Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Identifying and responding to child sexual abuse within complex safeguarding approaches

An exploratory study

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About the authors

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About the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) wants children to be able to live free from the threat and harm of sexual abuse. Our aim is to reduce the impact of child sexual abuse through improved prevention and better response.

We are a multi-disciplinary team, funded by the Home Office and hosted by Barnardo's, working closely with key partners from academic institutions, local authorities, health, education, police and the voluntary sector. However, we are independent and will challenge any barriers, assumptions, taboos and ways of working that prevent us from increasing our understanding and improving our approach to child sexual abuse.

To tackle child sexual abuse we must understand its causes, scope, scale and impact. We know a lot about child sexual abuse and have made progress in dealing with it, but there are still many gaps in our knowledge and understanding which limit how effectively the issue is tackled.

Contents

Executive summary

Complex safeguarding is a term used to describe an approach to responding to criminal activity (often organised) or behaviour associated with criminality, involving children and adults, where there are concerns of exploitation and/or safeguarding concerns. Complex safeguarding often involves multi-agency, co-located teams of social workers, police, health and other practitioners, working together to tackle various forms of exploitation – primarily child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. It goes beyond a traditional focus on younger children and harm within a home environment to address the specific circumstances and needs of adolescents and their experiences beyond a domestic setting.

Complex safeguarding approaches seek to address acknowledged limitations within current safeguarding practice, link expertise on different forms of exploitation, and respond to risks faced by this older age group, broadening the range of options for practitioners to engage with and safeguard adolescents.

While child sexual exploitation is commonly described as falling within the broader category of child sexual abuse, it is also argued that all child sexual abuse is exploitative; some use the two terms interchangeably. This research study focused on child sexual abuse in all its forms, considering child sexual exploitation as a form of child sexual abuse and adopting the UK Government's current definitions of both terms.

Research aims

This was a small-scale exploratory study to raise questions and shed light on practice in terms of how child sexual abuse, in all its forms, may feature in complex safeguarding practitioners' work in supporting young people. Its aims were to:

- better understand how previous and recent/ongoing abuse, especially child sexual abuse, is (or is not) described by professionals in complex safeguarding teams, and capture practitioner perspectives on how these forms of abuse may feature in complex safeguarding teams' caseloads and subsequent practice responses
- explore the language used by professionals in a complex safeguarding team to discuss issues that may constitute child sexual abuse
- support the further development of practitioner knowledge on the importance of understanding, recording and responding to child sexual abuse in the field of complex safeguarding, and share key messages with wider stakeholders.

The study sought to inform practice and contribute to an emerging body of knowledge around complex safeguarding, which remains a developing approach.

> Complex safeguarding often involves multi-agency, co-located teams working together to tackle various forms of exploitation.

Research method

The study was originally to have included a close analysis of complex safeguarding case files in a case study area in England, in order to capture the scale of concerns related to child sexual abuse and ascertain how child sexual abuse was understood and recorded in case files. Owing to the restrictions imposed by the UK Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it was not possible to undertake the on-site, case file work.

The project team therefore redesigned the study by amending the research aims and questions, and developing alternative online approaches to data collection which involved:

- six semi-structured interviews with members of one complex safeguarding team in the case study area
- a focus group with four social workers in the same team
- a short online survey completed by 64 other practitioners in complex safeguarding teams across the case study area.

Key issues emerging from the research

Understanding child sexual abuse in relation to complex safeguarding approaches

Definitions and understandings of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation are crucial to complex safeguarding work, and the language used in this context is important. Definitions matter because they determine which cases are referred to and taken on by complex safeguarding teams, and because any misunderstanding or misapplication of terms might mean that child sexual abuse in certain contexts is obscured or overlooked.

Complex safeguarding approaches have sought to bring together different areas of work on tackling exploitation which were previously dealt with separately. Particularly complex cases involving young people who are targeted and subjected to serious harm through criminal and/or sexual exploitation are referred to complex safeguarding teams, which work intensively to safeguard them. The harm faced by these young people is primarily, although not exclusively, seen as being outside the family.

In the interviews, complex safeguarding practitioners often used specific and recurring language to define key terms such as child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, but this was not always consistent with the UK Government's definitions, which are not bound to either intra- or extra-familial contexts; practitioners often referred to child sexual abuse as 'intra-familial', and child sexual exploitation as 'extra-familial' and involving grooming.

The language used by practitioners to describe complex safeguarding mirrored that used to distinguish child sexual abuse from child sexual exploitation, with frequent reference to 'traditional' child protection work for the former and 'specialist' work for the latter.

Identifying and responding to child sexual abuse

In the case study area, both police and social work research participants were clear about the parameters of their role and articulated both shared (safeguarding) priorities and their necessarily separate operational work.

The role of evidence, and in particular the emphasis placed on victim disclosure, was a prominent emerging theme. In some instances, being able to 'evidence' practitioner concern with a victim's disclosure or other form of evidence (for example, forensic material, CCTV footage or witnesses) would galvanise decisions to confront the abuse.

In terms of recording concerns of child sexual abuse, survey findings revealed that complex safeguarding practitioners were nearly as likely to record their concerns in cases where there was no verbal disclosure as they were in cases where there had been a verbal disclosure. However, some social workers in the focus group and interviews were conscious that young people or their families could potentially request access to their files; in light of this, they lacked confidence in recording professional concerns of child sexual abuse that could not be substantiated with sufficient evidence or 'fact'. These issues are regularly identified in regional and national studies of the response to child sexual abuse.

Implications for practice

The research highlights a number of possible implications for practice. The authors hope that it will prompt reflective discussion to inform continued developments in identifying and responding to child sexual abuse in all its forms, including child sexual exploitation, within the context of complex safeguarding. Complex safeguarding remains an emerging field of work; further research is necessary to understand it better, and to evaluate how complex safeguarding approaches are being implemented in practice.

> The role of evidence, and in particular the emphasis placed on victim disclosure, was a prominent theme emerging in the study.

1. Introduction

Complex safeguarding is gaining increasing attention, both strategically and operationally – at national level (the Home Office, the College of Policing and the Department for Education) and within local authorities across the country. Yet it remains a developing area of work, and there is emerging discourse around a nationally agreed definition of complex safeguarding and what it involves.

Broadly speaking, 'complex safeguarding' describes an approach to responding to criminal activity (often organised) or behaviour associated with criminality, involving children and adults, where there are concerns of exploitation and/or safeguarding concerns. Going beyond a traditional focus on younger children and harm within a home environment, it often involves multi-agency, co-located teams of social workers, police, health and other practitioners, working together to tackle various forms of exploitation – primarily child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation – of adolescents.

A nascent body of research has been examining rationales for complex safeguarding teams, the types of harms that these teams focus on, and the operational responses that come together to form a complex safeguarding approach. A recent briefing highlights complex safeguarding as an approach that seeks to improve practice with adolescents at risk of harm or exploitation outside the family home, and which recognises the commonalities and interconnections between different forms of exploitation that had previously been worked on in silos (Firmin, Wroe and Lloyd, 2019). In this way, it seeks to address acknowledged limitations within current safeguarding practice (Firmin, Wroe and Lloyd, 2019), respond to risks faced by this older age group, and broaden practitioners' options to engage with and safeguard adolescents. It is also seen as providing a way of working with young people in their communities, thereby reducing the need for costly out-of-borough placements (Firmin, Horan et al, 2019).

To explore how different forms of child sexual abuse feature in the work of complex safeguarding teams, the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) commissioned a small-scale study focusing on one area in England (known as 'the case study area') which had adopted a complex safeguarding approach. This report sets out the findings from that study.

The target audience for this report is primarily social care managers and police personnel interested in developing complex safeguarding approaches, so that the learning that may emerge from the study is shared within relevant teams and multi-agency networks.

> Complex safeguarding is an approach that recognises the commonalities and interconnections between different forms of exploitation.

1.1 Research aims

This was a small-scale, largely qualitative exploratory study to provide insight into how child sexual abuse, in all its forms, features in the work of complex safeguarding practitioners supporting young people who are assessed to require a complex safeguarding response. As such, it sought to raise questions and shed light on practice, rather than providing a representative picture of the response to sexual abuse within complex safeguarding practice as a whole.

The aims of the study were, therefore, to:

- better understand how previous and recent/ongoing abuse, including child sexual abuse, is (or is not) described by professionals in complex safeguarding teams, and capture practitioner perspectives on how these forms of abuse may feature in complex safeguarding teams' caseloads and subsequent practice responses
- explore the language used by professionals within a complex safeguarding team to discuss issues that may constitute child sexual abuse
- support the further development of practitioner knowledge on the importance of understanding, recording and responding to child sexual abuse in the field of complex safeguarding, and share key messages with wider stakeholders.

1.2 Defining child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

In its exploration of how all forms of child sexual abuse are identified and responded to within the complex safeguarding approach, this research draws on the UK Government's definition of child sexual abuse:

> "[Child sexual abuse] involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse." (Department for Education, 2018:107)

> This study sought to provide insight into how all forms of child sexual abuse feature in the work of complex safeguarding practitioners.

It considers child sexual exploitation to be a form of child sexual abuse, in line with the UK Government's definition of child sexual exploitation:

> "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." (Department for Education, 2018:107)

It can be argued that all child sexual abuse is exploitative, and some use the terms 'child sexual abuse' and 'child sexual exploitation' interchangeably. Overlaps between different forms of child sexual abuse, and between child sexual abuse and other forms of violence and abuse, can make definitional distinctions "problematic" (Kelly and Karsna, 2017); these intersections can also be difficult to disentangle operationally.

Nevertheless, in this report we use the term 'child sexual abuse' to refer to all forms of child sexual abuse, including child sexual exploitation; the term 'child sexual exploitation' is used only in those instances where practitioners made specific reference to this form of child sexual abuse.

1.3 Background to the research

Practitioners, whether working within a complex safeguarding approach or not, cannot respond to child sexual abuse unless that abuse has been first identified – and a wide body of research has highlighted that this identification often depends on disclosure of the abuse.

A study of intra-familial child sexual abuse concluded that statutory services are predominantly disclosure-led, with the burden of responsibility falling on children to disclose the abuse (Children's Commissioner for England, 2015). In their research into disclosures of childhood abuse, Allnock and Miller (2013) found that four-fifths of the 60 children they interviewed had tried to tell someone about their abuse – and that what those children had really wanted was for someone to notice something was wrong, and to be asked direct questions about their experience. More recently, a report into the multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment concluded that professionals rely too heavily on children to verbally disclose abuse (Ofsted et al, 2020).

> Practitioners, whether in complex safeguarding teams or not, cannot respond to child sexual abuse unless it has first been identified.

In 2019, as part of the Welsh Government's action plan to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse (Welsh Government, 2019), the CSA Centre commissioned research to explore how child sexual abuse is identified, recorded and responded to by local authority children's services (Roberts, 2020). A sample of electronic social care records relating to children in two Welsh local authorities was examined, and two focus groups were held with 10 social workers from different teams in those local authorities. The research found that:

- only one-fifth of children whose case files recorded concerns about child sexual abuse (including child sexual exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour) had been placed on the child protection register under the category of sexual abuse
- social workers reflected on the infrequency with which children disclosed child sexual abuse to social workers, and recognised that this had an impact on the number of sexual abuse cases in their caseloads
- in the absence of disclosure, caution was expressed with regard to talking to the child about potential abuse, for fear of asking leading questions
- there was a consensus that local authority children's services were more able to identify child sexual exploitation than other forms of child sexual abuse – although participants considered it uncommon for child sexual exploitation to be disclosed, they said it was easier for social workers to articulate concerns about child sexual exploitation than other forms of child sexual abuse, as the emphasis in cases of child sexual exploitation was on recognising risk as opposed to the child communicating that they had been abused
- with regard to recording concerns about child sexual abuse other than child sexual exploitation in social care records, some social workers appeared hesitant to do this if a child had not verbally disclosed – it was felt that this would complicate work with the family.

The study called for improvements to social workers' training in relation to managing disclosures and understanding the signs and indicators of child sexual abuse; and clearer guidance about the questions that can be asked in relation to concerns about child sexual abuse where there has been no disclosure, and how such concerns can be named in care records.

1.4 Structure of this report

Chapter 2 outlines the methodology used in this study, including ethical considerations and limitations. Chapter 3 then describes the main findings, reporting on practitioners' understanding of child sexual abuse and how concerns of such abuse were identified and responded to by one complex safeguarding team in the case study area.

