



*Action for
Children*

**“ I don’t want
to go down
that road ,,”**

The harms inflicted on criminally exploited children

Safe and happy childhood



Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care and support, ensuring their voices are heard, and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

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Foreword

The criminal exploitation of children across the UK should be of huge concern to us all. Every year tens of thousands of children and young people are exploited or at risk of exploitation. And it can happen to any child.

As a former police officer in Scotland, **I have seen first-hand the impact criminal exploitation can have.** Not just on the child or the young person involved, but on their family, their community and society at large, including victims of crimes associated with exploitation. It’s a complex area – often a child doesn’t know they have been exploited and a parent or a professional may not recognise the signs.

As an ambassador for Action for Children, a national charity that runs dedicated support and diversion services across the UK to steer young people to a better future, I urge you to read this report.

It reveals a shocking catalogue of abuse involving trafficking, weapons, physical, emotional and psychological harm, threats to life and the murder of children.

That is where the criminal exploitation of a child can ultimately lead, and it is a growing crisis.

Agencies across the UK, including the police, must work together to break the criminal networks behind the exploitation of our children. As a priority, the new government should seize the opportunity to develop a long-term strategy to tackle it.

Read this report to understand why we need to work collectively to better safeguard children and young people at risk of serious harm.



Sir Iain Livingstone QPM
Former Chief Constable, Police Scotland
Action for Children Ambassador

Introduction

“

I didn’t know what was happening until it was too late. I thought I could handle it myself. I couldn’t tell anyone what was happening, or I’d get locked up. The fear, the power, the money, getting caught, getting my family caught or being seen as a snake.

Young Person supported by Action for Children’s Criminal Exploitation Intervention Service

Criminal exploitation is a form of child abuse that causes significant physical, emotional and psychological harm to tens of thousands of children and their families across the UK.¹ Despite local and national policy emphasising the importance of safeguarding exploited children’s welfare, the actual response often falls short in providing the necessary support and protection for children and their families.

Children may be removed from their families and communities, placed in unsuitable accommodation, or criminalised and sanctioned for their own abuse. This is contributing to mistrust, suspicion and a sense of hopelessness from criminally exploited children.

Action for Children sees first-hand the devastating consequences of this growing crisis, through our dedicated support and diversion service for young people at risk of exploitation. We believe all children deserve a safe and happy childhood, free from exploitation and abuse.

In March 2024 we published the findings of the Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children. The review, chaired by Professor Alexis Jay CBE, received evidence from over 70 organisations and people with lived experience. It recommended changes to local practice and national systems across child protection, education, early help services, police and criminal justice.

Action for Children is working to implement the recommendations of the Jay Review, including better understanding of exploited young people’s experiences, the harm exploitation causes to children and their communities, and the local responses to children in need of protection and support. In this report we have analysed serious safeguarding incident data from our services tackling the criminal exploitation of children over a four-year period.

The range and level of harms are shocking: assaults using knives, baseball bats, acid, metal poles and dog chains have been recorded.



Threats of physical harm are also recorded. Threats may be used to enforce cooperation or silence, extort repayment of drug debts, or discourage attempts to move away from exploitation.

While the data size is small, the analysis within this paper showcases the severity, gravity and frequency of harms experienced by our children. When multiplied across the UK, this shows the potential impact of this growing issue.

By highlighting the harms caused by exploitation we seek to shine a light on the challenges faced by services and partnerships in protecting children. Many of the challenges listed highlight what was heard throughout the Jay Review, reinforcing the need for recommendations to be implemented as soon as possible. We consider challenges faced at local level and consider what professionals can do to safeguard children at risk of serious harm and ensure that no child is criminally exploited.

¹ Action for Children (2024) ‘Shattered Lives, Stolen Futures: the Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children’, March 2024. Available at: https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/Shattered_Lives_Stolen_Futures_Report_-_Full_Report.pdf

1. Responding to criminal exploitation

Action for Children’s Criminal Exploitation Intervention Service

Action for Children launched the Criminal Exploitation Intervention Service in Scotland in 2012. Since then, the service has expanded its reach across Scotland, England and Wales, adapting the original model to support over 500 children, young people and families since 2020.

The service is dedicated to supporting children aged 11–18 and their families when the child is experiencing criminal exploitation or deemed at risk. We have a diverse team of experienced practitioners and mentors with lived experience. Their commitment to building trusting relationships enables us to provide flexible and intensive support.

The children referred to our service often face multiple vulnerabilities and challenges that increase their likelihood of exploitation. The goal is to break down barriers to engagement and address vulnerabilities that may lead to future or ongoing exploitation. Building resilience can then encourage a move away from exploitative relationships towards more positive life outcomes.

Support is tailored to the needs of each young person and can include a wide range of services. These include exploring healthy relationships, emotional regulation, life skills development, self-esteem building, employability support, family support, peer mentoring and promoting consequential thinking.

Crisis support is also a crucial component of our work. Children may need help during critical moments, such as at the point of arrest, attendance at A&E or following incidents of trafficking. These often take place outside of traditional service hours. We walk alongside young people throughout their journey, meeting them where they are, acknowledging that the path into and out of exploitation is complex, risky and life changing.

The effectiveness of our service has been externally evaluated by CASCADE, a UK centre for evaluative research in children’s social care.²

Their research identified the elements of the service that make it effective:

- Support from trusted adults.
- Tailored intensive support.
- Addressing negative pathways.
- Collaborative multi-agency working.
- Support from lived experienced practitioners.

Our Criminal Exploitation Intervention Service cannot succeed without strong multi-agency partnerships. In 2019 the service won the European Social Services ‘Overall Excellence’ Award in recognition of the successful collaboration between Action for Children, Glasgow’s Health and Social Care Partnership, and Police Scotland. We know from our work with young people across the UK that collaboration is essential at every stage of their journey. The response of even a single agency can significantly impact the trajectory of a child’s experience with exploitation and their future. Safeguarding vulnerable young people is a collective responsibility that can only be achieved through a shared understanding of the issues they face and coordinated responses across all sectors.

