

Improving the response to child sexual abuse in policing

Learning from a pilot of child sexual abuse training for frontline police officers and those in specialist child protection roles

December 2022

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) aims to root its work in the best evidence available. For all our training courses and programmes, this starts with the development of the training, followed by regular review of the content to ensure that it reflects the latest developments in research and practice. We routinely collect feedback from training participants, using it for reflection and continuous improvement. When we pilot a new course, or offer it to a new group, we may collect more follow-up data and publish a report. Our learning reports contain participant feedback; evaluation reports synthesise additional evidence, such as interviews with participants' managers.

Executive summary

Evidence shows that many police officers – new recruits, those with long service, frontline officers and even those assigned to specialist units – receive minimal training specifically on child sexual abuse. Such training is often delivered as part of broader inputs on child protection matters, and in the context of emotional abuse and neglect. As a result, officers often ‘learn on the job’ – drawing on their own or their colleagues’ experiences – and lack confidence in, for example, spotting the signs of child sexual abuse and communicating with children and families affected by it.

Between February and May 2022, the CSA Centre piloted two training courses for police officers and staff, designed to fill this training gap by supplementing existing training provision. Both courses focused on enhancing attendees’ ability to recognise signs of child sexual abuse, and to respond effectively to callouts and cases where concerns of child sexual abuse may arise.

- **An introduction to child sexual abuse.** This *half-day course*, aimed at new and frontline officers, was piloted in three police force areas – Dyfed Powys, Surrey and West Yorkshire.
- **Identifying and responding to child sexual abuse.** Aimed at both frontline officers and those in specialist child protection roles, this *one-day course* was piloted in two police force areas – Dyfed Powys and Kent.

This learning report summarises findings from the CSA Centre’s self-evaluation of both courses and their online delivery. The findings are based on feedback from participant surveys and group sessions held with police force training coordinators in the pilot areas.

The half-day introductory course was delivered five times in Dyfed Powys and Surrey and once in West Yorkshire to a total of 804 participants. The demands on frontline/response officers’ time immediately after a training session limited their ability to provide feedback, but 84 of them did so: a large majority (88%–90%) reported that they had increased their knowledge of the scale of child sexual abuse and how to talk to children when concerns of child sexual abuse arise, and most (86%) said they would be more confident in communicating with children following the training.

The one-day course was delivered three times in Dyfed Powys and once in Kent, to 175 police officers and staff in total. Feedback was provided by 83 participants, with a large majority reporting that their knowledge had increased across different aspects of child abuse – particularly in relation to the scale of child sexual abuse (95%) and their ability to recognise signs and indicators of sexual abuse and sexually abusive behaviour (91%). Most also felt more confident about responding to concerns of child sexual abuse and communicating with sexually abused children and their non-abusing parents.

Across both courses, more than 90% of survey respondents said they would use their learning in their professional role; several felt that the training would improve their approach to engaging with children, particularly in terms of not relying on children’s verbal disclosure of abuse. It was felt that even ‘specialist’ officers might lack knowledge and understanding of certain topics such as communicating with children, and would benefit from additional training.

The delivery and content of both courses were widely commended, with many survey respondents praising the ‘reliability’ and ‘credibility’ of the course trainers (both retired police officers). While there were some suggestions for minor changes, which have been taken into account in planning future delivery of this training, overall the courses were deemed to be very effective, offering a valuable and necessary additional component to police training on child sexual abuse.

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1. Introduction

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) delivers a wide range of training aimed at improving professionals' knowledge, skills and confidence to identify and respond to concerns of child sexual abuse. Training relevant to policing includes courses on children's harmful sexual behaviour and working with non-abusing parents and carers, in addition to the Child Sexual Abuse Practice Leads Programme. Additionally, in early 2022 the CSA Centre developed and piloted two new training courses on child sexual abuse, aimed specifically at police officers and staff:

- **An introduction to child sexual abuse – for policing professionals**

A half-day course giving frontline officers an introduction to and overview of child sexual abuse, so they can and addressing the critical points that they need to understand in order to confidently recognise and effectively respond to calls/incidents involving child sexual abuse.

- **Identifying and responding to child sexual abuse – for policing professionals**

A one-day course addressing the critical points that police officers and staff need to understand so they can confidently recognise and effectively respond to cases of child sexual abuse. It was aimed at both frontline officers and those in specialist PVP (Protecting Vulnerable People)/child protection roles.

Four police forces in England and Wales took part in the pilot phase of the two training courses:

- Dyfed Powys
- Kent
- Surrey
- West Yorkshire.

This learning report, prepared by the CSA Centre's research and evaluation team, summarises the findings from our self-evaluation of the pilot.

2. About the two training courses

Background

In 2019, policing advisors in the CSA Centre's Practice Improvement Team carried out a survey and a scoping review¹ to determine:

- police officers' understanding of, and response to, child sexual abuse following training received in-force
- the types of prevention and disruption strategies deployed across police forces.

Incorporating focus group discussions with both strategic leads and frontline officers in nine police areas,² this work highlighted several recurrent themes:

- Although police officers wanted to respond to child sexual abuse appropriately and effectively, and recognised the value of preventative work, many – including new recruits, those with long service (20+ years), and those assigned to specialist units – had received little or no specific training around child sexual abuse. Some recalled training around child sexual exploitation.
- Officers of varying ranks reported that their only training around child sexual abuse was received in the broadest terms as part of a one-day safeguarding or child protection course, and often in the context of emotional abuse and child neglect.
- As a result, officers often 'learned on the job', drawing on their own experiences or those of their peers, and lacked confidence in key areas – for example, in spotting the signs of child sexual abuse, and communicating appropriately and sensitively with children and families affected by such abuse.
- In some cases, experienced detectives in specialist teams were waiting up to two years to undertake Specialist Child Abuse Investigation Development Programme (SCAIDP) training.³

In a group interview following the delivery of the pilot courses that are the subject of this report, one police force's training coordinator corroborated these findings:

"I often see that [child sexual abuse] training is wrapped in other training and gets thrown in with neglect, which just focuses on the lessons [from high-profile cases. Child sexual abuse] is always an afterthought, so it was so refreshing [in these courses] to have up-to-date and specific statistics that were relevant to what we do."