Following on from this, Chapter 4 critically examines the key findings and issues arising from the study. Finally, Chapter 5 addresses the wider implications of the findings, aiming to prompt reflective discussion that can inform continued developments in identifying and responding to child sexual abuse in all its forms, including child sexual exploitation, in the context of complex safeguarding.

Throughout the report, all research participant attributions and direct quotations have been anonymised and the research team has applied a referencing system in the main body of the text: I1–I6 for interviewees, FG1–FG4 for focus group participants, and S1–S64 for observations made in survey responses. Survey respondents are referenced by sector as well as reference number, since the sample is larger.

> A previous study has called for improvements to social workers' training in managing disclosures of child sexual abuse.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research questions

To fulfil the research aims detailed in section 1.1, the study was framed around the following research questions:

- How are concerns of child sexual abuse identified and responded to within the complex safeguarding caseload?
- What support do young people experiencing or at risk of child sexual abuse receive for that abuse within the complex safeguarding caseload?
- What language is used to discuss issues that may constitute child sexual abuse?

2.2 Redesigning the research

This research was originally designed to include a close analysis of case files in the case study area, in order to:

- capture the scale of concerns related to child sexual abuse in those case files
- ascertain how such abuse was understood and recorded in the files.

It was not possible to undertake the on-site case file work, however, owing to the social distancing rules and other constraints imposed by the UK Government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The project team therefore redesigned the study by amending the research questions and incorporating alternative, mixed-methods approaches to data collection and analysis. The case file study was replaced with a focus group of social workers from one complex safeguarding team in the case study area, who were invited to explore concerns of child sexual abuse by discussing two fictional cases or 'vignettes' drawn from real-life scenarios in social work case files.

The focus group discussions were enhanced by a series of semi-structured interviews with six other members of the same complex safeguarding team, and a short survey that was open to members of other complex safeguarding teams across the case study area. The data collection methods are detailed in sections 2.3–2.5.

The research team sought to make use of the original research questions in designing the new research methodology; however, the shift to a smaller-scale, largely qualitative study did have an impact on this. Questions relating to the scale of child sexual abuse in complex safeguarding caseloads, and how the recording and reporting of child sexual abuse varies within the complex safeguarding caseload, were removed because the research team could not carry out a systemic analysis of case files (and thereby provide a robust assessment of variation).

> The focus group was enhanced by interviews with members of the same team, and a survey open to other complex safeguarding teams.

2.3 Survey design and recruitment

An online survey for practitioners working in complex safeguarding teams across the case study area was designed and implemented using SurveyMonkey software. The aim was to gather their insights on experiences of and responses to child sexual abuse. The survey contained a mix of closed and open-ended questions covering topics such as the complex safeguarding approach, the forms of exploitation and sexual abuse experienced by the young people they worked with, and how they responded to and recorded concerns of child sexual abuse. The survey was open over a three-week period between September and October 2020, and was completed by 64 complex safeguarding practitioners.

As Figure 1 shows, survey respondents were distributed primarily across two professional groups – social workers and police – reflecting the composition of the case study area's complex safeguarding teams. Small numbers of practitioners from other agencies, such as voluntary-sector organisations and education services, also responded.

Figure 2 shows that almost three-quarters of the 64 respondents were frontline staff (n=46), with a further one-fifth in management roles/ positions of seniority (n=13).

Two-thirds of the respondents (n=43) had been in their current role for over a year.

2.4 Conducting the interviews

In total, six semi-structured one-to-one interviews were carried out with members of one complex safeguarding team: the team manager, two police officers, two social workers and a psychotherapist. The interviews provided an opportunity to:

- capture practitioner insights into the aims and nature of the complex safeguarding approach
- highlight patterns of referral, recording and response in relation to child sexual abuse
- explore understanding of key themes and concepts through the nature of the language used by team members.

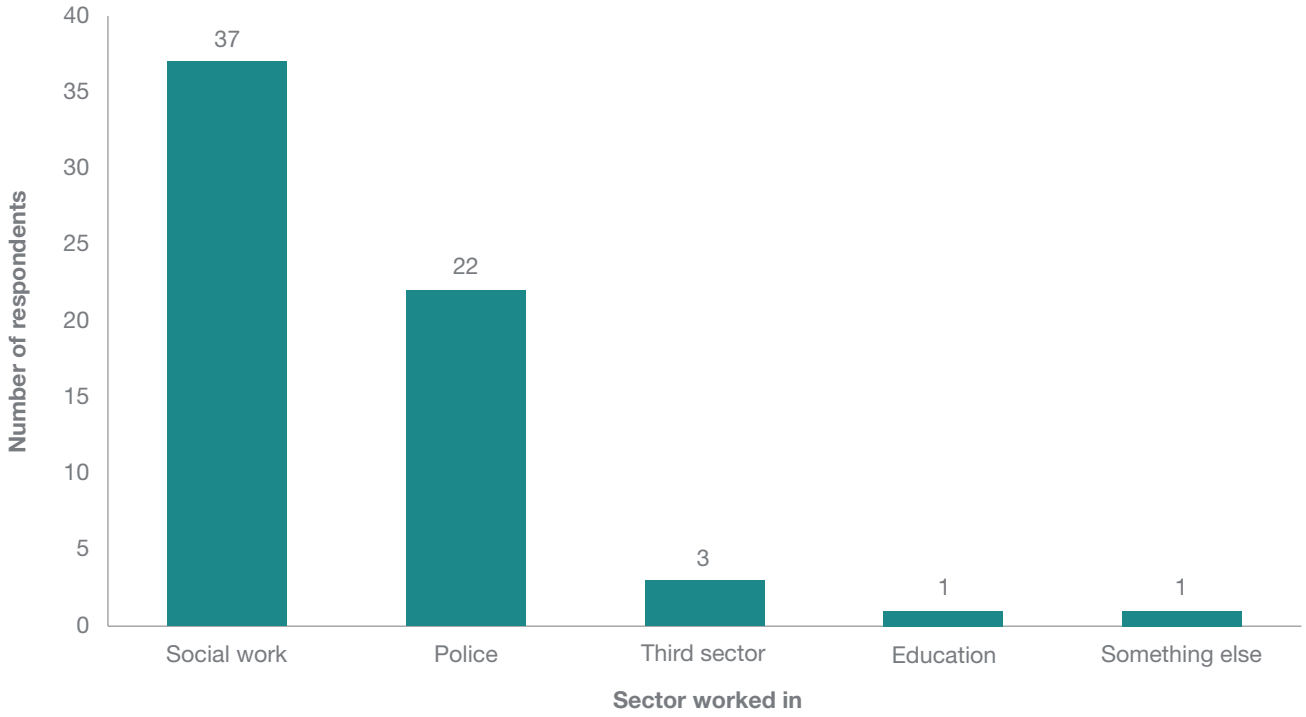
The team manager invited participants to take part in the interview. Each prospective interviewee was then contacted by one of the research team and provided with an information sheet detailing:

- the aims of the research study
- the voluntary, anonymous and confidential nature of participation
- how the study's findings would be written up, and how their responses would be used
- the contact details for each researcher and the CSA Centre, in case of questions or concerns.

All interviewees were asked to sign an informed consent form prior to interview.

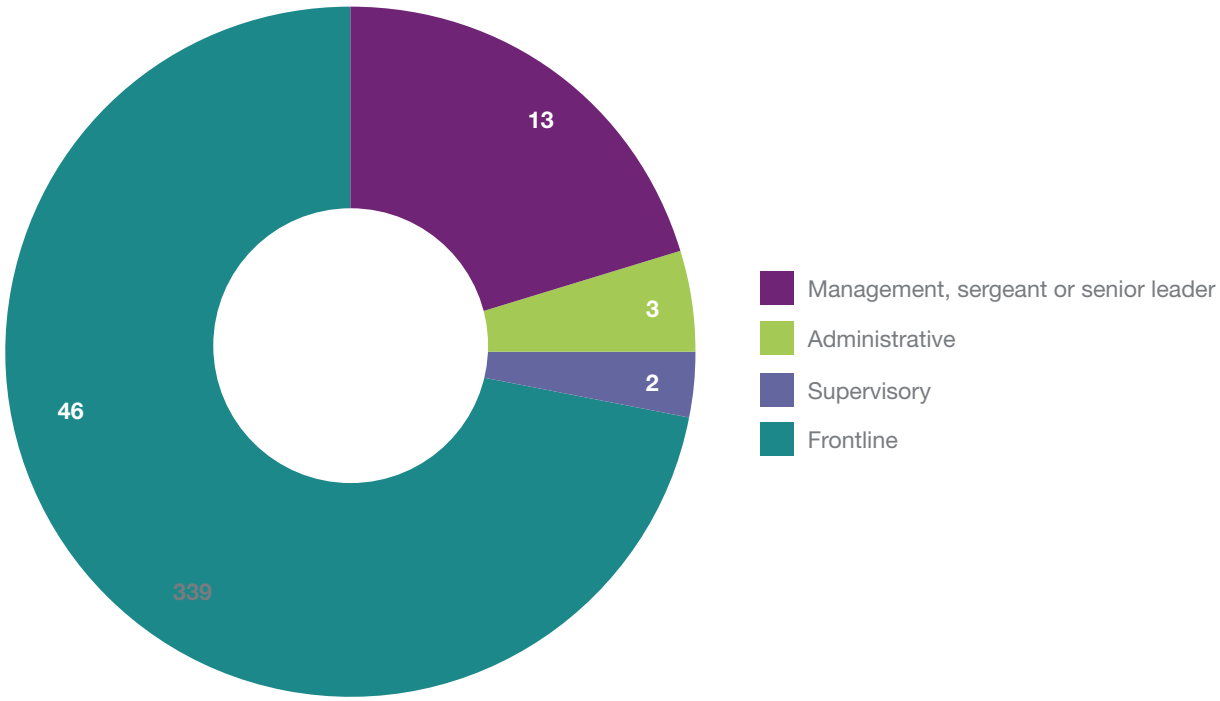
In line with social distancing rules, all interviews were carried out by telephone; each lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

Figure 1. Survey respondents by sector



n=64 respondents.

Figure 2. Survey respondents' professional roles



n=64 respondents.

2.5 The focus group

The research team facilitated a focus group with four other social workers from the same complex safeguarding team as the interviewees. In adherence with social distancing measures at the time, the focus group was conducted online via Microsoft Teams.

As with the interviews, the team manager invited participants to join the session, and it was made clear that involvement was voluntary and subject to their availability.

The main aim of the focus group was to explore how the social workers in the team would identify, interpret and respond to concerns of child sexual abuse in situations similar to their day-to-day work. To this end, the research team devised two fictional case studies or 'vignettes', involving a 15-year-old girl and a 15-year-old boy respectively, which were informed by previous research and drawn from real-life practitioner experience of cases in another geographical area. The focus group was invited to review and discuss each vignette in turn before answering the following questions:

1. What are your initial thoughts on this situation?
2. Do you see this case as featuring child sexual abuse or exploitation?
3. What decisions or actions would you take in the course of your work on this case?

The focus group closed with general discussion about the perceived differences between complex safeguarding work and more mainstream social work, and the value of having an opportunity to reflect on their work in a group setting.

The vignettes and full question schedule are included in Appendix 1.

2.5.1 The use of vignettes

There is a body of literature that explores the use of case studies or 'vignettes' in children's social work research, and specifically their role in investigating practitioner decision-making (see, for example, Taylor, 2006; Hayes and Spratt, 2014; Reisel, 2017; Berrick et al, 2019). The method is noted as useful for studying problems in depth, understanding the various stages in processes (for example, assessment, intervention and outcomes), and exploring situations in context (Gilgun, 1994). Vignettes have been employed variously to increase understanding of evaluative perceptions when practitioners assess and make decisions with regard to CSE specifically (Reisel, 2017), and to investigate how social workers balance risk and protective factors when analysing referrals (Wilkins, 2015). They have also proven useful as a tool to explore the effect of multiple factors in decisions about complex scenarios (Taylor, 2006), which can often invoke practitioner 'dilemma', thereby providing an opportunity to reflect on nuanced concepts such as risk and consent.

2.6 Data analysis

2.6.1 Practitioner online survey

The research team analysed the survey responses to provide summary statistics and explore differences in professional responses and cultures. Where open-ended responses are cited in this report, they are referenced by practitioner sector (for example, social work or police).