² CASCADE (2024), ‘Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service Evaluation’, March 2024. Available at: <https://cascadewales.org/research/action-for-childrens-serious-organised-crime-early-intervention-service-soceis-evaluation/>

Challenges in identifying criminal exploitation

No harm to children is acceptable.

All children deserve a safe and happy childhood. One which is free from exploitation and abuse.

We know the harms caused by exploitation are much wider than the 179 reported incidents that we included in our analysis. In many instances, harm goes unreported or remains unnoticed by authorities due to the nature of exploitation and children’s efforts to hide their involvement.

Identifying criminal exploitation is complex

It can be challenging for agencies to detect and respond appropriately for a range of reasons. The system currently struggles to balance the dual roles of exploited children as both victims and perpetrators. This binary view often leads to misidentification and inappropriate responses that address children’s behaviours instead of the underlying vulnerability.

Children frequently come to the attention of services only after significant harm has already occurred – when they are criminalised, hospitalised or living in fear. The Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children, commissioned by Action for Children, highlighted the need for a national strategy to address the uncoordinated response that currently exists. It places clear expectations on agencies by emphasising their roles and responsibilities in tackling the issue.

The criminal exploitation of children and its links to Serious Organised Crime

Serious Organised Crime (SOC) plays a significant role in facilitating the criminal exploitation of children and young people. Criminal networks operate with businesslike sophistication, often using older individuals with status in local communities to recruit and exploit children. This hierarchical structure complicates the identification of at-risk children, as exploiters maintain little direct contact with their victims. Children may unknowingly form relationships they believe are reciprocal, only to be later exploited into committing serious crimes with lasting consequences.

Children often don’t realise they are being exploited. Exploiters prey on their vulnerabilities to groom them into engaging in harmful activities. Exploitation can take place even where a child seems to consent, as their participation is fundamentally based on coercion and manipulation. Too often we see children face significant harm, or cause harm to others as a consequence of their own exploitation. They then become entangled in a justice system that often fails to recognise their victimhood, leading to further marginalisation through criminalisation, exclusion and homelessness. Because identifying criminal exploitation is complex, the challenges agencies face in detecting it and subsequently responding must be acknowledged.



“I don’t want to go down this road”

How we talk about criminal exploitation

Criminal exploitation is a form of child abuse in which a child is coerced into committing criminal acts. The Jay Review was clear that there is no ‘one-type’ of exploited child.

Victims can be boys and girls, children from all ethnic backgrounds from anywhere across the UK. However, criminals who exploit children are skilled at picking out young people with vulnerabilities to abuse.

This includes:

- Children who are not in school.
- Children who are in care or have experienced family breakdown.
- Children who live in temporary or homeless accommodation.
- Children with mental health problems.
- Children who are struggling with addiction.
- Children who are neurodiverse.

In the absence of a statutory definition of the criminal exploitation of children, the Jay Review developed the following:

The criminal exploitation of children occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child into criminal activity. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual.

While coercion, deception and an imbalance of power may represent exploitation to professionals, young people supported by our services describe exploitation as³:

“

People buying me things to do things for them or giving me drugs.

“

Making you sell drugs then threatening you and your family.

“

Someone who has power over you telling you what they want you to do.

“

Taking me places away from home.

“

Getting something in exchange for doing things for older people.

³ Interviews conducted with young people for this report.



2. Our analysis: harms caused by criminal exploitation

To highlight the significant harms of exploitation caused by serious organised crime, Action for Children conducted an analysis of serious safeguarding incidents among the children and young people we support.

These incidents were reported to our internal safeguarding service between 2020-2024.

Thresholds for reporting to our internal safeguarding service include any incidents or near misses leading to serious harm to a child, young person, or any other individual within the family or community.

Any cases that offer potential for internal learning, local practice learning, responses or insights for the partnership are also reported.

During that time

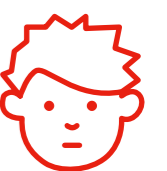
179

serious safeguarding incidents relating to exploitation were reported, impacting 140 young people.



94%

of children involved in serious incidents were male and most were aged between 15-18 years.



The youngest child was only 12 years old.

Our analysis identified five key themes

1 Intended harms caused to children: deliberate acts of violence and coercion by exploiters, or by children who themselves have been exploited.

2 Behaviours linked to exploitation: behaviours that result in criminal consequences or threats to a child’s health and safety.

3 Vulnerability and unintended consequences: consequences such as disrupted education, unsuitable accommodation, mental health issues and family relationship breakdown.

4 Children who cause harm as a result of exploitation: harms caused by children to others because of their exploitation.

5 The narrative around children who are exploited: perception of exploitation from children and agencies and its impact.

Since 2020 we have supported over 500 children, young people and families who have suffered unacceptable harms at the hands of exploiters. These harms are not to be minimised. While they have not met the threshold for formal reporting, they have been addressed according to internal and local safeguarding procedures.



Intended harms caused to children: key statistics

This summary of the 179 incidents highlights the severe harms caused to children, including physical assaults, trafficking and threats to life.

Physical assaults against children

Assaults against children totalled 107 out of 179 serious safeguarding incidents.

59

of these involved a **weapon**, including **knives**, blades, baseball bats, **acid**, metal poles and **dog chains**.

50

children were **stabbed**, with some suffering **life-altering injuries**.

2

young people were **fatally stabbed**.

48

were assaulted without a weapon. Many were left with **head and facial injuries**.

Assaults were often **filmed** and **distributed among their peers**, to humiliate them and reinforce their position in the hierarchy.



The greatest cost of exploitation is a young person's **life**. The murder, by stabbing, of two young people aged 14 and 18 had a significant impact on their families and communities. These losses are both harrowing and avoidable and the impact on peers has included a heightened state of vulnerability. Families struggle to rebuild their lives having suffered such painful loss, with many unanswered questions despite the criminal convictions of the perpetrators.