The findings from the survey and the scoping review prompted exploration of the ways in which the CSA Centre could align itself with pre-existing police training programmes: the newly created Police

¹ The results of the survey and the scoping review are set out in two research reports, available in the [police disruption](#) section of the CSA Centre website

² These consisted of seven police forces, one regional organised crime unit and the National Crime Agency (NCA).

³ The SCAIDP is a programme designed specifically to equip officers with the skills to investigate serious offences against children and young people.

Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA) Programme⁴ (established in September 2018), and the mandatory training days in place or being reintroduced in force areas. It was within the mandatory force training framework that the CSA Centre's pilot police training courses on child sexual abuse were delivered in four forces: Dyfed Powys, Kent, Surrey, and West Yorkshire.

Course design

The CSA Centre's police training courses were designed to address some of the issues outlined above, with the aim of 'filling a gap' rather than replacing existing provision. The course content was evidence-based, and was informed in part by discussions in the focus groups described above.

"The design of the courses was very much determined by cops who we spoke to face to face. Cops at all levels didn't seem to understand the holistic policing picture around child sexual abuse, i.e. the scale of intra-familial child sexual abuse; the amount of child sexual abuse taking place; why victims don't report; who offenders are; how to identify someone being abused; how to spot the signs; how to ask the right questions; who to refer to and what offences can be looked at, both criminal and civil. Last year, I attended a conference where it was noted that the police encounter far more intra-familial child sexual abuse offences than child sexual exploitation offences. This shows both the prevalence of familial abuse but also the strong likelihood that cops will come across familial offending as part of their normal day-to-day work." (CSA Centre practice improvement advisor for policing.)

Some of the police forces involved in the pilot contributed to the design of the training courses by highlighting the operational reality for policing in responding to cases or concerns of child sexual abuse. In a group interview following the training pilot, one force's training coordinator observed:

"Why are we doing what we're doing ... If we don't really understand the scale of [child sexual abuse], we don't necessarily appreciate how important it is. How do we make that approach to the kids and the families ... why don't kids talk to us ... everything we do, rightly or wrongly, tends to live and die on that disclosure when we know it's just a small piece in a bigger picture..."

A decision was made to provide one-day and half-day training course options, informed by the CSA Centre's understanding of how police training is delivered to accommodate work patterns across frontline and specialist teams. The half-day sessions for frontline officers were designed specifically to fit within the mandatory training frameworks in each of the four force areas:

"With the re-introduction in some force areas of mandatory training days for frontline officers, we knew that training days were often delivered by way of multiple inputs from different sources – either in-force training departments, or operational officers drafted in to deliver aspects of specialist training. It would have been a big ask for a force to give us two slots in their training day for a course in its pilot phase, so we varied the training slightly to fit the individual slots (of up to three hours) available." (CSA Centre practice improvement advisor for policing.)

⁴ The CSA Centre approached the College of Policing with a view to incorporating aspects of training on child sexual abuse into the PCDA curriculum alongside its specific training on vulnerability and child sexual abuse. Although the concept of partnership was broadly welcomed, the proposal was not progressed because the curriculum had been finalised and 33 police forces were already at varying stages of implementing the programme.

Similarly, professional knowledge and experience of work patterns and logistical considerations informed the development of a one-day course principally for police officers and staff in specialist roles.

“The one-day course is geared towards specialists; it gives forces the opportunity for specialists to attend as it’s easier to diary them out for the day. Attendance at the half-day will see them pulled out because they are on duty, whereas a full day will be taken off shift and the force can manage that absence.” (CSA Centre practice improvement advisor for policing.)

Accordingly, the training pilot comprised two courses:

- **An introduction to child sexual abuse – for policing professionals** (a half-day course providing frontline officers with an introduction to and overview of child sexual abuse).
- **Identifying and responding to child sexual abuse – for policing professionals** (a more detailed one-day course aimed at both frontline officers and those in specialist PVP/child protection roles).

Course aims and learning outcomes

The aims, content and learning outcomes of the two courses were broadly the same across the two training courses; the most notable difference was that **the one-day course afforded more time to go into greater depth on key themes and issues.**

Both courses aimed to address the critical points that policing professionals need to understand in order to confidently recognise and effectively respond to cases involving child sexual abuse. Participants could expect to gain a better understanding of:

- the scale and nature of child sexual abuse
- the different contexts in which sexual abuse takes place
- how the impact and trauma of child sexual abuse presents in children, young people and their wider family
- how children communicate their experiences of sexual abuse and the police role in helping them do this
- the potential signs and indicators of sexual abuse and sexually abusive behaviour
- the medical examination process
- ways to approach working with children, parents, carers, and multi-agency partners.

Course delivery

The courses involved formal teaching, reflective discussions and exercises, and small group sessions. They were delivered online, supported by PowerPoint presentations, videos and case studies.

The two trainers were retired Detective Inspectors with a wealth of both operational and strategic experience of investigating cases of child sexual abuse; both were practice improvement advisors at the CSA Centre.

Training resources

All training participants received:

- PowerPoint slides of the course presentations, for reference and reflection
- a comprehensive reference and resource list
- copies of three CSA Centre publications –
 - *Signs and Indicators: A Template for Identifying and Responding to Concerns of Child Sexual Abuse*
 - *Communicating with Children: A Guide for Those Working with Children Who Have or May Have Been Sexually Abused*
 - *Supporting Parents and Carers: A Guide for Those Working with Families Affected by Child Sexual Abuse.*

Participants in the pilot courses

Both courses were piloted in Dyfed Powys police force. Additionally, Surrey and West Yorkshire forces took part in the half-day training, and officers and staff in Kent attended the one-day course.

A total of 979 police officers and staff took part in the pilot training course:

- 804 attended the half-day training.
- 175 attended the one-day training

Table 1 presents a breakdown of the participants across the four forces.

Table 1. Training participants and feedback survey respondents

| Police force area | Type of training | Number of sessions | No. of training participants | No. of survey respondents (% of participants) | Total survey respondents in the force area |
|-------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|---|--|
| Dyfed Powys | Half-day | 5 | 240 | 16 (7%) | 75 |
| | One-day | 3 | 148 | 59 (40%) | |
| Kent | Half-day | 0 | - | - | 24 |
| | One-day | 1 | 27 | 24 (89%) | |
| Surrey | Half-day | 5 | 334 | 9 (3%) | 9 |
| | One-day | 0 | - | - | |
| West Yorkshire | Half-day | 1 | 230 | 59 (26%) | 59 |
| | One-day | 0 | - | - | |

Evaluating the courses

Feedback on both training courses was collected between February and May 2022, alongside course delivery.