2.6.2 Interviews and focus group

The interviews and focus group were audio-recorded and fully transcribed to facilitate comprehensive thematic analysis. This involved a process of familiarisation with the data through reading and re-reading all of the transcripts, generating initial codes and carrying out systematic coding of each transcript to identify key themes and highlight occurrence/recurrence across the interviews (Rivas, 2018).

2.7 Ethical issues

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the CSA Centre's Research Ethics Committee. Although no direct fieldwork was undertaken with victims/survivors of child sexual abuse, a number of areas required ethical consideration owing to the sensitive nature of the topic. These primarily included confidentiality and anonymity; participant welfare; researcher welfare; and secure handling of data. The full ethical framework can be found in Appendix 2.

2.8 Limitations

The qualitative work conducted in the case study area was on a small scale, owing to time and resource constraints. Furthermore, and in response to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, the research team was able to engage only virtually with both the interviewees and the focus group participants. Although it is common practice for interviews to be conducted remotely (for example, over the telephone), the virtual approach may have had an impact on the focus group by restricting the participants' opportunities to 'round-table' or 'case conference' in a close team environment, as would be commonplace in their day-to-day work. Following a comprehensive review of the research design, however, the research team determined that virtual engagement offered the most effective approach in the circumstances.

2.8.1 Limitations involving the use of vignettes

In the context of social work, the rationale for using vignettes or case studies is that it enables an exploration of the analysis of case work (for example, case referrals) and decision-making in a manner less threatening than if participants were asked directly about their own practice (Wilkins, 2015). However, there are a number of limitations to using this type of research method, and these were taken into account when developing this study. For example, research has found that case studies are not useful for estimating prevalence or generalising to wider populations (Gilgun, 1994; Greenwood and Lowenthal, 2005).

In a review of using vignettes in social work research, O'Dell et al (2012) highlight a number of assumptions when using vignettes: firstly, that narrative representation is sufficiently comparable to 'real-life' events (despite the fact that they cannot be detailed enough to represent reality); and secondly, that there is a straightforward link between the stated attitudes and actions of practitioners discussing and reacting to vignettes (a fictional situation) and their actual behaviour (in the real world). The research team took these issues into account when setting up the focus group. Although fictional, the content of both vignettes was drawn from real-life scenarios in social work case files, and the group setting mirrored as far as possible the 'case conference-style' discussions familiar to social workers by providing a forum for dialogue between colleagues and giving voice to different positions and perspectives.

3. Findings

This chapter reports the findings from the study, drawing on the 64 responses to the online survey of practitioners working in complex safeguarding teams across the case study area; interviews with six practitioners from one of those complex safeguarding teams; and the focus group with four social workers from that team. The main themes explored are:

- the characteristics of complex safeguarding cases
- the process of referring cases to complex safeguarding teams
- practitioner understandings of child sexual abuse in the context of complex safeguarding
- key elements of the complex safeguarding approach to child sexual abuse (including the aims and nature of the support provided)
- how child sexual abuse is identified and addressed within the complex safeguarding approach
- how concerns of child sexual abuse (with or without a verbal disclosure) are responded to
- how child sexual abuse is recorded.

The overarching theme of the use of language, particularly that used by practitioners to articulate their understanding of terms and approaches inherent to complex safeguarding, is woven throughout this chapter but is dealt with explicitly in sections 3.5.3 and 3.7.2.

3.1 Profile of cases managed by complex safeguarding teams

3.1.1 Gender

The survey asked practitioners about the gender of the young people they worked with. Among the 61 respondents who answered these questions, around three-fifths (n= 38) thought that child sexual exploitation involved and affected mainly girls, while similar numbers thought that organised crime/gangs (n= 40) and child criminal exploitation (n= 33) affected mainly boys (see Figure 3). A substantial proportion of respondents said that the cases they worked with involved exploitation of both boys and girls.

These patterns were reflected in the interviews.

3.1.2 Working with diverse groups

Respondents to the online survey were asked for their impressions of the other characteristics of young people they worked with in cases of child sexual exploitation.

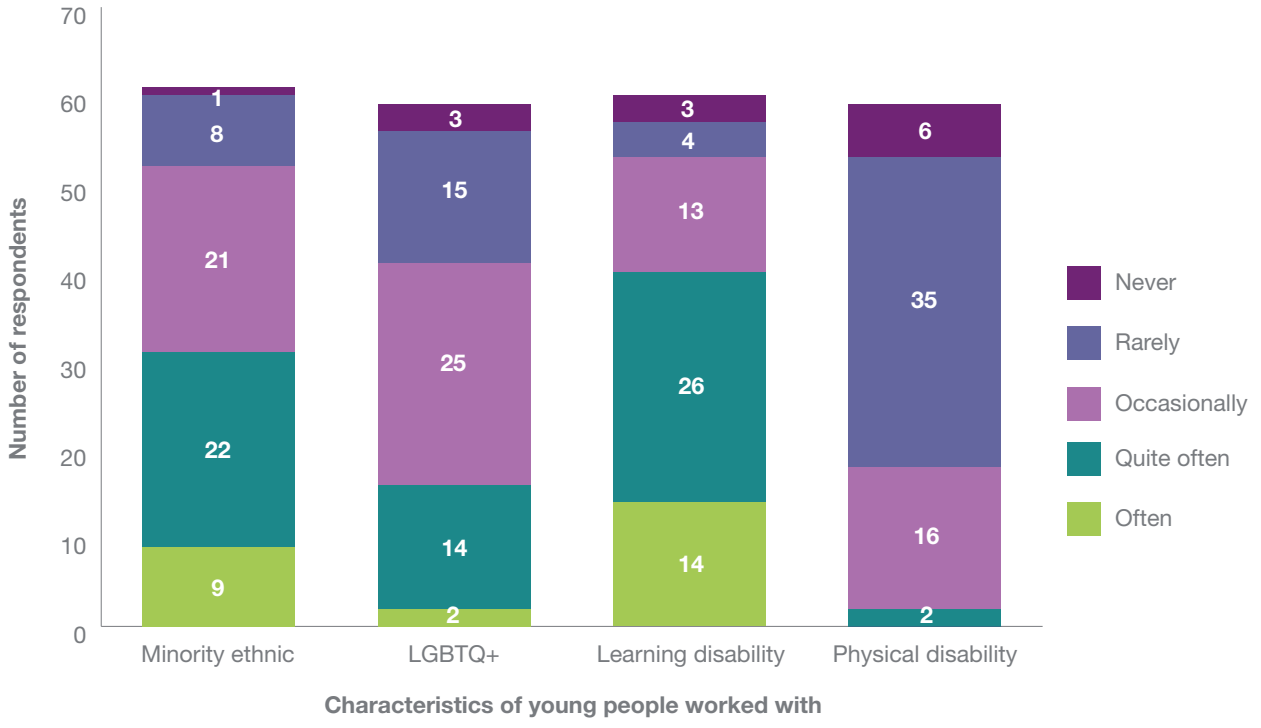
Again, 61 respondents answered these questions. As Figure 4 shows, half of them (n=31) stated that they often or quite often worked with young people from minority ethnic backgrounds; two-thirds (n=40) said the same of young people with learning disabilities, but only a quarter (n=16) reported working often or quite often with LGBTQ+ young people. Two-thirds of respondents (n=41) said they never or rarely worked with physically disabled young people, and most of the others (n=16) said they did so only occasionally.

In the interviews with members of one complex safeguarding team, most thought that the majority of child sexual exploitation cases they dealt with involved young White women.

Figure 3. Perceptions of the genders of young people affected by different forms of exploitation

n=61 survey respondents who answered these questions. (No more than 60 answered any individual question.)

Figure 4. Frequency of work with different groups of sexually exploited young people



n=61 survey respondents who answered these question.

3.1.3 Cases by form of exploitation

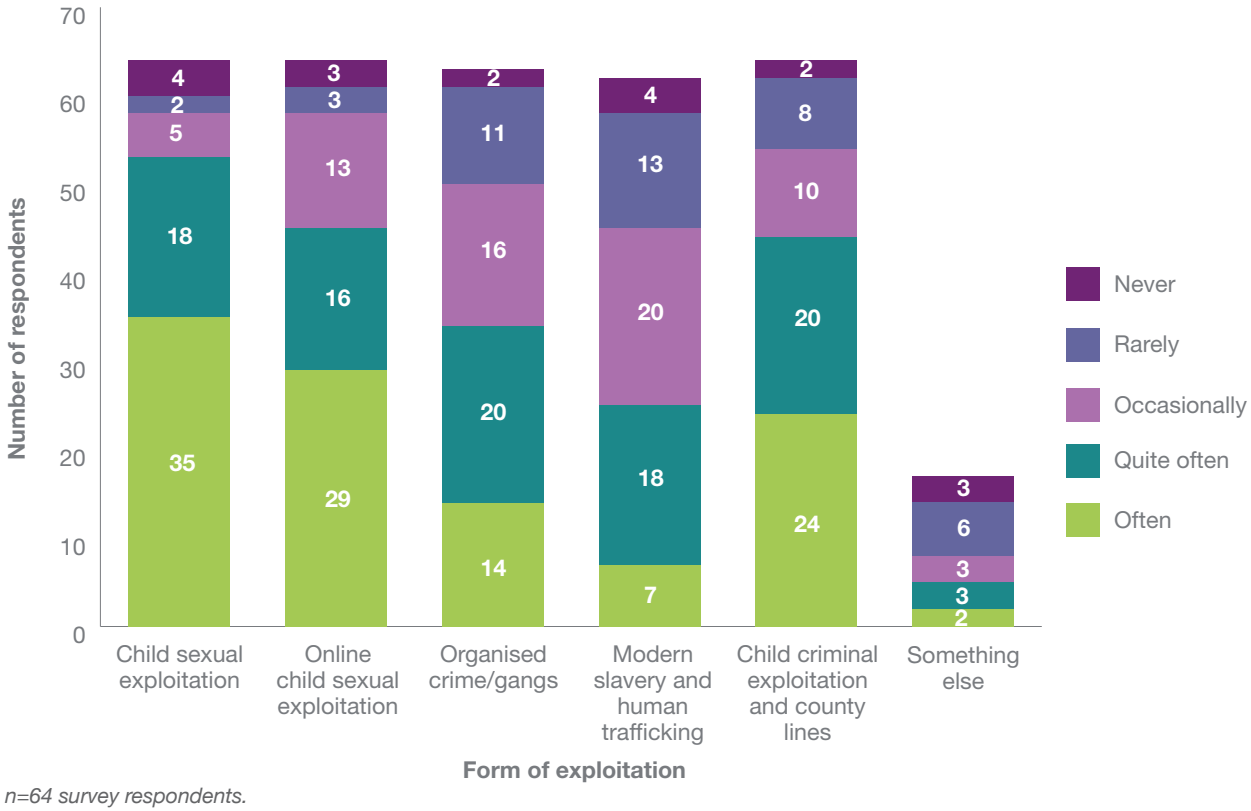
Survey respondents were asked to rate how often their caseload featured different forms of exploitation, using a Likert scale ranging from 'often' to 'never'. As Figure 5 shows, more than four-fifths (n=53) of the 64 respondents said that child sexual exploitation featured often or quite often in the cases they dealt with; this was followed by online child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation, both of which were said by almost three-quarters of respondents to feature often or quite often in their caseloads.

3.2 The referral process in the case study area

In the case study area, cases are referred to complex safeguarding where there is a concern about exploitation. Most of these referrals are channelled through the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), although some may come via police intelligence. Team members described how cases were initially screened by the MASH and allocated to the appropriate team:

> "Usually, all of our referrals come from social workers, so even if it comes through our MASH from a teacher or another professional, they have to come in to social care for it to be screened and then it comes to the complex safeguarding team. So [child sexual abuse] would be picked up within those MASH teams and filtered to the most appropriate team." (I2)

Figure 5. Frequency with which different forms of exploitation feature in complex safeguarding cases



n=64 survey respondents.

They said the team did sometimes receive cases involving wider forms of child sexual abuse as well as exploitation (sexual and/or criminal), although this was not always apparent at the outset, and not all cases involved a disclosure from a young person or a report from another professional. The child sexual exploitation risk assessment tool used by the complex safeguarding teams in the case study area provides space to record whether there is a history of 'abuse and neglect' and/or 'historic abuse in the family' (emotional, physical, sexual and neglect), and whether the young person is 'sexually active in an inappropriate relationship' or engaged in 'non-consensual sex'. That said, interviewees acknowledged that previous child sexual abuse would not be a primary motivating factor for referral to the complex safeguarding team, and indicated that a referral would principally be triggered by a risk of current exploitation.