Children forced to carry drugs internally

Some children attending A&E or arrested by police were found to be carrying drugs internally. This form of abuse, referred to as 'plugging', involves packages of drugs being inserted into a child's body. This act should be considered by agencies as a form of sexual abuse, though it is not currently recognised as such legally.

Instead, children are often treated as suspects linked to drug dealing and distribution, leading to invasive searches. We do not have accurate data on these incidents as we often rely on disclosure from young people due to information not being routinely shared between agencies. Regardless of frequency, this response by the system breaches children's rights and risks further traumatising them.

Threats and intimidation

Of the 179 incidents, 99 included a **physical threat of harm** to enforce cooperation or silence, extort repayment of drug debts, or discourage a child's attempts to move away from exploitation.

On 34 occasions threats were made to children's **lives**. These included formal police-issued threat-to-life notices, stating an immediate and credible threat to kill has been made. They also included informal information about money being offered to individuals to harm or kill young people, known as 'hits' or 'bounties', ranging from £50 to £100,000.

Some families, including those with younger siblings, responded to these threats by leaving their homes for their own protection. They were then deemed to have made themselves intentionally homeless and subsequently housed in hostels or temporary accommodation. On other occasions, young people did not feel threats would amount to harm and, in any case, frequently felt that police-issued notices offered them little protection. Some children received threats from exploiters who were in prison, as well as being threatened while in prison or secure care themselves.

Warnings were given in the form of being pushed down the stairs. Threats were made to harm family members in the community if the exploited child did not comply or disclosed anything to the authorities. The anxiety over not being able to control what happened to family members while in prison caused significant emotional distress. While there has been progress in Scotland to remove all children from youth offender institutions, children in other nations will still face these challenges.

Trafficking

There were

21

reported incidents of children trafficked across the UK.



Some were trafficked multiple times, for periods varying from overnight to three weeks. This number is likely an underestimate, given not all incidents are reported and many trafficking incidents go undetected.



Hospital admissions

There were

107

incidents in which children

were physically harmed, but only 89 children were admitted to hospital to receive treatment. This leaves 18 children who did not seek medical attention for serious injuries.



Some discharged themselves out of fear, while others avoided hospital altogether. Exploiters often tried to access children in hospitals, leading to further fear and intimidation and reluctance of young people to stay in hospital to receive treatment.

Sam's* story

**We have changed some details of Sam's experience, including his name, to protect his anonymity.*

Sam was one of the young people trafficked due to exploitation.

He was originally placed on a community order for offences linked to exploitation – drug possession and intent to supply. Failure to apply the Section 45 defence of the Modern Slavery Act (2015)⁴ resulted in Sam being criminalised because of his exploitation.

He was living in homeless accommodation following a curfew as part of a community order, and had left his room on a Saturday night to meet someone outside, leaving his PlayStation paused. It was days before he returned. Snapchat messages had been sent to his parents stating he was fine, and they did not need to worry. His parents knew these messages were not sent by Sam due to the way they were worded. Exploiters commonly use this tactic when trafficking so police reduce the child's risk rating as a missing person.

Action for Children staff went to visit Sam on Monday. They identified him as missing through analysis of CCTV footage and were subsequently able to conduct a search of his room.

Sam was trafficked out of his local area to various locations across the UK over a period of six days. He was eventually able to contact his parents seeking help and they gave him a train ticket so he could return home. It was only then he was able to escape. Once safely returned, Sam was quickly arrested for breaching the conditions of an existing community order by not adhering to his curfew. He was subsequently sentenced to two months in prison.

The harms caused to Sam while trafficked are still not fully known. He has not felt able to communicate this fully to staff but has indicated he has since been under threat and in fear for his safety. His criminalisation due to harms caused by exploitation underlines the challenges with the existing system, which is not able to see children simultaneously as victims and in conflict with the law. Sam continues to be supported by the service since his release from prison. He is keen to look at employment opportunities, develop skills to live independently, and manage healthy relationships.

⁴ Modern Slavery Act 2015. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/enacted>

Behaviours linked to exploitation

Weapon carrying

72

young people involved in the incidents were carrying a weapon.



Young people frequently explain to our staff that carrying a weapon is 'normal' within their communities and they're often told to carry weapons for their own protection. Despite the consequences of criminal charges, being harmed, or causing harm with a weapon, many young people feel it is riskier not to carry a weapon at all. Children were reported as carrying machetes, meat cleavers and zombie knives as well as bats, poles, pocketknives, BB guns and imitation firearms.

Staff supporting young people have reported seeing them wearing stab-proof vests or multiple layers of clothing to protect themselves from potential attacks. There is a constant fear of repercussion for exploited young people when out in the community.

Substance use

Substance misuse was often a contributing factor to these young people's exploitation. They were either in debt due to drug use or using drugs as a means of self-medicating their anxiety, fear and low mood. Many were attempting to escape the realities of life or block out the feeling of hopelessness they experienced.

94

of the 140 young people were exploited to deal drugs or had a drug debt. Of these, 83 were known to use substances themselves.



Missing episodes

59

missing episodes were reported, ranging from 48 hours to three weeks.



When children are reported missing, support is offered to family members. Where possible, staff will make attempts to locate young people through physical or digital searches. For some who go repeatedly missing there can be a challenge in getting partners to recognise the concern around exploitation and the need for a more focused response.

It is worth noting that there will be far higher numbers of missing episodes that did not meet the threshold for reporting to the safeguarding service. Incidents of children reported missing for up to 48 hours are not required to be reported to our internal safeguarding service. However, these would be responded to in line with local child protection procedures.

The full extent of harms caused to children while missing is often unknown. From disclosures made to the service it is clear children who are missing or trafficked experience significant physical, emotional and, at times, sexual harm. It is imperative that agencies recognise the seriousness of missing episodes and ensure their responses match the level of concern. The case study of Adam, on the next page, highlights the importance of a trusted relationship between the service and young person in promoting their safety and supporting them on their journey through exploitation.