Following each training session, participants were invited to complete an online feedback survey, with the same survey used for both training courses. In total, 167 participants completed the survey: 84 of these had attended the half-day course (representing 10% of that course's participants), and 83 had attended the one-day training (47% of that course's attendees).

Table 1 above presents the distribution of the survey respondents across the four police forces. It is important to note, however, that not all respondents completed the survey in full. As the fifth column of the table shows, the response rate was relatively low across the pilot sites, particularly in relation to the half-day course: in all cases feedback was invited, but it was recognised that logistical constraints, and particularly the demands on frontline/response officer time immediately after a training session had ended, affected course participants' opportunities to complete the survey.

In addition, the research team facilitated online, semi-structured group interviews with the force training coordinators in three of the four pilot forces – Dyfed Powys, Kent and West Yorkshire – some weeks after all training sessions had been delivered. These discussions, lasting between 45 minutes and one hour, provided an opportunity for reflection on the training's delivery and impact from a strategic perspective.

3. Feedback on the half-day training course

The half-day training course was delivered in three forces: Dyfed Powys, Surrey and West Yorkshire. A total of 804 police officers and civilian staff participated; 84 of them responded to the feedback survey, with 67 completing it in full. The operational roles and teams represented were diverse, and included:

- child exploitation
- antisocial behaviour and hate crime
- neighbourhood policing
- domestic abuse investigators
- frontline response
- intelligence analysts
- disclosure office (Prosecution Team)
- POLIT – online investigations team

Out of 63 respondents who described their previous training, just over half said they had received training associated with child sexual abuse – predominantly as part of their initial training, with some reference to seminars and Professional Investigations Programmes (PIP) 2 and 3.

Feedback on the learning outcomes

Contributing to knowledge and understanding

Survey respondents were asked how much the training had increased their knowledge and understanding in key outcome areas relevant to their policing role, on a scale from “Not at all” to “Not much”, “A bit” and “A lot”. Figure 1 overleaf shows the results.

Most respondents said the half-day training had increased their levels of knowledge and understanding by ‘a lot’ or ‘a bit’ across all outcome areas – and particularly in relation to identifying potential signs and indicators of child sexual abuse (46% and 45%, respectively), and how to talk to children where there are concerns of child sexual abuse (51% and 37%, respectively).

Respondents who noted little or no increase in knowledge and understanding typically referred to their existing knowledge and operational experience in the outcome areas.

The following comments from both police officers and civilian staff provide additional detail, as well as insight into forces’ decisions around which personnel should attend training:

“Really useful to understand how [child sexual abuse] can lead to later problems in life and how to spot the signs early and raise concerns.”

“I found it really interesting regarding the wider impact of the abuse on the family and how it is important to listen when there.”

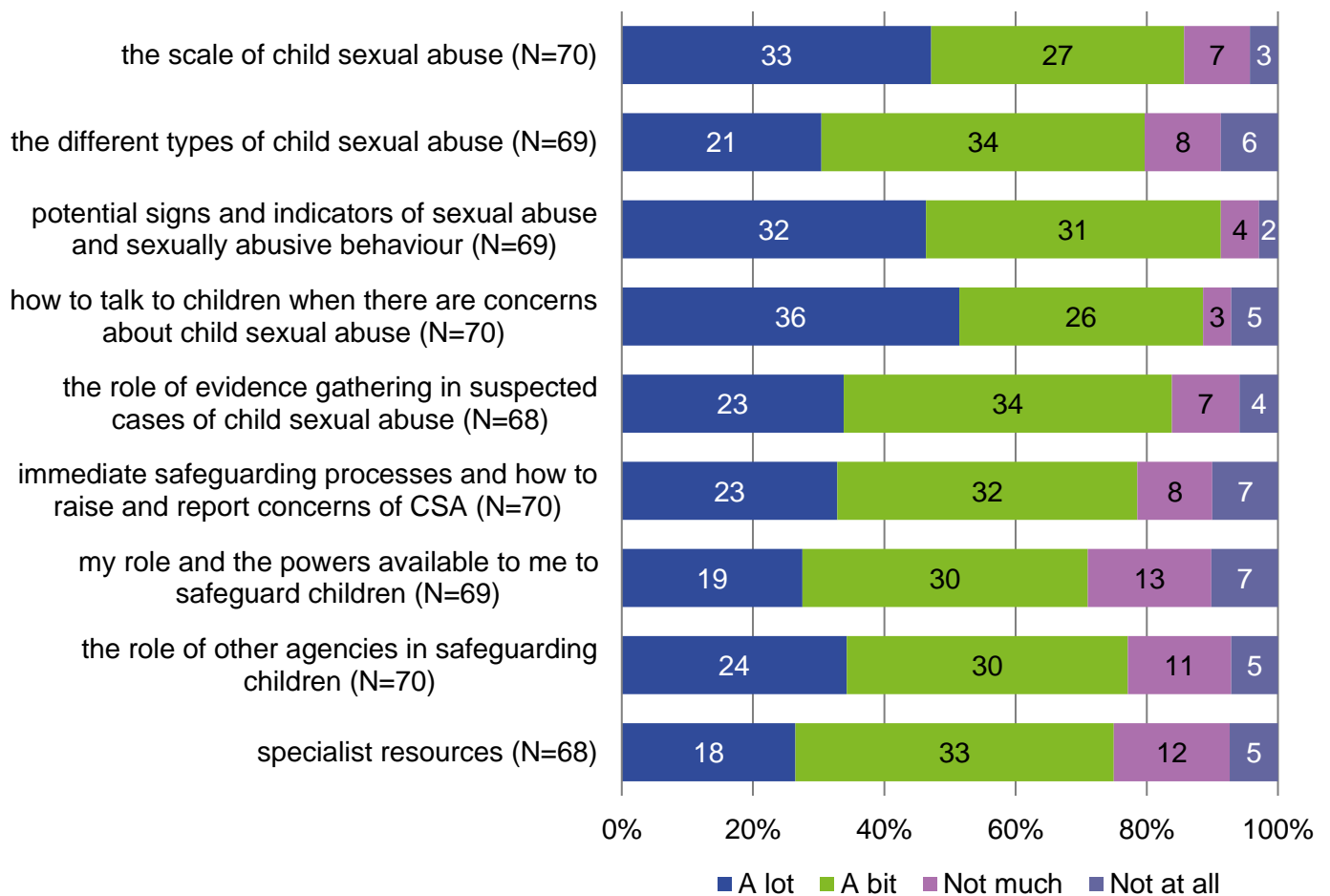
“I have been a Detective for 14 years and worked in Child Protection for 6 years. I currently work in PSD [Professional Standards Department] and wanted to do this training as a bit of a refresher, it was very useful and re-affirmed my knowledge.”