A social worker and a police officer are allocated to each referral that is accepted, regardless of whether any crime has been disclosed. This is to facilitate a relationship with police in case of future disclosures, and to ensure that each sector is up to speed with developments in the case. Joint visits may be carried out with the young person's statutory social worker[1] or with a non-uniformed police officer, where appropriate, in order to develop familiarity and trust.

3.2.1 The role of risk in referral and assessment

All the interviewees were well versed in the language of 'risk', and their responses highlighted the specific ways in which a risk assessment is used within complex safeguarding:

> "We don't always have a crime, if you like, in the first instance, when it's referred … It's all about the risk." (I5)

> "There are concerns about CSE [child sexual exploitation], so, you know, alarm bells are going for professionals, when actually we do consultations and consultations will come in… I've done one today, and it's just 'at risk of CSE' and it's like... 'What does that look like for that young person?' 'How does that look in day-to-day life?'" (I6)

A number of the interviewees highlighted a concerted shift away from risk-based discourse and management systems, however, in order to reflect and incorporate the strengths-based approach that characterises their work.

> Interviewees indicated that a referral to the team would principally be triggered by a risk of current exploitation, not by previous sexual abuse.

1. Most young people and their families will have already been in contact with children's services prior to their referral to a complex safeguarding team, so they will usually have a statutory social worker who may continue to be involved in their case.

3.3 Practitioner understandings of child sexual abuse in the context of complex safeguarding

Definitions and understandings of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation are crucial to complex safeguarding work, and the language used within complex safeguarding teams is important: it determines which cases are referred to and taken on by complex safeguarding teams, and the misunderstanding or misapplication of terms may mean that child sexual abuse in certain contexts is obscured or overlooked.

In the interviews, specific and recurring language was often used by the practitioners to define key terms such as child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and complex safeguarding – but this language was not always consistent with the definitions in statutory guidance (Department for Education, 2018), which are not bound to either intra- or extra-familial contexts. For some interviewees (both social work and police), child sexual abuse was actively distinguished from child sexual exploitation by reference to child sexual abuse as intra-familial and child sexual exploitation as non-familial and involving grooming:

> "You've got [child sexual abuse] which, historically, is more familial, within the household, and [child sexual exploitation] is more non-familial. It's that contextual element, outside of the family background, so it's exploitation that is occurring either online – you've massive amounts of digital offences – and then you've got more physical grooming as well." (I4)

Even among those applying this distinction, there was a general understanding that child sexual exploitation is 'still child abuse':

> "I mean, when we talk about sexual abuse we usually think about either familial abuse, peer abuse, it is still within exploitation – you're still sexually abused, even if you're exploited." (I4)

> "I'm part of the discussion of 'Is this referral for us or for someone else?' So I suppose, in those terms, I'm aware of the difference in terms of thinking about exploitation rather than their being abused. Exploitation, on the whole, is extra-familial, so there's something about traditional social work and safeguarding methods being very much focused on the home ... but it's still child abuse." (I3)

The language used by practitioners to describe complex safeguarding mirrored that used to make distinctions between child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, and was often reinforced by the operational divisions between child protection and exploitation work. One of the clearest expressions of difference between the two areas of work was through reference to 'traditional' forms of child protection within social work and more 'complex' safeguarding:

> "[Complex safeguarding is] totally different to your traditional child protection. We would deal with the exploitation side of it, so a lot more online abuse… abusers that aren't known to the victim like they would be before." (I5)

Interviewees referred to work focusing on exploitation as a 'specialism', marking it as distinct from what they described as 'traditional' child sexual abuse work:

> "It's more specialist, I would say. It sort of overlaps, in a lot of ways, but… I suppose [child sexual exploitation] as a whole is a kind of specialist role, it's more specific because there's an exploitation element to it." (I5)

One interviewee questioned the use of the term 'child sexual exploitation', however, and the extent to which it reflects the realities of young people's experiences of victimisation and perpetration:

> "CSE is like a buzz word now, isn't it? And it's used to alert people, rather than actually understanding and thinking about what it looks like for that young person. Whereas I wouldn't say CSA is used really at all. I think looking at sexual abuse, when it's discussed, it's usually just CSE." (I6)

This observation was borne out by comments in other interviews; the interviewees rarely referred to child sexual abuse explicitly, and acts of sexual abuse were often communicated (consciously or unconsciously) in terms of generic exploitation or framed in terms of 'trauma':

> "I would talk about it in terms of trauma, and relational trauma, rather than sexual abuse." (I3)

> "It's how you word it. Even in exploitation, we don't always use the words 'sexual exploitation'." (I2)

> "We look at power imbalance." (I2)

One interviewee thought that not being labelled as a sexual violence service was less off-putting for the young people they were supporting, especially if they did not identify themselves as survivors of child sexual abuse:

> "I think that the complex safeguarding team is very, very helpful for young people, and I think there's a definite need for it. I think we're seeing a lot of young people who might get lost if it didn't exist… People don't always necessarily identify [as] being a victim of sexual abuse, or knowing that that's happened." (I6)

In many cases, the language used by complex safeguarding practitioners when talking to young people reflected a strengths-based approach to supporting them:

> "I go in for self-esteem, what she's worth as a young person, rather than the actual, 'This is grooming.' What I say to a lot of the young people I work with is, 'I'm talking to you as another woman, about what we deserve as women, in a relationship, and this isn't what's good, what's appropriate.'" (FG3)

3.3.1 Practitioner perspectives on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in complex safeguarding cases

To explore the scale and nature of child sexual abuse in complex safeguarding caseloads, survey respondents were asked how often there were concerns that the young people they worked with had experienced or were experiencing child sexual abuse. Two-fifths (n=26) said this was often or quite often the case, and slightly more (n=28) said it occasionally happened. Only one in seven (n=9) said there were rarely or never any such concerns. Among the 59 practitioners answering a question on the nature of these concerns, one in six (n=10) said they tended to involve extra -familial child sexual abuse only, and slightly fewer (n=6) said they involved only intra-familial abuse; almost three-quarters (n=43) reported that both intra- and extra-familial abuse featured in the concerns raised about the young people they worked with.

In the interviews, practitioners were asked to reflect on whether different forms of child sexual abuse, including child sexual exploitation, featured in the cases they worked on. Other than child sexual exploitation, the only form of child sexual abuse that all interviewees recognised as being widely present within their caseload was online abuse; this was often described in conjunction with grooming, which could sometimes lead to sexually abusive encounters in person.

> The language used by practitioners when talking to young people reflected a strengths-based approach to supporting them.

Interviewees expressed differing views about the prevalence of intra-familial child sexual abuse among the cases they worked on:

> "All of them [involve intra-familial CSA]." (I6)

> "No, I've not had anything like that since I've been on the team." (I1)

There was a widespread view that, where present, intra-familial child sexual abuse was likely to be a prior rather than a current experience of the young people worked with by the team:

> "I think that [child sexual abuse] is a historical feature, rather than a current feature. So, quite often, that has taken place in a young person's history. It's not historic because it's still being lived in there – but the actual physical abuse, whatever that abuse was, is in the past, and that's being dealt with one way or another, so they're no longer living with that abuse. I would say there is a very small amount where there is family abuse happening." (I3)

> "We do have cases where there's been historic sexual abuse, whether that be within the family or otherwise." (I5)

3.4 Core elements of the complex safeguarding response in the case study area

The complex safeguarding approach adopted in the case study area has a number of core elements, including:

- deploying specialist knowledge and practitioners
- taking a strengths-based approach that values the young person's strengths and aspirations
- investing time in young people
- providing an individual response based on their needs and at their pace
- maintaining consistency and not overloading young people with different professionals.

The primary objective is to build a trusted relationship with young people at risk of or experiencing exploitation. Some social workers maintain a small caseload in order to develop strong individual relationships with young people who are living in particularly unstable environments. Working in this way can be intensive and long-term, but allows relationships to be built by focusing not (at least initially) on the abuse or exploitation but on the young person's strengths:

> "Our role is to focus on building a trusted relationship with the young person. Initially, it might be that you just see them weekly, daily, monthly, whenever they want to see us. It's young-person-led, so it's as and when they want that support… We're not just there when something's happened, like they've been missing from home or there's been risk. We're there on their terms, and we just focus on their strengths and their ambitions, their aspirations for the future." (I1)

> "I focus on their strengths, what they're good at, and finding that quality about them, and helping them to recognise that in themselves. I think when self-esteem grows, they might open up to you. Eventually, when they start to recognise that what happened to them, or what might have happened, wasn't their fault, they might want to start talking to you. I just focus on the relationship. That is key for me." (I1)

3.4.1 Aims of the response: bringing professional cultures together

Interviewees said the support provided by the social workers in the complex safeguarding team aimed primarily to stop the exploitation, build the young people's resilience, and enable them to build positive relationships with professionals and other trusted adults. There appeared to be a substantial focus on understanding grooming and recognising unhealthy relationships:

> "My overall aim is that, when get I close to them, they have a good understanding of grooming and exploitation, keeping safe on social media, that they can recognise a healthy relationship and an unhealthy relationship, and that the family's strengthened and that they've got positive relationships in their lives that they can turn to when you're not there." (I1)

Interviews with police officers indicated that disrupting the perpetrators was also a key part of their complex safeguarding work:

> "In relation to complex safeguarding as a whole and what would be offered, that would be increasing awareness and education and, if possible, disruption; depending on the nature of it, we have access to some disruption work that we can do." (I4).

The language used by police officers and social workers in the interviews highlighted the distinct occupational cultures and professional objectives that come together to form a complex safeguarding response. While team members noted that there was joint working on the safeguarding aspects of case work, they recognised the importance of maintaining distinct roles and responsibilities within the team. Social workers highlighted the importance of "building trusted and appropriate relationships", and police officers referred to "building an intelligence picture" and "establishing an evidence base". There was also a suggestion that social workers could spend time building a relationship with the young person that would support the police investigation, as the police did not have the capacity to work in this intensive, in-depth way:

> "I would say that it's more focused on stopping the exploitation and gathering information to build up a case for the police – it's what happens quite a lot." (I6)

> "I feel the aim of the police on our team is more to build a relationship with the young people, but they're just not physically able to do it, because of the amount of work that they have. So a lot of work that they ask us [to do] is to get more information on building a case." (I6)

It was felt that social workers could spend time building a relationship with the young person that would support the police investigation.

3.5 Identifying and addressing child sexual abuse within the complex safeguarding approach

The focus group with four social work practitioners in one complex safeguarding team was convened to explore how concerns of child sexual abuse are identified, interpreted and responded to in situations similar to social workers' day-to-day work, using two fictional vignettes involving 'Jade' and 'Jamie'. Both vignettes can be found in Appendix 1, but a brief synopsis is provided here:

- Jade is a 15-year-old girl who is known to social workers. She is known to associate with an organised crime gang and is said to be involved with a gang member. Jade's mum has contacted social workers because she is concerned about locks on Jade's bedroom door, gifts received from the gang member, and an increased tendency for Jade to stay away for days at a time.
- Jamie is 15 years old and is frequently missing from home and school. He is often seen near gay bars and clubs. Jamie identifies as bisexual, his family are devout Catholics, and he does not feel he can be open to others about his feelings. Last week, police found Jamie in bed with a 19-year-old man, hung-over and with love bites on his torso.

3.5.1 How are concerns about child sexual abuse articulated by practitioners?

In relation to possible child sexual abuse, the focus group participants appeared relatively comfortable to address the relationship-focused aspect of intervention and identify whether grooming and/or exploitation were present. However, they seemed more cautious about considering and exploring whether either Jade or Jamie had experienced sexual assault or rape. They often described the young people's interactions with their potential abusers through the lens of a 'relationship'.

The following extracts from discussions about the vignette featuring Jade show the focus group's initial thoughts on her situation and the actions that might be considered as a result. The use of terms like "being in a relationship" and "seeing someone" perhaps reflected the language used in the vignettes:

> "If it's Jade being picked up by this guy, have we got information about her being in this relationship?" (FG1)

> "We're not coming along and saying, 'You don't have relationships at all.' What we want is safe and healthy relationships for young people." (FG1)

> "I suppose, for me, the standout is her age, and the fact that she's seeing someone who's heavily involved in crime." (FG3)

While young people may describe their situation in these terms, it is important that practitioners reflect critically on the use of these terms, as there is a risk of sexual abuse being missed, overlooked or minimised if the situation is treated simply as a 'problematic' relationship.