Adam's* journey through the system

*We have changed some details of Adam's story, including his name, to protect his anonymity.

Adam's reality

Adam was referred to the Action for Children Criminal Exploitation Intervention Service when he was 15 years old.

Following a family breakdown, Adam became looked after by his local authority and he was also excluded from education.

Adam was removed from the care system after a decision was made that he could not be 'managed in a care setting'.

After being placed in unsupported accommodation at the age of 16, Adam's substance misuse increased.

No contextual information was offered about Adam's exploitation. He wasn't offered the opportunity to provide this when decisions were taken around prosecution.

Despite efforts to share concerns among services supporting him, the link between Adam's behaviour and his exploitation was not made.

Adam's exploiters continued to try and pull him in, not allowing him to feel safe within his community. His housing situation left him vulnerable to ongoing exploitation.

Adam communicated he was at risk of harm from others if he didn't pay a debt. He would not disclose details for fear of repercussions.

Adam was trafficked between nations within the UK. He was able to contact his support worker at Action for Children to say he had been taken hours away from his home, held against his will and had experienced significant emotional, physical and mental trauma.

Adam managed to escape and make contact with his support worker.

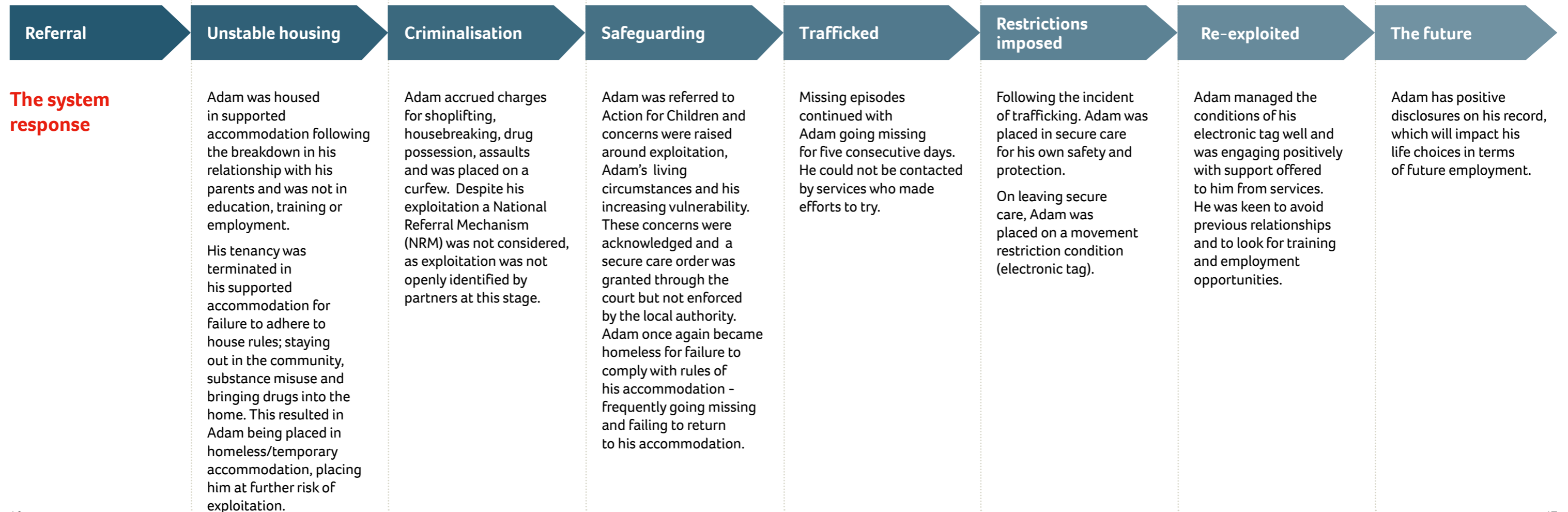
Adam's mental health was significantly impacted by what he experienced while trafficked and exploited.

Adam could not build trust with a system he saw as rejecting and seeking to criminalise him. He was fearful of repercussions if he engaged with authorities.

Nine months later, Adam's previous exploiters tried to kidnap him again. Adam was drugged and attempts were made to pull him into a vehicle.

Adam contacted an Action for Children key worker, who secured alternative housing (homeless accommodation) and supported him to give a statement to police.

Daily support was provided by Action for Children to stabilise Adam, creating a feeling of safety and security in his relationships. This also reduce the amount of time exploiters could 'access' him. Efforts were also made to support Adam with employability and skills that could help him establish a life away from exploitation.



Vulnerability and unintended consequences

“

Our kids are living in poverty, don't have access to positive role models and have a lack of positive opportunities. It can seem like a hopeless situation. All young people want to have a good life, to be successful, to be someone. We need to show them they can have all of those things, that anything is possible. I have experienced what they have, I have seen the horror that happens to people and have lost so many people along the way. I don't want that for our young people. That's why I do this every day. Seeing one young person turn it around makes it all worthwhile.

Lived experienced practitioner, Action for Children

Underlying vulnerabilities and indicators of exploitation

Visible and significant harms such as violence, abduction, online threats of physical harm, or threats to life often create emergency responses from agencies in a bid to protect children. These visible harms do require urgent responses from services, but they are often addressed superficially without linking them to the underlying exploitation. The involvement of children in criminal activities frequently obscures their status as victims, leading to a failure in recognising their exploitation until it's too late.

Vulnerabilities such as homelessness, poverty, disengagement from education, family breakdown, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and low self-esteem were common across the young people involved in these incidents. Common indicators of exploitation included missing episodes, substance misuse, discussion around financial difficulties, changes in social groups, and children suddenly having new clothes or other possessions. Among children referred to our service there is little recognition or verbal reference in service referrals to context such as 'exploitation, coercion, control, manipulation'. Instead, the focus is on incidents or behaviours described in language such as 'involved in organised crime', 'significant offending', 'involved in drug dealing and distribution', and 'causing significant harm to themselves and others'.