“Whilst a lot of the input was specific to front line officers, I found it so useful to know more about the processes and best practices in this area.”

“I work in a specialist role for child sexual exploitation, so I already had an understanding of the above areas.”

“I am not a police officer, but the information provided within this input has given me a greater understanding of the processes which will assist when reviewing disclosure of material arising in these types of cases.”

Figure 1. How much did the half-day training increase respondents’ knowledge and understanding in relation to child sexual abuse?



Developing confidence in responding to concerns of child sexual abuse

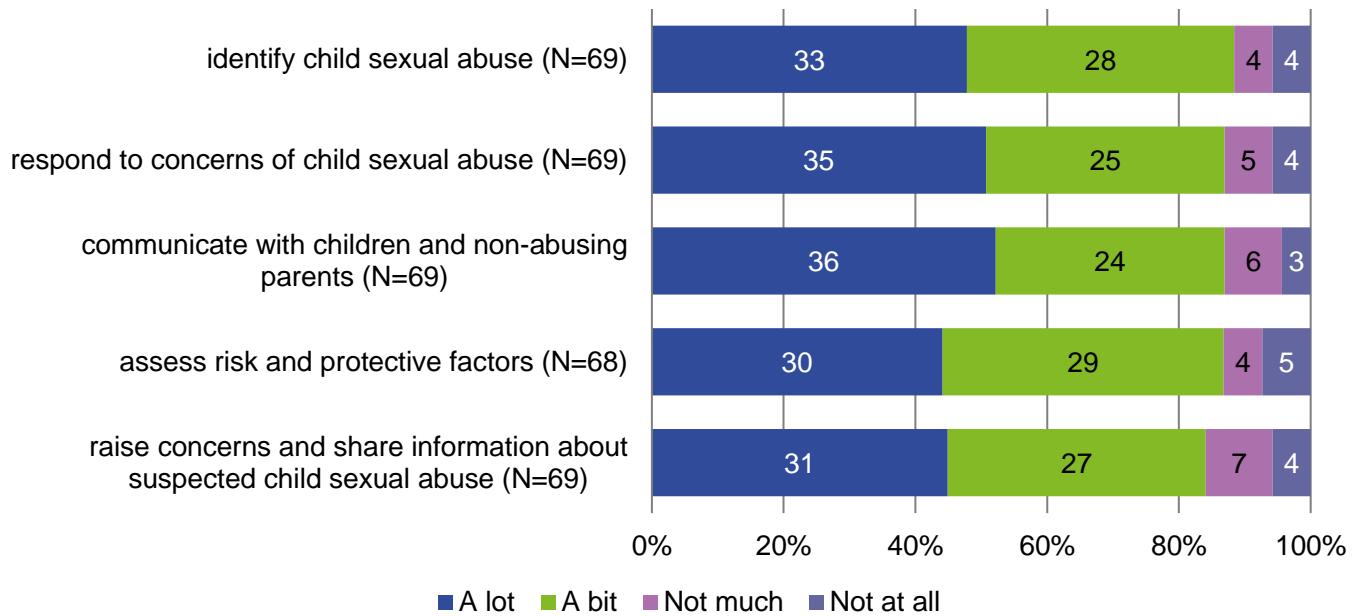
Survey respondents were asked how much the training had increased their confidence to identify and respond to concerns of child sexual abuse in key outcome areas relevant to their policing role. Figure 2 overleaf shows the results.

Most respondents reported that the one-day training had increased their confidence, with a slight variation between increases of ‘a lot’ and ‘a bit’, particularly in relation to responding to concerns of child sexual abuse (50% and 36%, respectively) and communicating with children and non-abusing parents (52% and 35%, respectively):

“[I will] have more confidence in spending more time speaking with a child.”

Again, where respondents indicated little or no increase in confidence, this was often because they were working in specialist teams focused on child sexual abuse and perceived the course as a refresher or ‘top-up’.

Figure 2. How much did the half-day training increase respondents’ confidence to identify and respond to child sexual abuse?



Applying the learning to practice

Sixty-nine survey participants stated how much they would apply their learning in their professional role. Of these, 61 (88%) said they would do so either ‘a lot’ or ‘a bit’:

“The legislation presented regarding social services and the expectation on them is new to my team and this has been disseminated.”

“I can share the knowledge with other appropriate people and understand the impact it has and how to raise concerns. Good for understanding how it impacts later life.”

“Through my role, I speak to children on a daily basis, mostly teenagers. [The training] will assist me in speaking to those that are younger and with any disabilities.”

“I attended this training to identify if it required rolling out across the Department, the information acquired will inform future training events.”

Changing their own practice

Of the 68 respondents answering a question on changes to their own practice, almost half (n=31) said the training would lead them to do something differently in their police role; another one-third (n=24) were unsure whether it would do so. Many respondents expressed an intention to become more child-focused, and/or acknowledged that the police role does not always allow for time to be spent with children or create space for children and young people to talk.

“[The training has informed] how much information I will tell a child. I need to be more informative with the child themselves, not just the parent/carer.”

“[The training helped me to] better understand the importance of using the child's language, and the fact that allowing time for children to tell their stories is crucial. Much of the way we are set up doesn't allow for this flexibility of time, but we need to try and create room for it as much as possible! Also bringing the focus back to safeguarding in the first place rather than necessarily progressing the investigation.”

“I think the question around ‘why or what is causing a certain type of behaviour’ (from the victim) has opened my eyes so I will look a little deeper at records bearing this in mind.”

Feedback on the course content and delivery

Sixty-seven of the survey respondents **rated the trainers** on a scale of one to five. Three-quarters of them (n=49) awarded five stars, and 15% (n=10) gave four stars. Both trainers were praised for being engaging, knowledgeable and relatable. Many respondents commented that both trainers were retired officers, which was felt to have enhanced the credibility of the training.

“Both trainers are credible and clearly have the experience in policing to present the course.”

