

HSCP Briefing for Multi-Agency Practitioners



April 2024

“Children cannot and should not be the only witnesses to the harm they experience; it is the responsibility of the adults around the child to respond to help-seeking behaviour and to safeguard them”

Centre for Excellence on Child Sexual Abuse

HSCP Thematic Audit: The Multi-Agency Response to Child Sexual Abuse

This thematic review formed part of the HSCP’s multi agency audit plan for 2023/24. It took place in April 2024.

Thematic reviews are used as a window into current practice, identifying best practice and emerging themes across the cases examined where further strengthening of practice is needed. HSCP would like to extend its thanks to the practitioners and managers that supported the multi-agency audit. The input of practitioners was invaluable and ensured the voice of the child was a central focus of this work.

If you do one thing:

Be prepared. Explore and use the Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton (HIPS) [Child Sexual Abuse Toolkit](#). Share the resources with your colleagues.

Sexual abuse – Involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts, such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing, and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children. [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#) (page 162).

Prevalence

The majority of child sexual abuse is hidden; never reported or uncovered by an official agency. The most recent data estimates that 15% of girls and 5% of boys will experience child sexual abuse before the age of 16. Only one in eight children will become known to professionals at the time ([Child sexual abuse: Trends in official data](#), CSA). Children with special educational needs and disabilities are three times more likely to be abused than their peers and additional barriers can sometimes exist when recognising abuse in this subgroup of children ([Child abuse and neglect in the UK today](#), NSPCC).

Far more children are sexually abused than services identify

Child sexual abuse in 2022/23: Trends in official data
csacentre.org.uk

2,300 children on a child protection plan due to child sexual abuse (England)

9,500 children seen by sexual assault referral centres (England and Wales)

49,000 children assessed at risk of sexual abuse* (England)

105,000 child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police (England and Wales)

500,000

children are estimated to be sexually abused every year**

Sources: Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes, 2022/23; Department for Education, Characteristics of Children in Need, 2022/23. *Includes assessments recording concerns of child sexual abuse and exploitation. **Estimate calculated using single-year prevalence estimated by age group (Radford et al. 2011, Childhood abuse and neglect in the UK today) and the Office for National Statistics mid-year population estimates, 2022. Please note: numbers rounded to the nearest hundred thousand.

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

“...we can no longer stay silent on this issue. We have to talk about it and act. Everyone needs to play their part in identifying, preventing and tackling child sexual abuse in the family environment.”

[The multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment:](#)

[JTAI Report](#), February 2020

Key messages

For Strategic Leaders and Managers

✓ **Take every opportunity** you can to promote awareness and use of the [Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton Child Sexual Abuse Strategy and Toolkit](#) within your agency.

✓ **Consider how assured you are** of the resources from the toolkit being embedded and used in your agencies' processes, procedures and practice, and take action to seek assurance as needed.

For Practitioners

✓ **Make sure your training** in this area is up to date. Explore the HSCP multi-agency [Virtual Training Offer](#).

✓ **Use** the [Information Sharing Advice for Practitioners in Safeguarding Services](#). Make sure you know, understand and follow the Seven Golden Rules for Information Sharing (pages 4-5).

✓ **Recognise** that we cannot rely on a child verbally disclosing child sexual abuse: “This is a heavy and frankly unrealistic responsibility”. Be familiar with the [Signs and indicators template](#) and guidance from the Centre of Expertise for Child Sexual Abuse. Be professionally curious and “prepared to think the unthinkable”.

✓ **Understand** the [definition of child sexual abuse](#), both contact and non-contact sexual abuse, including involving children in looking at or in the production of, sexual images.

✓ **Check out** the [research and resources](#) from the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse. This includes support for children and families where there is concern regarding illegal images of children and a parent/carer.

✓ **Know** about the importance of specialist child sexual abuse medical [assessments](#) and their importance in supporting a child holistically as well as having a forensic evidential function.

Thematic audit

The HSCP thematic review consisted of the following:

- Review of local/national multi-agency data and training attendance and evaluation.
- Review of the learning and recommendations from case reviews.
- Frontline staff survey around confidence in identification and response to child sexual abuse and awareness of the [HIPS Child Sexual Abuse Strategy and associated Toolkit](#).
- Multi-agency audit of the circumstances of 10 children and families.
- National reviews and research - Reports referenced within this document include the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#) and the Joint Targeted Area Inspection considering the multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment.