Impact on family life

Families are significantly impacted by serious organised crime and criminal exploitation. In one severe incident a parent was restrained and forced to watch their child being assaulted due to the child's historic drug debt. Other parents have experiences of exploiters coming to their house demanding money, and feel a responsibility to manage drug debts for their children.

Poverty can be a significant factor in driving children towards exploitative relationships, as well as keeping them entrenched once a debt has been created. Helping families to access emergency support from our Action for Children Crisis Fund for food, clothes and basic household necessities such as electricity, beds and white goods is commonplace. Families tell us of the hopelessness they feel knowing their child is leaving the house to 'work off' a debt or pay a dealer they owe money to, not knowing if they will come to harm or if they will return at all. However, while poverty is a key factor for many children and young people we support, criminal exploitation does not discriminate based on socioeconomic status. Exploiters target children from all backgrounds. We have supported many young people who do not live in poverty but have still been exploited based on other vulnerabilities in their lives.

Family links to serious organised crime

17

young people were identified as having family members linked or mapped to serious organised crime, adding further complexity to how children are protected.



While traditional safeguarding measures should be adopted to consider risks of familial harm, exploitation through family often extends beyond the family and therefore requires wider consideration around the interplay between intra- and extra- familial harm. Rivalries between crime groups, community perception and the assumed status of young people linked to particular families all contribute to a complex picture in identifying and responding to exploitation concerns.

Family relationship breakdown

27

young people experienced family relationship breakdowns, pushing them towards exploitative relationships.



While many families do their best to protect their children from exploitation, they also face the complex choice of involving agencies and risking their children being criminalised. Unknowingly, parents can increase a child's risk in their attempt to protect them. Many parents tell us about the dilemmas they face when they find drugs or weapons and dispose of these for their child's safety. This immediately leads to a debt that will be placed on the child to pay off. Involving agencies at this point can lead to criminal charges or fears around their children being removed into care or secure accommodation. In addition, many children will act aggressively and violently towards parents, unable to manage the emotional distress and anxiety associated with their exploitation.

Suitable accommodation or housing options

80%

of exploited young people over the age of 16 supported by Action for Children were living in homeless or temporary accommodation. Four of these children were seeking asylum.



When placed in accommodation, many children communicate their concern that it's likely to increase their risk of exploitation, but with no alternative offered. **The reasons for children being in homeless or temporary accommodation were sometimes, but not always, linked to their exploitation and in most cases significantly contributed to their exploitation.**

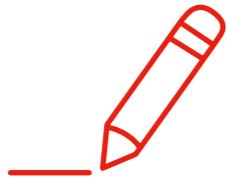
Some young people had positive relationships with family members but could not live safely with family. Others chose to make themselves homeless as a way of protecting family members. The majority had fractured or broken relationships with family that contributed to them declaring themselves homeless and being placed in unsuitable accommodation. Children can often be surrounded by individuals seeking to exploit them, making it very difficult for them to maintain distance and remain focused on achieving positive outcomes such as training, education or employment.

Where possible, our exploitation services support family members to rebuild fractured relationships, recognising all children need a sense of belonging and safety. Where children have experienced breakdown in relationships with family, there is increased likelihood of them relating to their exploiters as 'family', making it harder to recognise these relationships as harmful. Time, consistency and patience are often required to help a child come to the place where they are willing to reflect on their relationships. Often, serious incidents – like those described in this report – prompt children into realising the negative impact of these relationships. A more suitable accommodation setting for young people is needed to protect them from exploitation.

Not in education, employment or training

96

of 140 young people (68%) were not in education, training or employment.



Schools play a pivotal role in identifying vulnerabilities and indicators that could lead to criminal exploitation. Peer-based learning around issues such as criminal exploitation, relationships, substance use and knife crime are all key in healthy adolescent development. Children being excluded or disengaged from education impacts services' ability to safeguard, as vulnerabilities and indicators of exploitation may not be identified due to gaps in agency oversight. While some children may not be engaged or are excluded from education, many tell us they want to get qualifications and aspire to get a job.

Our service works alongside schools to identify barriers to engagement, promote reintegration and support young people in getting back into education, training or employment. School may not feel manageable for many exploited young people, and our service offers support to gain qualifications through their key workers instead. Providing routine, structure and confidence supports a more successful reintegration.

Neurodiversity

82

of 140 young people (59%) were neurodiverse, a significant proportion.



Differences in ability to navigate relationships, identify risk or manage impulsivity are vulnerabilities that increase a child's likelihood of exploitation. How these children are subsequently supported can affect them further, with many not able to understand or cooperate with the system. The consequences for many young people are not knowing who to trust, feeling let down by the system at every stage of their lives, and gravitating further towards exploiters who they perceive to offer reassurance, guidance and protection.

Fear of speaking out



**“.....
You don't want it to happen to you and get upset because you feel forced. Pride stops you telling people.**

Young person, 15

Children are often reluctant to disclose details about their exploiters. In our analysis, 128 out of 140 young people refused to provide information about their exploiters, underscoring the need for agencies to act on indicators of exploitation rather than relying on victim disclosures.

Many children stated that pride stops them from speaking out. Children have built relationships they believe to be positive and reciprocal, only to learn they have been deceived, manipulated and exploited. This is challenging to accept for many children, who often have unmet needs for belonging and acceptance.

The fear of repercussions from exploiters also prevents young people from speaking out. It is crucial to build positive trusting relationships with young people to provide them with a safe space to explore any concerns they have about relationships. They can subsequently be supported to move away from exploitative situations.

Children who cause harm to others as a result of exploitation

Through our analysis, we identified 41 incidents where children or young people caused harm to others. All these cases involved assaults or threats with weapons, with 12 of those being targeted attacks.