In the following comment, however, the practitioner seemed to recognise that Jade saw herself as being in a legitimate relationship. They suggested that working with that knowledge and talking with Jade about keeping herself safe in that relationship – for example, by talking about contraception – could open up discussions which might enable any possible abuse to come to light:

> "We work closely with specialist nurses who can have a chat about contraception options, and see if that's a different avenue that opens up speaking out about any type of abuse that might have happened…" (FG4)

> It was suggested that talking about keeping safe in a relationship could open up discussions, enabling any abuse to come to light.

The vignette involving Jamie clearly resonated with participants' own caseloads. Indeed, one mentioned a similar case they had dealt with that was investigated as rape. Occurring late in the focus group discussion, this was the first time the term 'rape' was mentioned in connection with this scenario (albeit only in relation to this particular participant's case, which had been the subject of a police investigation). Potential concerns about sexual abuse in Jamie's case came to the fore almost inadvertently, as the participants got into a discussion about age and consent following an initial misunderstanding about Jamie's age and whether he was under 16. At this point, one participant stated that it would be important to ascertain whether Jamie could remember what had happened and had given consent.

3.5.2 How do practitioners address concerns of child sexual abuse with young people?

From the six interviews, it was clear that, in relation to the disclosure of child sexual abuse, complex safeguarding practitioners are young-person-led and inclined to wait until young people are ready to share details of any abuse or exploitation they may be experiencing:

> "It's as and when… It could be years before a young person discloses things or talks to you about things." (I1)

Interviewees confirmed that they would not necessarily ask the young person about sexual abuse/exploitation directly at the point of referral:

> "It would be a massive concern, any kind of sexual abuse that happened, but it wouldn't necessarily be a question that we would ask. If the consultation comes through, it's usually one of the main points that they would say whether... whatever that sexual abuse might be, whether it's a known perpetrator or unknown, or whoever it is, it would usually be one of the concerns. If there's a discussion around it being a possibility, I guess I would definitely probe and ask the [referring] professional the questions around that, to clarify what's happened, but it wouldn't usually be the reason that someone's come in to us, I would think." (I6)

As the social workers got to know the young person and build up trust, interviewees said, they might introduce police to them. Establishing a trusting relationship with the young person was considered key to ensuring that disclosures could be made and evidence gathered more easily in the future:

> "I think once you manage to get that child's trust, that's when you start getting disclosure further down the line. They might say nothing's happened, originally, but further down the line you get disclosures. We wouldn't necessarily get that in another unit, because they're not able to invest that time." [I5]

They said this approach had been seen to work in some of their cases, and perceived it to be very different to mainstream child protection as it involved a longer-term process of 'drawing out' information over a period of time:

> "I've got a young person that I've worked with for over a year. She's a looked-after child and she lives out of area. She's got a really good relationship with a police officer [name] on my team, and she's started disclosing things, more recently, and she's happy to speak with [the officer]. She doesn't tell [the officer] everything, but I feel like we're getting to that point where she might open up, because [the officer's] been visiting her for over a year… That's the beauty of our role, we're that consistent person, they don't have various social workers. That young person I was talking about, she's had so many different social workers, but I am that same face for her, and the police officer is." (I1)

> "When we go back to the discussion we had about how you would respond as the duty social worker to a child who maybe you have never met before, and you're intervening to support them and safeguard them, it's completely different to maybe how you would draw that information out of a young person who you've worked with for a period of time." (I2)

Perceived complexities with identification in exploitation work

One of the complexities highlighted in exploitation work was the lack of clarity that sometimes existed around the nature of victims and offenders and the possible overlap between them. There was a perception among interviewees that some practitioners found it particularly challenging to identify victims in child criminal exploitation (CCE) cases, because young people could be victims of exploitation while also committing criminal offences themselves. They did not feel that the same was true in cases of child sexual exploitation:

> "The complexity around CCE is that you're potentially dealing with victims who are also criminals, because they may have been arrested for drugs offences or other offences, and then it transpires that they are subject to exploitation, and it's that fine line between victim and suspect, isn't it? … Whereas your traditional child protection… it's easier to identify your victims; it's a lot harder to identify those victims when it's around criminal exploitation." (I4).

> "I think some of the police and some of the social workers have also struggled to be able to see some of the criminally exploited young people as exploited. It's quite a different kind of emotional response than we have, because sexual exploitation is so abhorrent." (I3).

As a result, the interviews with some team members suggested a greater confidence and experience in responding to child sexual exploitation compared to child criminal exploitation, which had come into their remit more recently:

> "We're at the very beginning of the journey with CCE, whereas CSE and sexual abuse, we've learned a lot … I think that's a lot more embedded, and our knowledge and skills are a lot better in that area than CCE." (I2)

3.5.3 The prevalence of victim-centred language

Safeguarding children and young people from exploitation, and disrupting crime and criminal networks, are both described as key priorities in complex safeguarding work. A victim-centred approach means focusing on the young person's needs and strengths, in line with the principles that inform their work.

Previous research (Lloyd, 2019; Pearce, 2014) has highlighted the tendency of social work practitioners to label young people's behaviours as 'challenging' or 'risky,' which can border on victim blaming. Complex safeguarding practitioners in this study were aware of the potential negative implications of focusing on a victim's behaviour rather than the perpetrator's actions, although two interviewees said that they had witnessed this trend in wider multi-agency networks. They thought this could shift blame away from the perpetrator's actions and the reasons for the young person's behaviour, placing judgement on the young person themselves:

> "When our social workers are at case conferences, and people are talking about the young person… sometimes the judgement placed on the child is horrific… 'That child's behaviour is bad because...' They're not thinking about why that child might be behaving out of sorts, and this is a prime example if the child has got significant behavioural difficulties… Has something happened to that young person? What is it that happened to make them behave that way?" (I2)

> Complex safeguarding team members saw the negative implications of focusing on a victim's behaviour rather than the perpetrator's actions.

3.6 Responding to concerns and disclosures of child sexual abuse

3.6.1 Responding to a disclosure

The social workers interviewed described how, if a young person verbally disclosed or reported child sexual abuse, they would primarily have a listening role and be led by the young person: "It's up to them" (I1). They had a clear sense of their remit, seeing themselves as supportive listeners and signposting to other support rather than offering counselling:

> "To be honest, I just listen. At the end of the day, I'm not a counsellor, I'm not a therapist." (I1)

One suggested that they lacked confidence about what best to do in the event of a disclosure, and described being worried about saying the wrong thing:

> "We get a lot of training in this job, which is brilliant, but at the end of the day we're not therapists, we're social workers. We have a clinical therapist on our team, and that's supportive, and that helps us. But you're having quite deep conversations with these young people, and I always worry: 'If they come forward about something, will I say the wrong thing? Will I do the right thing?'" (I1)

Although the interviewees' complex safeguarding team contained nationally trained and accredited Specialist Child Abuse Investigators (police), one social worker mentioned a lack of specialist sexual abuse training:

> "We've got quite a lot of training in understanding trauma, but I don't think I've really experienced anything specialised [in] sexual abuse." (I6)

Team members said they would bring in a range of external partners, if needed, including a sexual assault referral centre (SARC), independent sexual violence advisors (ISVAs), speech and language specialists for young people with communication difficulties, and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). They added that the team might also refer young people to early intervention services on grooming and exploitation, or to organisations like Victim Support or Barnardo's which offer a package of support. However, they said their primary goal was to safeguard and support the young person:

> "Obviously, you'd make sure that they're safe – that would be the first thing that would take place – but it depends if it's historic, it's current, how it's impacting on them, the trauma that they've suffered from it. So, for us, we're developing a relationship. If someone discloses, we need to make sure that they are in a safe place to be able to do that, and that they're going to get the support that they need. We would utilise health, police, all the agencies, but make sure that that young person felt safe and secure to be able to make those disclosures… And it would be a collective response to make sure that that young person is safe and supported." (I2)

> One social worker in the complex safeguarding team mentioned a lack of specialist training in relation to sexual abuse.

Interviewees explained that, when trying to coordinate appropriate support, it was important not to overload the young person with multiple professionals and agencies, so they tried to ensure that the complex safeguarding social workers remained the young people's central reference point. They added that there could be issues with young people's readiness for counselling and, for those who did want to take up counselling, the availability of relevant services:

> "The majority of the time, they're not ready for counselling." (I1)

> "I think we need to be referring on to the right services, but as I said, it's months and months on the waiting list." (I1)

Once a case is registered, going through the legal process can also be difficult for young people and the case may not go any further. One social worker described how this aspect of the intervention could be frustrating, especially as children and young people were not always able to furnish the details needed to progress the investigation (due to age or learning disability, for example):

> "They can't give them clear accounts, because they don't know times, days, depending on their age. Quite often it's very hard to evidence, isn't it, sexual abuse? That's what I find hard, and it's very rare that perpetrators will get 'done'. It's so hard to evidence. We do all this work, building relationships in the hope that young people will come forward, or young children will disclose what's happened to them, and if it does, it's then: will the perpetrator get found, arrested, will it go that far? It's just such a long process, and that's what I find quite sad and frustrating." (I1)

3.6.2 Responding where there are concerns but no verbal disclosure

The online survey asked practitioners whether they would address concerns about a history of child sexual abuse alongside current experiences of exploitation. Of the 60 respondents who answered the question, the vast majority (n=51) said they would, but nine – including seven social workers – said they would not. Follow-up responses from three of them clarified that, although they would be mindful of these concerns when working with the young person, they would not raise the issue unless the young person did. One mentioned not wanting to retraumatise the young person or jeopardise the relationship of trust:

> "If there were any safeguarding concerns – for example, the young person disclosed that they had been sexually abused in the past – then of course I would address this and make sure that this young person and any others were safeguarded. However, if there were behaviours they were displaying which suggested it may have happened but they hadn't disclosed and there was no evidence regarding who might have harmed them, I would look to build a relationship with them in the hope that, in time, they would feel able to disclose if they had been abused. In addition, if the person had been abused but had since been safeguarded, I would work with them according to their presenting concerns, and while my understanding of the trauma they had experienced would guide my work with them, I wouldn't raise it unless they did." (S36, social worker)

> "This would be addressed within my assessments and would be relevant in planning my sessions. It would be [a question of] whether it is appropriate for the individual young person for this to be addressed in sessions, as the last thing that I want to do is retraumatise them or jeopardise my relationship." (S30, social worker)

In terms of how they would address concerns of child sexual abuse in such cases, most survey respondents said that this would depend on the circumstances, but that they would assess the young person's current situation and safety, explore support options, and make referrals to relevant specialist services such as the SARC, if necessary. A number specified that they would refer the young person to social care. Almost all police officer respondents mentioned a potential investigation, although some acknowledged that this would depend on the circumstances and the child's wishes. Social workers tended to focus more on ascertaining the impact of the abuse, safeguarding and support needs, and exploring the matter with the young person themselves where possible:

> "Assess the information and make appropriate referrals, safeguarding, and start appropriate investigations to prosecute offenders where possible." (S15, police)

> "Understand the young person's history, consult with our psychologist to develop a formulation, refer to a specialist service if the young person wanted it (such as SARC), look at any current risks with family (if the harm was intra-familial), talk to the young person at their pace and only if they volunteer/want to speak about it." (S62, social worker)

In the interviews, social workers described their approach when they suspected that a young person they were working with was being sexually exploited but had not yet made a disclosure. In such instances, they said they would still wait for disclosure before acting:

> When you get to know these young people, you do get to know them and think that something might have happened to them, something quite traumatic, by the way that they behave… So sometimes we do have those suspicions, but I suppose it's about being there, and then when they are ready to open up, that they trust you enough to do that, and that you're there for them." (I1)

Practitioners felt they had to strike a balance, being neither over-zealous nor complacent in their response to individual cases. Their observations here echoed concerns about approaches to recording forms of child sexual abuse in case files (see section 3.7):

> "Obviously, you've got to be really careful that you're not jumping to conclusions… but you can't also become complacent. You need to recognise those signs and think about how you're going to work with that young person in order that they feel in a position where they can maybe share something." (I2)