Multi-agency practice strengths

There were examples of positive practice throughout the audit. This included:

- Direct work with the children.
- Education as a protective factor, and a good working relationship between schools and children's services.
- Children's attendance at the child protection conference ensuring their voice is heard and working with professionals.
- The child protection process 'holding children safely' through, sometimes, lengthy criminal investigations.
- Cross-border information sharing and multi-agency support in sharing information across areas.

Learning identified

Parent oriented issues, domestic abuse and parental mental and physical ill health, featured in multiple cases. It is known that perpetrators will sometimes seek partners with additional vulnerabilities.

Practitioners should be mindful of **language barriers and cultural experiences** in relation to adults who are considered as protective/safe adults. This may impact understanding of the potential risks posed to the children.

Practitioners should be aware and reminded of the increased vulnerability of children with **additional needs and disabilities** to all forms of abuse and that includes sexual abuse.

School attendance/educational engagement is a protective factor. Previous local and national reviews have highlighted this in cases of child sexual abuse. In two of the cases, the children were not receiving education provision on a daily basis. In cases where child sexual abuse is a concern, educational provision and engagement should be prioritised.

Intra-familial child sexual abuse often occurs with other forms of physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. This can mean that signs and indicators of sexual abuse may be attributed to other concerns or harms a child may be experiencing.

Additional findings

[The HIPS Child Sexual Abuse Strategy and associated Toolkit](#) were published in March 2023. The findings from the staff survey indicated that over 70% were aware of the strategy and toolkit. Of that 70%, two thirds of respondents had not accessed the Child Sexual Abuse Toolkit. When asked what prevented staff accessing the toolkit the majority responded that they had not had a case where it was relevant.

The toolkit supports professionals to identify some of the potential signs and indicators of sexual abuse and therefore can support in identifying children suffering child sexual abuse. The significance of the statement “not had a case where it was relevant” shines a light on the need for the multi-agency workforce to engage more with the Child Sexual Abuse Toolkit.

It is equally important for managers of staff who use the Child Sexual Abuse Toolkit to be familiar with the resources and guidance within the toolkit to support in supervision or case discussion.

HSCP thematic review recommendations

The HSCP thematic review made a number of recommendations which will be monitored through the HSCP Scrutiny Group on behalf of the safeguarding partners. These recommendations include the development of [eLearning](#) regarding:

- Child Sexual Abuse Signs and Indicators Template
- Communicating with Children
- Managing Risk and Trauma after Online Sexual Offending
- Information sharing Advice for Practitioners in Safeguarding Services

These should be promoted by agencies when available and how this has been achieved should be shared with the HSCP Independent Chair and Scrutineer.



Resources to support practice

Thresholds

[Hampshire and Isle of Wight Thresholds Chart](#)

Toolkits

For professionals

[Child Sexual Abuse Toolkit](#)

[Adopting a Family Approach Toolkit](#)

[Neglect Toolkit](#)

[Safeguarding Adolescents Toolkit](#)

[Understanding Unidentified Adults Toolkit](#)

[Child Exploitation Toolkit](#)

[Child on Child Abuse Toolkit](#)

[Learning from Reviews Toolkit](#)

For parents & carers

[Child Sexual Abuse \(support for parents and carers\).](#)

[Supporting your Adolescent Toolkit](#)

[Child Exploitation Toolkit \(support for parents and carers\).](#)

Training

The [HSCP Virtual Offer](#) provides a range of multi-agency training on some of the themes arising from this review. These include:

[Webinars](#)

- Learning from local reviews
- Child sexual abuse
- Harmful sexual behaviour
- Disguised compliance
- Neglect
- Unidentified Adults
- Having Honest Conversations
- Missing, exploited and trafficked Children
- A Family Approach
- Domestic abuse
- Trauma Informed Journey
- MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub)
- Working Together and Preparing for Child Protection Conferences
- Safeguarding adolescents

[eLearning](#)

- Brook Traffic Light
- Child Sexual Abuse Toolkit
- Child Exploitation Toolkit
- HIPS Child Sexual Abuse Strategy and Toolkit
- HIPS and 4LSAB Family Approach Toolkit

Further Information

[The multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in the family environment: joint targeted area inspections \(JTAs\) - GOV.UK](#)

Safeguarding Theme Overview Packs

HSCP's [Safeguarding Theme Overview Packs \(STOP\)](#) consolidate all multi-agency information and support in one accessible resource. These packs are designed as a one-stop resource to assist professionals in working collaboratively to identify and respond to child safeguarding themes, including:

- Child Exploitation
- Understanding Unidentified Adults
- Learning from Reviews