Most of these acts of violence were directly related to the young person's exploitation – they were coerced, threatened or influenced to carry them out. In some instances, children committed offences in the presence of their exploiters or associates, even if those specific actions couldn't be directly tied to exploitation. All children involved in these incidents received a criminal justice response, with little recognition or context offered around their exploitation. While we recognise the justice system's responsibility to consider the appropriate response to offending, we argue any decisions should be considered through the lens of exploitation and child protection.

Incidents involving children causing harm to others

41

assaults with a weapon.

15

targeted attacks.

3

assaults without a weapon.

1

young person threatened physical harm with a weapon to another young person over social media.

1

death by dangerous driving.

© Open Aye



The responsibility of young people in the context of exploitation

As children often do not disclose details about their exploiters, agencies need to remove the expectations on children to admit their exploitation, which places unnecessary responsibility on them. Relying on children to disclose their exploitation before acting to protect them is not a viable approach; the presence of vulnerabilities and indicators of exploitation should be sufficient to warrant intervention.

Current legislation recognises that under-18s cannot consent to their own exploitation. Therefore, a child's ability or willingness to recognise or disclose their exploitation should not be interpreted as an indication of whether harm is occurring. The case study of Peter on the next page highlights the complexity of exploitation where there was a significant level of offending alongside conflicting opinions across safeguarding partners on identifying and responding to Peter's exploitation.

Peter's* journey through the system

*We have changed some details of Peter's story, including his name, to protect his anonymity.

Peter's reality

Peter was referred to the Action for Children Criminal Exploitation Intervention Service when he was 14 years old.

Peter was charged with 90 offences but was not offered legal representation, despite being only 15 at the time.

With guidance, he sought and received legal advice. He did not acknowledge he was criminally exploited.

When his electronic tag was removed, Peter asked if there was somewhere he could 'buy one' to stay on it. He saw this as a way to 'keep out of trouble' by creating some distance between himself and his exploiters.

Peter continued to be treated as a perpetrator. In police reports, there was no consideration given to where he was taking stolen items or the role of adult facilitation (exploitation).

Despite offences accrued, signs and indicators of exploitation and intelligence shared around organised crime group (OCG) involvement, police did not submit an NRM as they did not feel there was suitable evidence to suggest Peter was being exploited.

Limited information was shared by police to support decision making around Peter's risk and safeguarding. Despite this, the social work team recommended Peter stay on his supervision order for his own safety. This protected Peter from fully entering into the justice system.

Peter had entered a 'twin track' situation in which social work efforts to safeguard him were in conflict with a police response which saw him as a perpetrator linked to organised crime.

Peter continued to be criminalised as a result of his exploitation. He identified periods where he wanted to move away from criminal behaviour but felt powerless to do this for fear of repercussions from his exploiters.

Action for Children shared concerns with Peter's solicitor around his exploitation and his engagement with the service.

Peter's family communicated concerns that his life was at risk in the community.

Peter now has a significant criminal record that will impact his future prospects, including employment and travel.

Peter did not see himself as exploited, and nor did agencies. Efforts were made to keep Peter in the safeguarding system but responses were limited in the absence of a shared welfare-centred view of Peter's life.



The system response

A police report described Peter as: *"Involved in criminal activity from a young age. Charges relating to theft, violence, reckless conduct. Shows little remorse, does not appear to want to change. Attendance very poor, high levels of truancy and when at school is purposefully disruptive causing huge issues for the teacher and class. Has few friends in school but associating with older youths who are involved in criminality. These youths are from other parts of city."*

Peter accrued 90 offences over a six month period including housebreaking, theft, fire raising, theft of motor vehicles, drug offences.

Peter was placed on a supervision order due to vulnerability, including eight months on an electronic tag to address his escalating offending.

He continued to accrue charges for thefts, housebreaking with intent to steal, theft of a motor vehicle.

Police recorded Peter as being 'involved in organised crime' with increasing intelligence around drug dealing and distribution. This information was not shared with partners at the time.

Children's services continued to monitor the situation through a statutory order and felt sufficient safeguarding measures were in place. Peter's escalating offending was noted but limited responses were available to reduce the risk of this within the legal framework.

An NRM referral was submitted by Peter's social worker, including supporting information shared by Action for Children.

Just after his 16th birthday, Peter was charged with 15 offences including attempted murder, house breaking, theft of a motor vehicle and possession of an offensive weapon.

Peter was remanded to a secure unit following his arrest and being charged.

Evidence was shared at a bail hearing around exploitation and bail was granted.

A conclusive grounds decision was given by the Home Office confirming Peter's status as an exploited child.

The system has been unable to see Peter as both a victim of exploitation and in conflict with the law. This resulted in a justice response dominating services' interactions with him.

The narrative around children who are exploited

A refusal to accept exploitation

Children referred to our service rarely accept their exploitation. Many challenge the notion that they are being exploited, believing instead that they are ‘gaining’ from their involvement if there is an exchange of money, drugs or material goods. Others believe they are part of something and do not see their exploiters as criminals. Despite this perception, agencies should still respond in a way that meets the needs of exploited children.

Young people’s perception of responsibility

Many young people we support believe they hold the responsibility to manage their own exploitation, often stating they know how to ‘handle things’ or ‘know what they are doing’. Too often, this presentation results in agencies failing to respond to children as victims, turning the focus on children ‘making decisions’ about their involvement. This combination of approaches from both child and agency overburdens children who can feel a sense of hopelessness around viable options to escape their circumstances.

The system should build trust with children to enable them to share their experiences in the knowledge they will be supported appropriately. Building trust requires agreement and coordination of child-first responses across justice and child protection. An appropriate focus on disruption of perpetrators must be balanced with support for exploited children to help them see a clear pathway out.

“

They are bombarded with the idea that ‘crime pays’. There are guys not much older than them who have perceived material wealth despite not having a legit job. By the time they realise it’s too late they are trapped in. How do they come back from that and admit they got it wrong? They can’t just walk away from these people. There’s consequences.