“Both great, the fact that they have worked in this area for so long and have actual experience is very valuable.”

“[They were] really engaging and clearly knowledgeable with real life experience not just things they had read in textbooks.”

Of the 64 respondents who **rated the course materials**, two-thirds (n=42) awarded five stars and one-fifth (n=13) gave four stars.

“I will send out the fab PowerPoint – we will use the top tips etc in comms that we push on [the importance of listening to the] child's voice.”

“The Trauma and the Brain video is genuinely quite good, I've had to watch it before when attending the STO⁵ course and it puts things into context well.”

“[The training was] simple and easy to follow, enjoyed the interactive parts as there weren't too many and not death by flip chart/PowerPoint.”

“I normally struggle to stay actively listening and engage when attending online training, but this was so interesting and informative I stayed completely connected and learnt a lot.”

Several respondents referred to the impact of ‘that question’ – when training participants were asked to discuss their first sexual experience, exemplifying how difficult it might be for a child to talk about what might have happened to them. The effectiveness of this learning tool was highlighted in both the feedback survey and via the ‘chat’ function during training sessions.

“It was impactful! Especially the extremely effective way they were able to make the candidates understand how a child feels about talking about sexual experiences to a complete stranger.”

“It was also really impactful to be asked to share our own sexual experiences and the subsequent reaction to this personally, I will definitely be more aware.”

⁵ Specially trained officer – also known as a sexual offences investigative techniques (SOIT) officer.

“I think it was a brilliant way to show what we do on a daily basis as Police Officers to victims of all types of crime not just sexual abuse. If we can’t understand how a victim may feel being asked difficult questions should we really be in a position where we are expected to ask them?”

Those awarding three stars or fewer indicated that a link to a video did not work, or that it would have been helpful to be able to print off some of the resources.

Regarding the **delivery of the training**, which was online, almost three-quarters of respondents (50 out of 64) awarded four or five stars. Many said the trainers and course content had kept them engaged throughout, and a few highlighted the usefulness of the online ‘chat’ function for wider discussion. Those awarding three stars or fewer indicated that they preferred face-to-face training and struggled with distractions in busy office spaces.

Suggested improvements

When asked how the half-day course could be improved, several respondents put forward content-based suggestions, including another case study – “to balance what went wrong with what went right” – and more interactive elements such as polls or small group work.

“Perhaps a question-and-answer section at the end specifically to allow for any questions that have arisen. It can sometimes be difficult during a training course to ask questions in the [‘chat’ function] as this cannot always be monitored full time by the trainers.”

Others noted that they would have liked a longer session, and specifically “the longer, more specific course for those that are child protection trained and have been for some time”. Some stressed the importance of targeting the right audience with shorter training for police officers, and there appeared to be a degree of misunderstanding as to the half-day course’s target audience:

“I feel this training is more aimed at new officers or officers with little service who have perhaps not attended these kinds of jobs. I have a lot of experience in policing including adult safeguarding and [child sexual exploitation] so felt I already had most of this knowledge.”

“[It’s important to] present to frontline officers, specialist officers, and officers new to the role. Everyone should see this input as there’s so much to take away from it.”

4. Feedback on the one-day training course

The one-day training course was delivered in Dyfed Powys and Kent, to a total of 175 police officers and civilian staff working in a diverse range of roles; 77 attendees completed the feedback survey in full, and a further six completed part of it. All ranks from frontline Police Constable to Detective Inspector were invited to attend by each of the forces, with participants' length of service ranging from new starters to officers with more than 20 years' service. In addition, Specialist Child Abuse Investigators Development Programme (SCAIDP) trainers and in-force trainers attended the sessions. The operational roles and teams represented were diverse, and included:

- child exploitation
- child protection
- management of sexual or violent offenders (MOSOVO)
- criminal investigation departments (CID)
- joint investigation units
- neighbourhood policing
- response officers
- risk assessors (domestic violence)
- online investigations team
- child vulnerability
- civilian investigators.

Almost 60% (n=45) of the 77 participants who completed the survey in full reported having previously received training that had aimed to increase their understanding of or response to child sexual abuse; 20 said they were SCAIDP-trained.

Feedback on the learning outcomes

Contributing to knowledge and understanding

Survey respondents were asked how much the training had increased their knowledge and understanding in key outcome areas relevant to their policing role. Figure 3 overleaf shows the results.

Most respondents said the training had increased their levels of knowledge and understanding 'a bit' or 'a lot' across all outcome areas; more than 90% reported this in relation to understanding the scale of child sexual abuse and recognising the potential signs and indicators.

"This training helped [me] to notice warning signs and notice behaviours that I wouldn't have realised could indicate this type of abuse."

Notably, some linked increased understanding of signs and indicators of sexual abuse to their work on domestic abuse cases.

"The training has helped me understand possible indicators regarding domestic abuse and the possibility of this being a factor in those cases. This will help in my overall policing."

