forces should highlight why such an intervention is necessary and a better approach than the standard response at use in their own force.

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