Lived experienced practitioner, Action for Children

Reframing the victim and perpetrator narrative

Children who engage in illegal activity because of exploitation are often defined as ‘high-risk’ or ‘high-harm offenders’, receiving a justice response that fails to recognise their exploitation. Often, children come to the attention of services through their involvement in criminal activity, highlighting a challenge around early identification and intervention, with over-reliance on police data to detect exploitation. By the time a child has come to the attention of police for offences linked to exploitation, harm and abuse has already occurred.

Early intervention is critical in identifying vulnerabilities and indicators at the earliest opportunity to prevent harms being caused to, and by, children through exploitation.

For children who perpetrate harm through exploitation, their own victimhood is often responded to separately, resulting in many children being prosecuted for offences alongside child protection processes. This offers a conflicting narrative for children and young people, and restricts agencies to addressing exploitation in siloes.

This binary view is not helpful when trying to ensure a child-first approach that addresses the vulnerabilities that lead to exploitation, while recognising the coercion, manipulation and grooming that lead to children committing offences. To ensure an appropriate and proportionate response, the criminally exploited child should not be seen as either a victim or perpetrator. They should be seen as an exploited child, prompting an agreed coordinated response that addresses their vulnerability to exploitation and the relevant protections. Language is critical in ensuring agencies communicate in a way that highlights exploitation.

Agencies responding to children who are exploited tend to refer to them as either victims or perpetrators. Responses to exploited children should allow child protection processes to be prioritised while also addressing offending linked to exploitation. Agencies often communicate their concern that young people who cause harm to others should be held accountable for their actions. Although these harms need to be addressed, alternative thinking is required to bridge the gap between protecting children from exploitation and addressing the risk associated with their behaviour.

Action for Children does not condone harm caused by children because of exploitation. However, we strongly advocate for addressing their needs and behaviour in a manner that is both proportionate and appropriate to their circumstances. We recognise that, while these young people may believe they are making informed decisions, their ability to do so is significantly impaired by the exploitative situations they are in.

Due to their age and stage of development, young people are naturally more inclined to take risks, seek relationships outside of their family and explore new identities in search of acceptance. These factors make them inherently more vulnerable. It is essential that the context surrounding each exploited child is thoroughly considered, ensuring their actions are understood within the framework of their exploitation, and that appropriate support and interventions are provided.

The debate of a child being a victim or perpetrator when they are criminally exploited is one that continues across sectors. While we acknowledge the tensions that exist, this debate is not helpful in coordinating a unified approach. Going forward, we should reframe our perceptions of a criminally exploited child to include this more nuanced understanding.

Ryan*

**We've changed some details of Ryan's experience, including his name, to protect his anonymity.*

Ryan is a 16-year-old supported by our Criminal Exploitation Intervention Service.

Support was offered to Ryan as he wanted to move away from dealing drugs for a local gang. Ryan made efforts to distance himself and leave the exploitative situation he was in.

Initially, Ryan did not hear from his exploiters; however, he was later tracked down in his temporary accommodation, kidnapped, assaulted and coerced into continuing to sell drugs as a way of maintaining his own safety.

With support from Action for Children staff, Ryan was able to disclose his ordeal to us. He refused to report this to police. He remained in fear for his safety, living in homeless accommodation, and felt attempts were being made to criminalise him rather than protect him.

Police continued to stop him if he was out in the community, with Ryan believing they were trying to 'pin' something on him. He therefore did not see any benefit in engaging with social workers and avoided any contact with police.

With support from our service, he was able to provide a statement, but communicated his fear for repercussions, refusing to leave his accommodation without any support from staff. His case underscores the dangers young people face when trying to leave exploitative situations and how a child's experience with the system can impact on their willingness to build trusting relationships with support services.

Why can't children trust the system?

Young people often feel trapped in their exploitation, believing they must manage their situation independently.

One young person described the hopelessness of his situation:

**“.....
You either choose to shot [work] for someone good or you get ripped off. Or you can get stabbed up and stay on the streets or leave the streets like I did.**

Young person, 15



What young people say they need

In tackling the harms associated with exploitation, children and young people are clear about what they need from agencies supporting them.

Consistency, trust and reliability came up countless times during our conversations with young people supported by the service. **Education, support in finding employment, and a safe place to live** were also key priorities.

Professionals who were non-judgemental and could understand the challenges they faced enabled children and young people to engage more positively with support offered to them. Barriers to engagement included young people believing services were 'out to get them' or would sanction them if they disclosed any information about what they were involved in.

Some young people felt they could never trust agencies, whereas others recognised relationships would take time. Although young people often failed to accept they were being exploited, they were able to identify the negative consequences associated with it, and as such were willing to accept support from the service.



**“.....
I need someone who is non-judgemental, respectable, trustworthy and understanding. Someone that's relatable.**

Young person, 17

Helping children and young people to achieve the priorities and needs most important to them is an essential part of our work. Children and young people who feel a sense of ownership and optimism about their life are more likely to engage and develop positive future aspirations.

**“.....
Time – I need a while to get to know someone and feel comfortable with them and I need trust. Trust so I am able to tell them things.**

Young person, 16

**“.....
She [Action for Children support worker] just gets it. If it wasn't for her I would be dead or in prison.**

Young person, 18

3. Conclusions and recommendations

'We can't let this continue': our collective responsibility

There is an urgent need to improve early identification and responses to criminally exploited children. This includes awareness raising, reframing the narrative, addressing vulnerability and risk in a way that avoids criminalisation, and using contextual safeguarding practices that recognise the specific environments, relationships and pressures that influence a young person's behaviour.

“..... **68%** *It is our responsibility to hold onto young people to get them on their feet. We need to stay with them through the good times and the bad times to help them see there is a way out of this. It's hard, but it's possible. I received that support and now I can give that back. There is a life away from exploitation and when you help young people see that it's a beautiful thing.*

Lived experienced practitioner, Action for Children

The responsibility to identify and respond to criminal exploitation covers families, education, social services, health, police and communities. However, there is a significant lack of awareness around the vulnerabilities and indicators of exploitation. Often, behaviours like anti-social behaviour, disengagement from education, substance misuse and low-level offending lead to punitive measures rather than protective interventions.