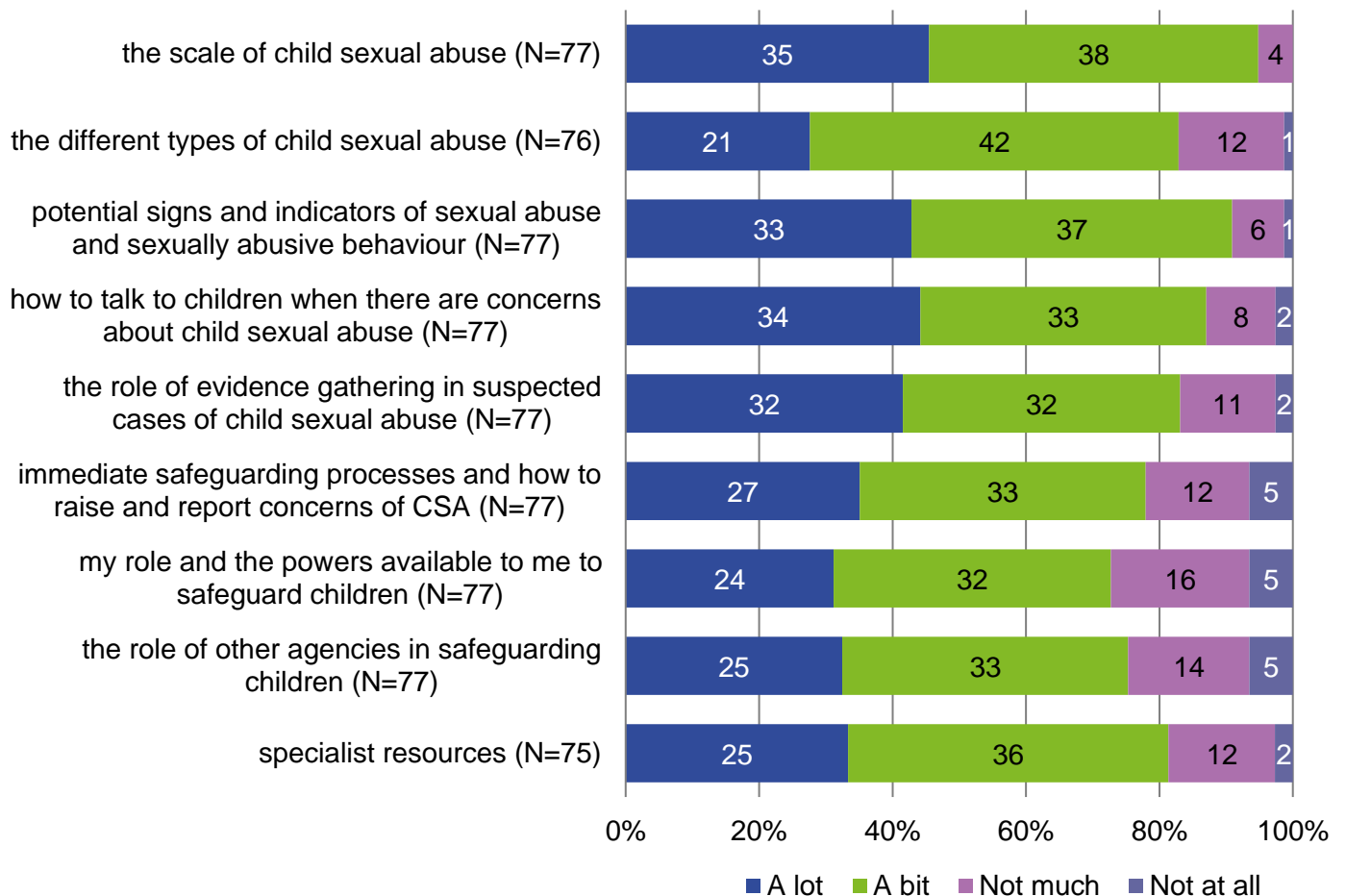
“I found the training very helpful with identifying possible sexual abuse and I will be able to use this in future situations that arise, especially in domestic incidents that we go to.”

Other respondents said their understanding had increased ‘not much’ or ‘not at all’; this view was most commonly held in relation to understanding of ‘my role and the powers available to me’ (27%) and ‘the role of other agencies in safeguarding children’ (25%). Some of these respondents were experienced officers who regarded the course as a ‘refresher’.

“Some parts I have received training on previously. However, there was also a lot of other info I learnt around welfare and not just going in with the police hat.”

“As an experienced [Detective Sergeant] in CP [child protection], this was more of a refresher. However, the course is really beneficial to new officers in CP and other departments who have no knowledge of CP.”

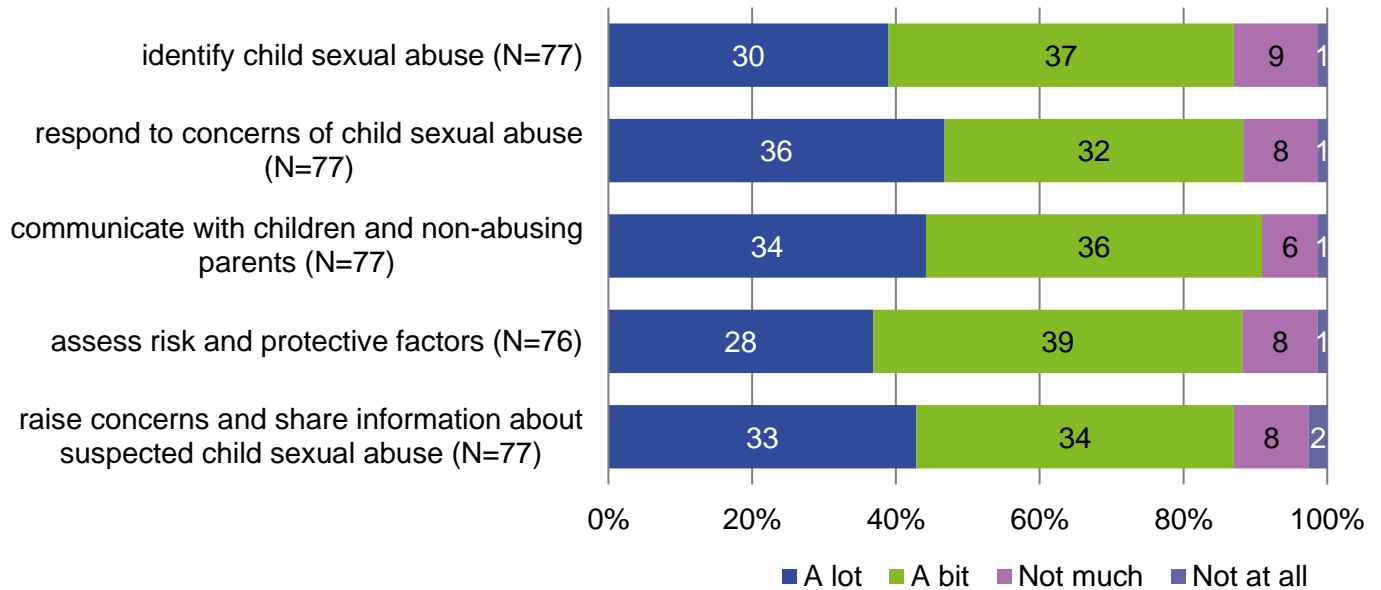
Figure 3. How much did the one-day training increase respondents’ knowledge and understanding in relation to child sexual abuse?



Developing confidence in responding to concerns of child sexual abuse

Survey respondents were asked to gauge the extent to which the training had increased their confidence to identify and respond to concerns of child sexual abuse in key outcome areas relevant to their policing role. Figure 4 overleaf shows the results.

Figure 4. How much did the one-day training increase respondents’ confidence to identify and respond to child sexual abuse?