The multi-agency nature of complex safeguarding emphasises the interplay between evidence/disclosure, suspicion and professional instinct. Police officers work alongside social workers to build a trusted relationship, but they have a slightly different approach in that they may open a case of suspected exploitation and gather evidence – "building an intelligence picture until [a young person is] ready to speak" – in the meantime. In some instances, they can act without a disclosure:

> "A good chunk of our work is when the child isn't on board… A lot of the time it's building that relationship to get the child to open up… Some of these cases are slow burners, because it's building those trusted relationships with the children. It could be that you've got the social worker building a relationship, trying to get that child on board while the police are doing whatever inquiry we can." (I4)

It was clear that the professional priorities of the police officers in the team – namely, seeking disclosures and securing evidence – differed from those of the social workers. Nevertheless, the police did also place an emphasis on safeguarding the young person:

> "A lot of the time it's doing work around potential [child sexual exploitation], so even though they've not made a disclosure at the time, it's just CCTV [and] other stuff that we can be doing to paint an intelligence picture. Sometimes that's what it is, and so until that child's ready to speak on this – a disclosure – it's just safeguarding that child, focusing on that, which obviously we focus on throughout anyway, and putting safety measures in place for that child, and looking at what investigative opportunities there are, even though there isn't a crime as such. That child's not telling us anything, but further down the line, if they do make a disclosure, we don't want to have lost any opportunity for evidence." (I5)

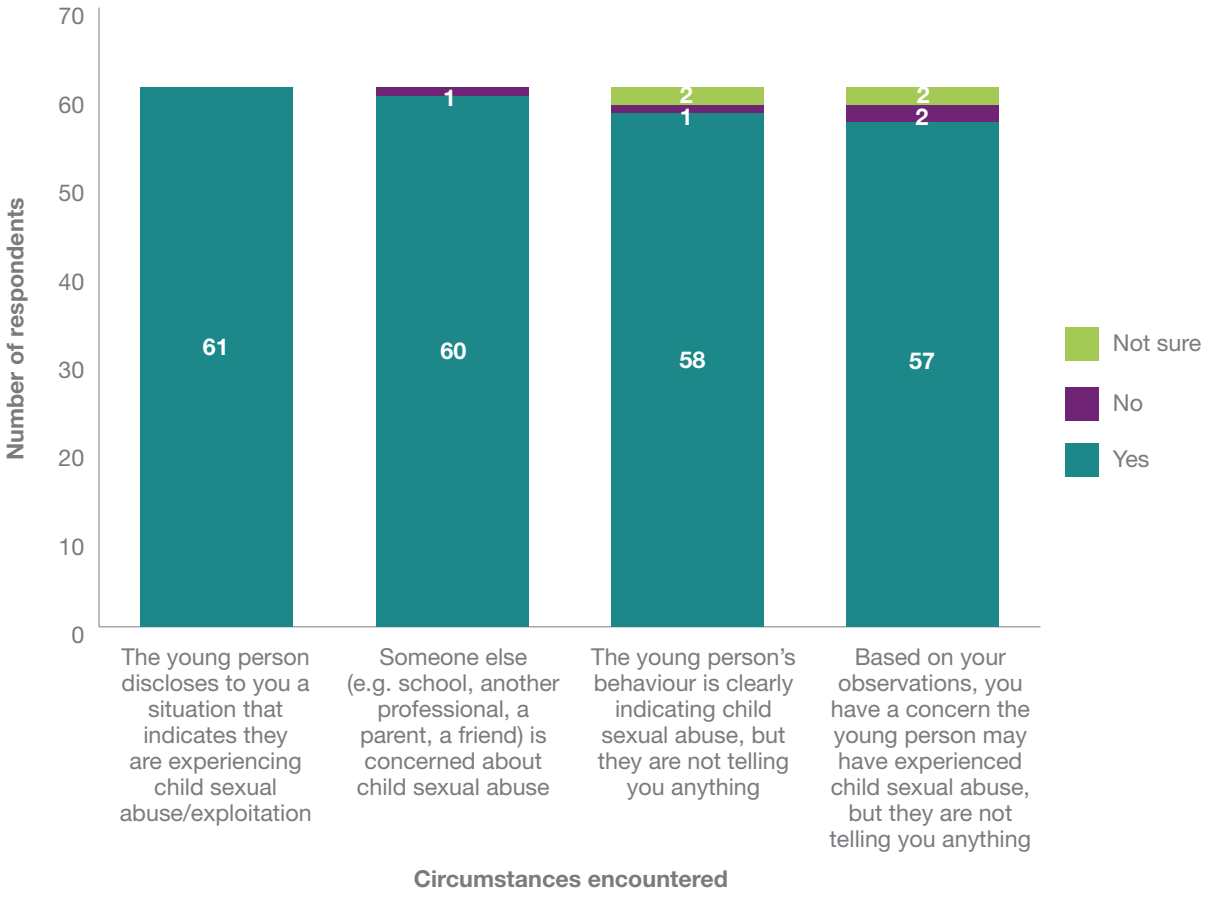
One interviewee said that young people are quite conscious that disclosure can lead to action, so they can be wary of giving away too much information. Equally, they could be testing the water to see how professionals react and what they would do to help:

> "They're quite knowledgeable on how to, kind of, disclose, kind of test the water with professionals, but not give too much information so that we're actually able to do anything about it, if that makes sense." (I6)

This interviewee said they felt confident in their role when responding to this type of situation:

> "Being aware that disclosure may become apparent, and that you might just need to be able to give time, and also just don't push too much for certain information. I think it's all that. You build a relationship with young people by being understanding, being supportive, being honest and open. They're all the same ways you would treat any human, no matter what their experiences are. But I think I would be quite confident." (I6)

Figure 6. Circumstances in which concerns of child sexual abuse are recorded



n=61 survey respondents who answered the question.

3.7 Recording child sexual abuse

3.7.1 The nature of evidence and its role in recording concerns of child sexual abuse

As mentioned above, the multi-agency dimension of the complex safeguarding approach revealed an interplay between terms such as evidence and disclosure, suspicion and professional instinct. For the complex safeguarding practitioners who participated in this study, evidence was often synonymous with victim disclosure, and this would often determine the approach to recording concerns of child sexual abuse.

Survey respondents were presented with a range of scenarios featuring differing degrees of disclosure, and asked whether and how they would record their concerns about child sexual abuse in those scenarios. All 61 respondents answering these questions said they would record their concerns of abuse in cases where there had been a verbal disclosure by the young person – but even in cases where their observations had led to concerns but the young person had not disclosed anything, the vast majority (n=57) said they would record those concerns (see Figure 6).

Social work practitioners identified a range of options for recording concerns of child sexual abuse, including on the young person's case file/case notes, the risk management tool and the team's electronic record-keeping system; a few also mentioned submitting intelligence to police. A number said they would be careful to point out that these were their own views rather than 'factual information':

> "I would record this on the child's case file in my observation but under the title 'Reflection', so it was clear that this was my view. I would also record in the child's risk management tool." (S27, social worker)

> "I would record with sensitivity but accuracy that if there is nothing factual this is recorded as it is. I would record another person's disclosure or indicators but be clear this is what it is, careful use of language and factual information, not assumptions." (S28, social worker)

> "I would need some kind of evidence before I recorded this information and I would actively seek to engage the young person and build a trusting relationship within which they felt able to discuss this with me. I feel recording information is essential in many cases but should not be recorded simply to cover 'one's back'." (S9, social worker)

Police respondents to the survey said they would record this information in the care plan, crime report and/or intelligence submissions:

> "If a crime has been disclosed directly to me or another professional, then I would record the crime. If a concern is raised but the young person has not disclosed a crime specifically, then I would record it in a care plan and/or intelligence [report] and refer to other professional agencies in case this forms part of a bigger picture of concern." (S59, police)

Interviewees in one of the case study area's complex safeguarding teams were also asked about recording child sexual abuse. They too distinguished between disclosure (evidence or fact) and practitioner instinct or concern (opinion), and indicated how they would record each of these differently. Police participants revealed a focus on "building an intelligence picture" in the context of a criminal investigation, often in the absence of a disclosure:

> "We would potentially submit a piece of intelligence even if it was only suspected." (I4)

> "We put intelligence on the system all the time, in terms of information that comes from the social worker… Maybe [the young person is] in a home, so stuff from the home or school… anyone who's involved with that child who pass[es] us information. We make sure it's recorded, to make sure we're painting an intelligence picture about that child, and knowing as much about them as we can, until they are ready to speak." (I5)

The interviews with social workers indicated that practitioner concerns and opinions required an accompanying evidence base if they were to be recorded:

> "When you record things, you have to make sure that everything you're saying is factual, it can't be opinion. I'll do my own analysis and discuss that with my manager – why a child might be behaving in a certain way, and what my gut instinct sometimes tells me: things they might have said or the way they behave might indicate that they've been through significant trauma. You might have that feeling, but you can't record it like that; that's your feeling or opinion. It has to be factual." (I1)

> "It's really hard, because if you don't have any evidence but you have a thought – if you're going to record that, you've got to be able to back it up with something." (I2)

For some, emerging concerns not accompanied by a disclosure would be discussed with managers in the first instance.

> "If there was a concern, we would discuss it so that other people were aware, and then... It's a really hard one that, you know. I don't know, if I'm honest." (I6)

> "I think I'd say it in supervision with my manager." (I1)

Another was mindful of recording unsubstantiated concerns, particularly because of possible implications for the suspected perpetrator of the abuse:

> "I know that, recently, one of our young people… she's in a new relationship with someone that's older than her. She's been spending quite a lot of time at his house, and we've kind of gone full circle, being really concerned about the relationship, but [then] actually that it might be quite a supportive relationship. Now we're really concerned about it – she came home with a mark on her face. I was quite conscious of making the police aware of what had happened, because we didn't know the ins and outs of what had happened, there was nothing specific disclosed. I'm just conscious that some people are made out to be or seem to be the perpetrator without any actual knowledge, and that would then be documented on systems to create a view of someone that might be inaccurate." (I6)

The importance of distinguishing between what is determined to be fact and what is deemed a concern was further highlighted in focus group discussions on the vignette featuring Jade's case:

> "I think we would need to get to a point of a 'What have we got in the pot?' sort of thing. 'Where is Jade at, at the moment? And what's happened?' That determines what we've got that's factual, what we've got that's suspicion. Is it likely it's happened, or is it somebody that's worried about it but with nothing to back it up?" (FG1)

> There was a consensus among interviewees that the language used in recording child sexual abuse concerns was of vital importance.

One interviewee was more definite about recording only what had been said by the young person, whereas another could envisage recording their concern that something may have happened if they had something more tangible to back it up:

> "I always record exactly what the young person said. I always quote what they've said." (I1)

> "You've got to be able to say that it happened, but that isn't to say that you can't put, 'I would think that something may have happened to that young person, because of...' if they've not disclosed and… you don't know if any crime has been committed but you think something has happened... You can record why you think that. I always think it's wise to put something like, 'It is likely that this young person has suffered some form of abuse, because of...'" (I2)

3.7.2 The importance of language when recording concerns

There was a general consensus among the interviewees that the language used when recording concerns of child sexual abuse was of vital importance:

> "It [language] has a huge impact, because it almost makes what you're inferring, or what you're implying… it almost becomes real." (I2)

When discussing approaches to case file recording, social workers were mindful that the young person concerned and/or their family might read the files at some point in the future:

> "I've always got to be mindful that the child has access to, and could come back and read, their file. That's what you've got to try and think about, at the back of your mind." (I2)

> "I think that we're starting to be quite conscious about the information that we do record, just in case the young people or parents request their information and what's been documented on them." (I6)

The time pressures that often characterise social work were highlighted by the interviewees, particularly in relation to case file recording, although mainstream social work caseloads were described as much higher. Nevertheless, interviewees were determined to address organisational issues around the use of language and the recording of cases more generally:

> "As a social worker, when you are fast-paced, you've got to get everything done two days ago. You've case after case building up, you just write what naturally flows in your writing, and you're not really always considering what you've written – but then if you came back and looked at it, you'd think, 'I shouldn't have written it like that.'" (I2)

> "It's [often the] terminology that needs to be looked at and addressed in the wider workforce. People are so judgemental, and it's something that we need to change from the bottom up, very much so. I'm not saying we're always right [in the complex safeguarding team], but we really try to consider the language that we're using in our assessments, particularly around sexual abuse and exploitation, because it can be construed as completely the young person's fault." (I2)

> "You come across language that's been recorded, that victim-blames all the time without them even realising. For example, 'They place themselves at risk of sexual abuse…' when actually that isn't the case." (I3)

They also highlighted proactive measures that had been put in place to give practitioners opportunities to reflect on and develop their recording practice. For example, auditing social worker case notes approximately every six weeks was seen as a constructive process, allowing for reflection and ultimately helping case workers to "record more thoroughly". One interviewee referred to a 'language toolkit' (The Children's Society, 2020), used to support the use of appropriate language in case file recording:

> "It records statements that are used very often around sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, and then it gives you an alternative to use. It is there to help promote and help you think about what you're actually writing." (I2)

4. Discussion

This chapter returns to the study's research questions, identifying and elaborating on the themes that emerged from the study in relation to the identification and response to child sexual abuse in complex safeguarding practice.