A staggering **100% of the children** involved in these incidents were known to the police before referral to Action for Children services, suggesting that young people are more likely to be known by justice service services before safeguarding.

68%



were not engaged in education, training, or employment. In the absence of education, children often do not have any daily contact with agencies who could identify vulnerabilities to exploitation.

They instead have large amounts of unstructured time that increases their likelihood of exploitation. School is a protective factor in providing a sense of purpose, belonging and positive social capital. Children still have these needs and will seek ways for these to be met in the absence of education.

Accommodation is a significant concern. Many of the young people supported by the service were living in unstable or unsafe conditions, further exacerbating their vulnerabilities. Over **80% of the over-16s** referred to the service were living in precarious housing situations, including homeless accommodations where they remained vulnerable to further exploitation.

The data illustrates that while these children and young people are engaged in illegal activity and often perpetrate harm against others, many experience significant, life changing harms that render it difficult to move away from exploitation. To be truly supported and have their rights upheld, children's behaviour must be understood and responded to in the context of their exploitation. **Early intervention to address vulnerabilities such as education, family relationships and housing should be prioritised as a means of prevention.**

Safeguarding exploited children: implications for government policy

The harms seen in our services echo the evidence given to the Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children. The Review identified several improvements to local practice and national policy that would support better safeguarding of young people.

Without action, hundreds more children will come to harm at the hands of exploiters every day. **Exploitation of children cannot become an accepted norm in our society.**

An improved system is required. Action for Children recommends that the following are implemented as soon as possible to ensure criminally exploited young people are effectively safeguarded and supported:

- 1** Investment in targeted exploitation prevention and support services.
- 2** Exploitation recognised as a distinct form of child abuse.
- 3** A welfare-first approach in the management of offences committed by exploited children.

Investment in targeted exploitation prevention and support services

Universal youth provision alone, though essential in reducing a broad range of vulnerabilities, is often not appropriate for exploited young people experiencing significant harm. They require specific, targeted and evidence-based support. Too often, services are funded on short-term arrangements, contributing to lack of trust from children, young people and communities, who rely on services that can be there to support them throughout their journey. Communities learn to build trust with agencies they know will be there in the long term.

Investment and funding for prevention services and crisis support for exploited children should be consistent, long term and allocated to reflect local need and the best evidence of what works. This should be backed by a specific requirement on local authorities to provide specialist services to prevent children from being criminally exploited.

Support services should work along statutory services to provide:

- **Specialist exploitation services** to work alongside statutory and wider community partners, ensuring a welfare-first approach in managing the criminal exploitation of children. This should include protections and management of risk associated with offending linked to exploitation.
- **A statutory safeguarding response** as soon as exploitation is suspected, ensuring a child protection approach within teams who can support children in need of protection while in conflict with the law.
- **Inclusive education** for children who are exploited, avoiding unnecessary exclusion or disengagement while equipping schools with required skills and knowledge to safeguard children effectively.



Exploitation must be recognised as a distinct category of child protection

Action for Children recommends the following steps for addressing the issues outlined above.

- **Exploitation recognised as a form of child abuse** and placed on a statutory footing. Exploitation should become the fifth statutory category of child protection alongside physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect.
- **A practice framework established** for child protection services, youth justice, police, health, Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS)/Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), education and other local agencies to clarify the roles and responsibilities of agencies responding to children at risk of exploitation. This should include details of available policy and legislation, the highest standards of safeguarding, multi-agency working and information sharing.
- **A clear strategy** across partnerships for identifying and responding to criminal exploitation as a child protection issue, developing a local outcomes framework that supports contextual interventions. Impact should be measured across individuals and communities.
- **Clear escalation procedures** that provide consistency of practice and clear lines of accountability across partnerships.
- **Training and awareness-raising** prioritised and made part of professional development across the children’s workforce.

A welfare-first approach to offences committed by exploited children

Local safeguarding partners should work to a joint, welfare-first approach in the management of offences committed by children. A statutory safeguarding response must be triggered as soon as exploitation is suspected by professionals. A safeguarding referral must be made by police as soon as possible when any child is arrested for any reason, whether or not they are subsequently charged with an offence.

A welfare-first approach to criminally exploited children should include:

A system that can hold space for children as victims in conflict with the law. We recommend that a specialist response is created within local youth justice teams that addresses the needs and vulnerabilities of children exploited into illegal activity. Youth justice services have specialist skills and knowledge around children in conflict with the law. Consideration should be given to the role they could play in responding to criminally exploited children, with specific consideration around managing the legal framework. This response should not rely on children being convicted of crimes to receive a response and should avoid criminalisation of children as a result of their exploitation. Protections should be offered in conjunction with appropriate support that addresses risk and offending linked to exploitation.

Robust and well-funded safeguarding arrangements. This includes the development of contextual safeguarding approaches and risk outside of the home (ROTH) pathways. Schools must also have the funding and resources to play a full role as statutory safeguarding partners.

Action for Children is committed to working with local partners and governments to turn these recommendations into action.

Children and young people deserve a childhood protected from harm and abuse. This report reveals the shocking extent of the issues facing the children and young people we are working with which, as exploitation continues to grow, we believe is the tip of the iceberg. The evidence provided offers a small but crucial insight into the harms caused by exploitation.

With commitment to change, we can significantly improve the wellbeing and safety of children across the UK.



“

Due to the nature of the game young people have learnt not to speak. They have lost their voice. They are fearful to speak out due to fear of what comes with speaking to professionals if their neighbourhood was to find out. We need to help them find their voice and help them trust us, and learn to trust the system. To do that we need committed services and a system that supports them instead of criminalising them.

Lived experience practitioner, Action for Children



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