Most respondents said the training had increased their confidence in the measured outcome areas, with a broadly equal distribution across increases of ‘a lot’ and ‘a bit’. Where a smaller increase in confidence was reported, this was often linked to perceptions of the course as a refresher or ‘top-up’ by respondents who were already working in specialist teams focused on child sexual abuse.

“One main aspect I believe my confidence has very much increased is around info sharing. Police continually drill into us the importance of [the Data Protection Act] but do not speak much around when we should provide information.”

“[It will help when] working with partner agencies, and information regarding multi agency approach.”

“I will be more confident in asking about a change in a child’s behaviour and why they are acting in that way.”

“The reason why a ‘disclosure’ is not made and the fact you can go back and spend time [with a child] has given me confidence to do this.”

Applying the learning to practice

Of the 77 survey respondents who answered questions on applying their learning in practice, almost three-fifths (n=44) said they would use what they had learnt ‘a lot’ in their professional role, and more than one-third (n=28) would use it ‘a bit’. Several respondents highlighted that they would take forward their learning on the signs and indicators of child sexual abuse in their operational roles; this is in line with the feedback on increases in knowledge and understanding. Respondents who were team leaders or responsible for in-force training indicated that the learning would be disseminated in team sessions, particularly in relation to cases where neglect is seen as a prominent factor.

“I agree that most child protection issues we deal with are neglect related, but this training will push me to look wider than that when dealing with families.”

“This training helped to notice warning signs and behaviours that I wouldn’t have realised could indicate this type of abuse.”

“[I will] get greedier for information and not be as afraid to ask questions when it comes to safeguarding instead of putting investigation first.”

“I come from a safeguarding background so this has always been a priority. This course I feel has helped me be able to pass on support and guidance to others when dealing with these jobs.”

“I found the trauma input beneficial and will certainly consider the effect trauma has on potential victims and our ability to obtain evidence from them.”

Changing their own practice

Over three-fifths (n=47) of the 77 respondents, and particularly those in supervisory roles, said the training would lead them to do something differently in their policing role:

“As a supervisor I will be taking a considerable amount from the day to lead my team and complete really constructive reviews and [give] direction to my team.”

“[The content about the] child protection medical was very informative [as was] the importance of review strategy discussions during and at the end of the investigation to deliver an appropriate response to the outcome of the investigation and follow-on safeguarding responsibilities of [the social services department].”

“[To] document the initial comments that children say, as they may not say the same things again, and that safeguarding is the key to everything.”

“I will consider [sexual assault referral centre] attendance in all cases of sexual abuse regardless of the forensic windows.”

A quarter (n=20) of respondents indicated that the training would *not* lead them to change their practice, with another 10 unsure whether it would. Many of them said this was because they were not frontline officers or they were experienced and knowledgeable, and so viewed the training as a ‘refresher course’.

“I have worked in the CID/[Public Protection Unit] for a number of years so already have knowledge of child abuse investigations, evidence gathering, and safeguarding procedures and processes.”

“A lot of it I already knew due to length of experience and skill base [as a Sexual Offences Trained Officer] but nice to know I haven't been going far wrong in my approach.”

“It was a good refresh of information.”

Feedback on the course content and delivery

The training was very well received, with participants noting the presentation’s informative content and clear structure:

“This is some of the best [child protection] training I have received – loved the practicality of the training and linking it to the role of a [Detective Constable in child protection].”

“I felt the day content was spaced well, there was a good balance of teaching and group interaction which kept the interest.”

Some referred to their current level of knowledge and operational experience, saying that this had limited the course’s benefit for them:

“Some of the subjects and topics covered today are already known to me but it was a very good refresher.”

“The trainers are very knowledgeable, and the learning material is well presented and informative. However I do feel that with the training and knowledge of child abuse investigations I already have this was duplication of training I have already received.”

While training coordinators in the pilot force areas acknowledged this point during the group interviews following the course delivery, they highlighted police managers’ responsibility to ensure that their teams are responding in the most appropriate and effective ways:

“For those who say, that was too basic for me, it should be about, well, how do you know that your cops are doing that then?”

A number of respondents stressed the importance of new and less experienced police officers receiving training around child sexual abuse:

“The training was excellent, but I would say this needs to be provided to officers young in service so that they have this knowledge at the beginning of their service to provide them with the confidence to deal with incidents of a sexual nature. Their initial actions could be crucial to any future investigation.”

“I am a [child protection] officer and have been for 10 years, I found this course interesting, and I liked the training style. This would be immensely useful to new officers coming to [child protection].”

It is possible, though, that these respondents were not aware of the half-day input designed with frontline officers in mind.

Of the 71 survey respondents who **rated the trainers** on a scale of one to five, four-fifths (n=56) awarded five stars and almost all the others (n=12) gave four stars. Both trainers were considered engaging, knowledgeable and relatable. Respondents welcomed the fact that both were retired police officers:

“[The trainers] having all their practical experience really helps – makes them credible. They are not boring. Very engaging and want to listen to their training.”

“I felt the knowledge and experience of the trainers was paramount to the delivery of the course – the fact they have been in a child protection role and understood the challenges faced by officers was beneficial to the course. Having been on courses where the trainer has not had experience this can often be frustrating.”

These observations were corroborated in the group interviews with training coordinators:

“You can tell someone who has learned it from notes or who has actually done it...there’s no hiding...if you can’t answer a basic question about practice, you lose credibility ... There’s no two ways about it because we’ve always got a million and one things we’d rather be doing, but if it’s good training, we’re engaged.”

Survey respondents were asked to **rate the course materials**. Of the 73 respondents who did so, two-thirds (n=48) awarded five stars and almost all the others (n=21) gave four stars.

“The case study is a brilliant way for officers to learn or top up the skill they have and is a great refresher. The fact [that one of the trainers] was one of the [Senior Investigating Officers] involved

in it just adds to the learning. It was very interesting to see the investigation unfold and great to see the interaction from the attendees.”

“Excellent – the guides on how to talk to children in particular are really good.”

“The video about a forensic medical procedure for children was helpful to know to what extent they are examined, so we can go on to reassure victims in future and answer their questions and concerns.”

Only four respondents awarded the materials three stars or fewer, suggesting more practical components to the training course:

“I think more examples of identifiers [potential signs and indicators of abuse] could be discussed. I struggle to engage with training on Teams and usually find it helps when it is more interactive, and discussions are had around real-life examples.”