4.1 How often complex safeguarding caseloads include young people for whom concerns of child sexual abuse have been raised

Almost half of the survey respondents said that the young people in their caseloads had often or quite often experienced child sexual abuse previously, in addition to the current or presenting exploitation concern – but child sexual exploitation and online abuse were the only forms of child sexual abuse that all interviewees recognised as being widely present within their caseloads. It should be noted, however, that complex safeguarding teams work with a small number of particularly complex cases, and interviewees recognised that other forms of sexual abuse were prevalent in the caseloads of other social work teams in their area.

With regard to the contexts of abuse encountered in caseloads, survey respondents reported that both intra- and extra-familial child sexual abuse were common in complex safeguarding cases, whereas interviewees more readily recognised the presence of historical, particularly intra-familial, abuse.

4.2 Whether child sexual abuse is a primary reason for a young person to be referred to complex safeguarding

Cases are referred to complex safeguarding where there is a risk of exploitation, including of a sexual or criminal nature. In so far as it encompasses child sexual exploitation, child sexual abuse is a motivating factor for a referral. The assessment tool used by practitioners in the case study area makes reference to historical and ongoing intra-familial abuse, which includes emotional, sexual, physical abuse and neglect, as well as 'sexually inappropriate relationships'. However, these are one of many other elements that practitioners consider when assessing a case.

Practitioners in the case study area indicated that 'traditional' child sexual abuse cases (and particularly those seen as involving historical, intra-familial abuse) were typically allocated to mainstream child protection – and, in terms of police involvement, to specialist child abuse investigators – rather than being referred to complex safeguarding teams. It is therefore the specialist exploitation focus of complex safeguarding work that primarily guides the nature and acceptance of referrals.

While complex safeguarding approaches have sought to bring together and develop a joined-up response to different aspects of exploitation that were previously dealt with in isolation, it is important to be aware of the potential for this to create different forms of separation – for example, between child sexual exploitation and other forms of child sexual abuse – as well as obscuring possible overlaps between child sexual abuse and child criminal exploitation.

Interviewees said there could be concerns that a young person was experiencing or had experienced other forms of child sexual abuse alongside the sexual exploitation that they had been referred for. Such concerns may not be apparent from the outset and may emerge in time through the trusted relationship that is prioritised between the young person and the designated case worker.

This scenario may reflect recent research by the CSA Centre in Wales, which found a widespread reluctance on the part of social workers to talk about child sexual abuse in specific terms (Roberts, 2020). The research literature emphasises the importance of young people who may be sexually abused being noticed, asked about this and listened to (Allnock and Miller, 2013).

4.3 Patterns in the characteristics of young people referred to complex safeguarding teams

Among the complex safeguarding practitioners surveyed, two-thirds saw child sexual exploitation as affecting mainly girls, while more than half considered organised crime/gangs and child criminal exploitation to affect mainly boys. These perceptions were reflected in the interviews conducted with members of one complex safeguarding team.

The survey respondents were also asked about other characteristics of the young people they worked with in relation to child sexual exploitation. Only a small number said they worked more than occasionally with physically disabled young people or those from LGBTQ+ communities. Around half said they worked often or quite often with young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, and two-thirds stated that they supported young people with learning disabilities.

4.4 How concerns of child sexual abuse are identified and responded to within the complex safeguarding caseload

4.4.1 Disclosures

The theme of disclosure is integral to an exploration of how child sexual abuse is identified and responded to, both in this study and beyond. Disclosure is a journey that is often long and rarely straightforward (Allnock and Miller, 2013). However, the provision of support for child sexual abuse depends on its being identified. The interviews suggested that complex safeguarding practitioners in the case study area rely primarily on disclosures from the young people to confirm – and, to some extent, validate – any concerns they have about possible child sexual exploitation and other forms of child sexual abuse.

Practitioners spoke about how building a trusted relationship could facilitate such a disclosure in the future, as and when the young person was ready. However, there was some uncertainty as to whether a disclosure would be responded to 'in the right way'; the general view appeared to be that, if a disclosure is made, signposting to relevant support services such as counselling is important alongside ongoing support from the complex safeguarding team. The case study area benefits from strong multi-agency links, but further specialist sexual abuse training for practitioners would be useful here, and was recommended by several interviewees.

> Building a trusted relationship could facilitate a disclosure of sexual abuse as and when the young person was ready, practitioners said.

In the online survey, there were contrasts in focus between social workers and police regarding how they would respond to concerns of child sexual abuse. These can be seen to stem from differing operational cultures and priorities, which were expressed in terms of "building a trusted relationship" on the one hand and "building a case" on the other. Social workers were more concerned about safeguarding and support needs, while the police focused more on investigating the case, although interviews suggested that police officers in the case study area also prioritised the wellbeing of children and young people.

4.4.2 The role of evidence

The nature and role of 'evidence' is another multi-faceted theme to emerge from this study. Although evidence was referenced by both police and social workers, it was interpreted and applied in different ways. This was particularly evident from the interviews conducted with social workers and police.

The majority of the interviewees acknowledged that child sexual abuse was often hard to evidence. For social workers in particular, distinctions were often made between disclosure (which they saw as providing evidence of child sexual abuse) and concerns based on their impressions: it was clear that being able to 'evidence' a concern or professional instinct with a disclosure or other form of evidence (such as forensic material, CCTV footage, or witnesses) tended to galvanise decisions to confront the abuse. For the police, different operational imperatives are often at play, and the need to obtain meaningful or sufficient evidence will be governed by the need to reach the threshold test for evidence before a case can be referred to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). However, it was clear from the interviews that police and social workers in this area share the role of safeguarding and young people's welfare.

4.5 Support provided to young people experiencing or at risk of child sexual abuse within complex safeguarding

As noted in section 3.4, a priority for complex safeguarding in the case study area is to develop or support trusted relationships with young people. Interviewees frequently mentioned developing conversations with young people around healthy and unhealthy relationships, and enabling them to build up the necessary skills to recognise the nature of the relationships they were in.

A core element of achieving success in these areas is the continuity of case social worker and the sustained and consistent support they are able to offer. It is widely recognised that having a consistent and sustained point of contact is crucial for young people who experience sexual abuse (Scott et al, 2019).

The presence of a parent worker to work alongside social workers provides another invaluable dimension to the support service, by enabling the continuity of care to extend across the family as a whole. This is something that is often missing from social work interventions (Roberts, 2020). Recent research (Pike et al, 2019) involving parents of sexually exploited young people suggests that, when parents seek help from children's social care, they commonly experience a lack of response, a belittling of their situation, or even blame for their child's exploitation. There is strong evidence of the importance of support to the family, particularly non-abusing parents/carers (Carpenter et al, 2016; Horvath et al, 2014; Scott and McNeish, 2017).

> Key to success in building relationships is the continuity of case social worker and the sustained and consistent support they can offer.

The time pressures that often characterise social work were highlighted by interviewees, although mainstream social work caseloads were described as much higher.

Findings show that specific support to address the child sexual abuse may not be forthcoming unless there has been a disclosure by the young person that this is something they are experiencing currently or have done previously. Where there was an evident disclosure or need for support in relation to child sexual abuse, social workers were clear about the limits and parameters of their role, which was very much one of bespoke support involving building relationships and signposting to other support such as counselling, if required, while police officers usually focused on the operational aspects of case investigation and gathering evidence. Survey respondents and interviewees mentioned a wide range of multi-agency partners and services to which they were able to refer young people, including a sexual assault referral centre (SARC), independent sexual violence advisors (ISVAs), sexual health and young people's counselling services. A number of participants commented on long waiting times for certain services, and one observed that young people were often not ready to access interventions like counselling.

4.6 Language used to discuss child sexual abuse

The terms and definitions used to articulate awareness and understanding of concepts such as child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation are crucial to complex safeguarding work. If concepts are misunderstood, or if there is a predominant reference to child sexual exploitation, there is the risk that experiences of child sexual abuse in other contexts may be overlooked.

This study found that the language used by research participants to describe child sexual abuse was often framed as intra-familial, with child sexual exploitation more closely linked to extra-familial settings; this language does not align with statutory definitions, which are not linked specifically to any setting. The research participants themselves made distinctions between 'traditional' child protection work, which responded to other forms of child sexual abuse, and more 'specialised' exploitation work.

The theme of language and operational discourse (trauma-framing and risk-based) was highlighted by the focus group and interviews. While the use of vignettes may have created an artificial discussion that does not necessarily reflect practice, practitioners in that complex safeguarding team often used somewhat sanitised language, making references to "trauma histories" rather than to sexual abuse explicitly. The term 'rape' featured only once, in a focus group discussion of a real case that one of the participants had been involved in; it was not used in relation to the cases described in the vignettes.

Concerns about potential sexual abuse in the vignette about a 15-year-old male were not voiced directly, but emerged through a discussion about his age and whether the encounter had been consensual. However, capacity to consent does not guarantee that sexual interaction is consensual (Hallett, 2017). Practitioners stated that, in their discussions with young people, they initially needed to show they recognised what young people thought of as 'relationships', after which they could build trust and begin to question this. However, they added, this did not mean that identified safeguarding concerns would not be addressed.

Practitioners generally chose not to describe forms of exploitation as 'sexual' at all, especially in the presence of young people. The interviewed social workers expressed wariness about who might read the files and the impact of doing so on the reader. Explicit concerns were highlighted around labelling incidents as abusive or individuals as perpetrators in the absence of disclosures. This reinforces interviewees' observations that language has a "huge impact" and practitioners need to be increasingly mindful of the language they use.

Interviewees admitted that, traditionally, some practitioners have a tendency to 'victim-blame' through the language they use, and proactive measures were said to be in place to address this through training, case file audits and a language toolkit to enable practitioners to reflect on and review their use of language in speech and in writing. In many cases, the language used by practitioners emphasised a strengths-based approach to supporting young people, and there was frequent reference to building trust and nurturing self-esteem and wellbeing.

5. Implications for complex safeguarding practice

This final chapter presents the possible implications of the study's findings for complex safeguarding practice, acknowledging that this was a small exploratory study and that complex safeguarding remains an emerging area of work. The points highlighted here aim to prompt reflective discussion, in order to inform continued developments in identifying and responding to all forms of child sexual abuse (including child sexual exploitation) in the context of complex safeguarding.

5.1 Separating out aspects of child sexual abuse

In the continued development of complex safeguarding, it is important to be aware of the possible implications of combining child sexual exploitation with wider forms of criminal exploitation – which has the potential to separate child sexual exploitation from other forms of child sexual abuse, and to obscure possible overlaps between child sexual abuse and criminal exploitation. Practitioner expertise on the links between child sexual exploitation and other forms of sexual abuse must not be lost, and practitioners need to be mindful that other forms of child sexual abuse may have occurred (or be occurring) in cases involving child sexual exploitation or criminal exploitation. The implications of this type of operational division must be considered, particularly as different forms of child sexual abuse can occur in a range of settings and are not limited to specific contexts.

In the interviews, specific and recurring language was often used to define key terms such as child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation (and complex safeguarding), but this was not necessarily consistent with the statutory definitions used in England (see section 1.2). This is likely to be the result of practitioners defining the role of complex safeguarding teams as they were set up.

5.2 Specialist training on child sexual abuse

While the range of training provided to complex safeguarding teams was not a focus of this study, the findings highlighted potential areas of professional development for both complex safeguarding teams and the wider workforce.

5.2.1 Training on key themes and definitions

There are a number of thematic areas to consider incorporating into training on child sexual abuse in the context of complex safeguarding. The terms and definitions used to articulate awareness and understanding of concepts such as child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation are crucial to complex safeguarding work.