Asked to rate the **method of training delivery**, which was online, more than half (n=40) of the 72 respondents awarded five stars, and one-third (n=23) gave four stars. Many said the trainers and course content kept them engaged throughout.

“Interesting, relevant, easy to follow.”

“Really great online training, very good clear guest speakers who delivered the training in a very informative way.”

“Although I prefer face to face – this was a really engaging digital delivery.”

“Digital delivery of the training worked well. The group exercise in the afternoon session was more engaging once participants had turned their cameras on during the breakout sessions.”

“We know we would have ideally liked this in person but, actually, the online version worked better than I had expected or hoped.”

Nine respondents awarded three stars or fewer; they cited their dislike of online training and their struggles to maintain engagement, rather than technical issues with the training.

Suggested improvements

There were few suggested improvements to the one-day training course, with many respondents praising its clear and concise structure. It was felt, however, that the training needed to reach ‘appropriate’ officers (i.e. new and frontline officers).

One respondent suggested more explicit reference to how police investigations link with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and crown court processes.

A couple suggested amendments to the case-study exercise within the course, which they likened to the ‘Hydra’ simulations used in police training to develop officers’ understanding of the law in specific situations. (It should be noted that the course itself made no reference to Hydra.)

“I wasn’t sure the ‘Hydra’ exercise worked. It would have been a bit better to step our way through the investigation.”

“When speaking to specialised departments it would be useful for the ‘Hydra’ type group exercise to reflect the work within those teams e.g. child exploitation/county lines.”

5. Additional themes in feedback on both courses

Some additional themes emerged from feedback across both training courses. Two themes that came through strongly in feedback on the one-day training course were:

- talking to children
- links with the police Specialist Child Abuse Investigators Development Programme (SCAIDP)
- over-reliance on children to disclose their abuse.

Talking to children

Some respondents reported that the training had improved their knowledge of how to talk to children, and that this would change how they did their job.

“This will help me identify sexual abuse, how to talk to children and look at the wider picture.”

“I thought the session on how to talk to children who are victims of child sexual abuse was excellent – it would have empowered officers to talk to children.”

“The training first hand demonstrated how difficult it can be for someone to talk about traumatic experiences. It was a reminder that we must always have an open mind and listen to the subtle clues provided by victims.”

“When I am struggling getting a child to speak, I am going to remember the phrase from today – ‘start with the memories and work outwards from there’.”

“I definitely appreciate the advice re talking to children, this will help me in video interviews, on joint visits etc.”

Significantly, reference was made to children *who had committed offences* as well as those deemed to be at risk or to have experienced some form of abuse:

“[The training will change how I] talk to children who commit offences – to ask more probing questions to find out if they are subject of abuse in any form.”

“[There will be] more scrutiny into behaviours of Juveniles that hit DASH [domestic abuse, stalking and honour-based violence] criteria, recognising why persons behave in such a manner (ACEs [adverse childhood experiences]) and become domestic violence [perpetrators] at a very young age. Referring such cases to MARAC [multi-agency risk assessment conferences].”

Consolidating the Specialist Child Abuse Investigators Development Programme

Twenty respondents specifically referred to the CSA Centre’s training in relation to their completion of the SCAIDP:

“This course has the potential to plug a very important gap that is left after the theoretical introduction that is SCAIDP. The practical element is exactly what has been missing.”

“From memory, [SCAIDP] did not really cover initial uniform response.”

“This is exactly what we have been missing for years, to plug the hole left by SCAIDP, to help officers actually do the job.”

The following observation provides an insight into the extent to which ‘specialist’ is often perceived to be synonymous with knowledge and understanding:

“I was pleased to see that this [training] complements the SCAIDP training currently in place. I enjoyed how communicating with children was covered as this is not something we have a lot of time to cover on SCAIDP (and could possibly argue we shouldn't need to in depth with it being a specialist course) so I think it's great that this [training] is given to officers to increase confidence in speaking with children.”

Reference was made to the SCAIDP in reflection sessions with training coordinators in the pilot forces, with one suggesting:

“The [CSA Centre] course would be a useful ‘Day 6’ to the SCAIDP training, adding a practical aspect to the theoretical framework given in the SCAIDP training.”

Disclosure

A number of respondents observed that the CSA Centre courses would change their approach to engaging with children, and the emphasis placed on disclosure by the child:

“It has always frustrated me that disclosures will not always happen when originally meeting a child and because of that the investigation comes to an end. Going forward I will definitely visit more than once. I know this is not going to be easy as there is so much pressure with other jobs. It would be great if this was reviewed on a Senior Leadership Team level that CP officers should be able to dedicate time engaging with the child before we can be confident there is nothing to disclose.”

“I will make sure that other people/colleagues/professionals who I deal with are enlightened to the fact that if a person doesn't want to tell you what happened – it doesn't mean it didn't!!!”

“[I will] keep an open mind, [and give] consideration to child's thoughts/feelings around disclosure to police.”

6. Interest in further training

A number of respondents across both training courses identified further training that they would be interested in receiving, including training on:

- Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interviews and statements

“Not just how to conduct an ABE but how to pitch, pace and get the best from the victim/witness under those circumstances. This isn’t taught on the ABE course.”

“Interviewing suspects, more on talking to children and ABE.”

- multi-agency working

“More training around working with social services – more access to sharing information.”

“Training on other agency support – Social Services CP plans, Child in Need etc.”

- wider criminal justice system processes

“It would be good to have training on [Rape and Serious Sexual Offences Officer] case files, Crown Court, and the CPS.”

7. What next?

The CSA Centre has finalised the two training courses in light of the constructive feedback received from the four pilot police forces, and is now offering them as standalone courses to forces across the country – see the [CSA Centre training brochure](#) for details. While the pilot half-day sessions were adapted to fit within the mandatory training framework in each of the four forces, this training course is now a standard length of a full half-day, and this is communicated to police forces at the initial point when they express an interest in commissioning the course.

Additionally, we are taking the wider learning from the pilots into more strategic discussions with senior policing leads as we explore opportunities to incorporate our bespoke child sexual abuse training for policing into national, mandatory training frameworks for both frontline officers and those in specialist child protection roles.

Research and evaluation team
Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

We’d like to hear from you. If you would like to find out more about our training, from historical successes and learnings to our forthcoming programme or bespoke packages, please contact us at info@csacentre.org.uk