It is important to consider or revisit existing specialist child sexual abuse training to ensure that it identifies the complexities around child sexual abuse – and around child sexual exploitation as a form of child sexual abuse – in terms of both the range of forms that such abuse can take, and how individuals can experience multiple forms of abuse in a range of contexts (either simultaneously or at different points in their lives). Whether these are concurrent with the exploitation that has led the individual to be referred to complex safeguarding, or are more historical, there is likely to be a cumulative impact which needs to be addressed. This type of comprehensive training will also help to mitigate the possibility that some forms of child sexual abuse may be overlooked in some contexts. In line with this, it is also important to include training on how and why adults sexually abuse children in a range of settings.

5.2.2 Training on language

Training on talking to children and young people about child sexual abuse, and on recording concerns of child sexual abuse, is also likely to be beneficial and improve practitioner confidence, particularly in relation to:

- broaching the topic of sexual abuse more directly
- dealing with potential disclosures
- ensuring that practitioners develop the skills to not retraumatise young people if they begin exploring possible abuse that the young person has not disclosed.

If training gives practitioners the opportunity to reflect on any concerns they have about using direct language to discuss sexual abuse, it may help them to empathise with young people who struggle to verbalise their situation and disclose their experience.

Regular case file auditing and the introduction of a language 'toolkit' to support case file recording were seen by interviewees as positive developments for complex safeguarding teams. Both afford the opportunity for practitioners to reflect on the nature and impact of the language they use in their response to child sexual abuse, particularly in the context of wider cultural practices including a tendency to victim-blame. However, it is important to be mindful that introducing standardised language into social work practice has potential implications for professional autonomy, experience and expertise, and for practitioners' ability to identify and capture the subtle complexities of child sexual abuse.

5.3 Diversity

The need for specialist training extends to developing an understanding of the profile of victims and considerations around culture and diversity. If certain groups are thought more likely than others to be affected by different forms of exploitation, children and young people who fall outside these groups may not be identified as potential victims/survivors – particularly girls in relation to child criminal exploitation, boys in relation to child sexual exploitation, and young people from some minority ethnic groups in relation to any form of child sexual abuse. It is therefore important to address and challenge preconceived notions of who is or is not affected by child sexual abuse; identify gaps in research, assessment and practitioner knowledge; and increase practitioners' confidence in working with different groups of children and young people.

> It is important to address and challenge preconceived notions of the types of people who are or are not affected by child sexual abuse.

5.4 Emphasis on victim-focused risk assessment

A number of the study's findings highlight the prominent role that risk and risk-based assessment play in aspects of complex safeguarding – at the point of referral, during initial case conferencing, and in the formulation of decisions on how to respond to young people and progress cases.

It is important to be mindful that a predominant focus on risk (primarily around a victim's risk of exploitation) may mean that the presence and/or impact of other forms of child sexual abuse – both current and historical – can be overlooked in some cases. While risk assessment tools remain integral to the identification of and response to child sexual abuse, it is important to reflect on the fact that risk is usually framed and assessed in terms of the victim's behaviour, and is rarely considered in relation to the risk that a perpetrator poses (Eaton and Holmes, 2017). Moreover, it is important to recognise that risk is dynamic in nature, and that both safeguarding and criminal justice responses are often initiated (at least initially) on partial information; safeguarding support mechanisms and interventions must therefore be able to capture and respond to emergent risks.

Recent developments in parts of the domestic violence sector – such as the 'Change That Lasts' model (Women's Aid, 2017) – reflect the need for a shift away from a sole focus on risk and towards an emphasis on safety, strengths and wellbeing, to develop a better understanding of effective ways to shore up existing protection structures and support children. The case study area reports that it follows a strengths-based model and is currently redesigning its assessment processes to ensure that these focus on safety and strengths, moving away from deficit-based risk assessments.

5.5 Combining criminal justice and safeguarding-led approaches to child sexual abuse work

5.5.1 The emphasis on disclosure

While this was a small-scale study which could not hope to explore the full breadth of work undertaken by complex safeguarding teams across the country, it is clear that evidence – in a variety of forms – plays an integral role in both recording and responding to child sexual abuse. It is therefore important to consider the implications of prioritising tangible evidence or 'fact' (e.g. formal disclosure, CCTV or forensic information) and the apparent preference for recording 'what can be proven' (or at least evidenced) over practitioner experience, instinct and/or unsubstantiated concerns (professional impressions).

This situation not only prompts debate about the role and value of professional curiosity and practitioner expertise in child sexual abuse work; it also highlights the need for further research to examine the scale and nature of safeguarding work undertaken to support victims of child sexual abuse (including child sexual exploitation) in complex safeguarding cases where there is no disclosure. It is important that future research incorporates a focus on other intervention approaches to support victims/survivors of child sexual abuse, such as the role of contextual safeguarding.

> Further research is needed to examine the support given to child sexual abuse victims in complex safeguarding cases where there is no disclosure.

5.5.2 Achieving a balance between occupational roles and priorities

Police and social workers in complex safeguarding teams have an increased, close working relationship, as evidenced in practice through co-location, the use of joint risk assessment tools and information-sharing processes, and the opportunity to draw on a range of diverse skill sets.

While this study shows a shared understanding of and responsibility for safeguarding by the members of such teams, it also reveals important differences in occupational roles and responsibilities. These distinctions can be understood from an operational perspective as the difference between 'building a relationship' and 'building a case', and serve to maintain the necessary separation of occupational priorities in complex safeguarding work.

However, the study also found an emphasis on requiring disclosure or other evidence to support concerns (see section 5.5.1); this may indicate that the response to child sexual abuse within complex safeguarding is becoming more oriented towards the criminal justice system (Allnock et al, 2019; Ofsted et al, 2020; Roberts, 2020). While there was no evidence in the case study area that a lack of disclosure was inhibiting the provision of support, a more criminal-justice-based approach has the potential to raise the threshold of response to all forms of child sexual abuse, which could reduce opportunities for intervention and welfare-based support for young people in cases where there has not been a formal report/disclosure.

As the complex safeguarding approach continues to develop, it needs to preserve the important distinctions between police and social worker roles. At the same time, an effective balance needs to be maintained between these roles in order to ensure a cohesive, victim-focused response to exploitation.

5.6 Approaches to data monitoring

Where possible, data should be collected on all forms of child sexual abuse – whether current, recent or historical – that are experienced by the young people referred into complex safeguarding teams. The way in which local authority data is collated should enable analysis by form of exploitation, so that trends in relation to child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation and other forms of exploitation – both individually and comparatively – can be monitored. Data should be further disaggregated by key socio-demographic categories such as gender, age and ethnicity, to enable comprehensive analysis of patterns and trends around the young people being referred to and supported by complex safeguarding teams in relation to each form of exploitation.

5.7 Clarifying the complex safeguarding approach

This exploratory study has revealed that the field of complex safeguarding, particularly in terms of the theory and practice that underpin it, is still developing. There is no nationally agreed definition of the complex safeguarding approach for research to draw on. Definitional questions are outside the scope of this study, which focused on how child sexual abuse featured in a complex safeguarding approach designed and implemented in one specific area of England.

It would be valuable to define the complex safeguarding approach, however, and to conduct an independent evaluation of how it is being implemented. This would assist those seeking to develop the approach in other areas of the country, and would enable a greater understanding of how complex safeguarding can be effectively implemented and where it might fit in the broader spectrum of support for victims/survivors of child sexual abuse.

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Appendix 1: Focus group vignettes

Jade

Jade has been known to social workers for almost one year, since she was 14 years old. Jade is known to associate with low-level organised crime group (OCG) members and is said to be seeing 'Bets', a mid-ranking OCG nominal. The OCG is traditionally known for firearms and Class A drugs. More recently, intelligence has been received that suggests they are getting involved in internal trafficking, moving girls between nail bars.

This morning Jade's mum has phoned her social worker saying that Jade has gone against her wishes and put locks on the inside and outside of her bedroom door. Jade's mum states she will not live in a place where she is locked out of rooms in her own house. Jade's mum has told the social worker that Bets is buying her lots of gifts and that Jade is either out for days at a time or locked in her room and online until all hours.

Jamie

Jamie is nearly 16 years old; he is frequently missing from school and home, and is often seen near gay bars and clubs. Jamie does not identify as gay, although he has told his social worker that he is 'bi' and that he currently has a girlfriend, Sammy. Jamie's family are devout Catholics, and Jamie does not feel he can be open to others about his feelings.

Jamie's social worker has spoken to him about his episodes of going missing, and h e states he only goes to gay bars as he can get in to the bars there and men buy him drinks, but they are becoming more frequent. He is now using Badoo [a dating-focused social network] to meet people. Last week Jamie was found by the police in bed with a 19-year-old man. Jamie was hung-over and had love bites on his torso. Jamie begged police not to tell his dad, as he would disown him. The police agreed to this and said they would leave it to the social worker.

Vignette-specific questions

1. What are your initial thoughts on this situation?

   Prompt: What questions might you consider asking?

2. Do you see this case as featuring child sexual abuse or exploitation?

   Prompt: Can you identify what informed your thought process?

3. What decisions/actions would you take in the course of your work on this case?

   Prompt: In relation to child sexual abuse/ exploitation elements?

General questions

4. In what ways does a complex safeguarding approach to these young people differ from what the mainstream social work team would do?

   Prompt: In terms of focus, priorities, actions, decisions.

5. Is there anything else you want to say about complex safeguarding and child sexual abuse/exploitation?

6. How has it felt to talk about these issues today?

Appendix 2: Ethical framework

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the CSA Centre's Research Ethics Committee. Although no direct fieldwork was undertaken with survivors of child sexual abuse, a number of areas required ethical consideration due to the sensitive nature of the topic being researched.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Efforts were made to ensure confidentiality and anonymity during the course of the study. Only the two assigned researchers and the CSA Centre research staff had access to the research material. Owing to the small size and nature of the complex safeguarding team in the study, the interview and focus group participants have been identified solely by number in this report. As the survey sample is larger, respondents have been referenced by role but the local authorities they are based in have not been named.

All the study participants gave informed consent. Those taking part in the interviews and focus group were given a project information sheet – outlining the aims of the research, issues relating to confidentiality and anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation – and signed a consent form. Consent processes were repeated at the outset of interviews and the focus group session. Participants in the survey were also given information about what taking part would involve and informed that completion of the survey was voluntary. Owing to COVID-19 restrictions, interviews were carried out by telephone and the focus group was conducted remotely; all were recorded with the participants' permission.

The interviewees and focus group participants were encouraged to discuss particular aspects of child sexual abuse in relation to the young people they worked with. While at times they referred to individual case examples, these remained anonymous. Ground rules were set at the start of the focus group, to ensure that the participants understood the need to treat one another's contributions confidentially.

The focus group vignettes were drawn from real-life cases in a different local authority area, but were constructed as composites to preserve the anonymity of the young people concerned.

Participant welfare

The study involved interviews and a focus group with practitioners working directly in this sensitive field of work. Although the participants were professionals with considerable experience of the subject matter and of protecting against emotional distress, it was acknowledged that in-depth discussions about their work could still be upsetting for some.

In relation to the interviews, the researcher protocol included offering to stop or discontinue the interview at any time, and making time at the end for debriefing and support options, if necessary. Like all practitioners working in complex safeguarding teams, the participants had access to support and supervision processes within their workplaces.

The researchers were not tasked with making specific judgements on the quality of service or on individual safeguarding. The study participants were informed that the research's purpose was not to evaluate individual practice but rather to discuss current approaches to working with child sexual abuse in their local authority area.

It was considered unlikely that information previously undisclosed to the complex safeguarding team would arise. It was agreed, however, that the researchers would follow a formal safeguarding process if they were concerned about a particular child's safety based on the information given during the interview/focus group. This process would involve recording the concern; informing the CSA Centre's safeguarding lead and research lead for the project; and, if necessary, informing the designated safeguarding lead for the local authority within three days.

Researcher welfare

Although the focus of this study was complex safeguarding, it was acknowledged that the sensitive nature of the topic (i.e. children and young people at risk of harm and abuse) might affect the research team. A support system was put in place to ensure the emotional wellbeing of the researchers, involving access to a therapist via the CSA Centre.

Secure handling of data

Any identifying information, such as contact details, was held separately from the data collected for research purposes. Signed consent forms and research material were stored securely in locked cabinets (paper copies) and password-protected folders (electronic copies). Interview and focus roup recordings were stored separately from transcripts.

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

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The photograph on the cover was taken using actors and does not depict an actual situation.

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