Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse response pathway: practice guide

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An Officer in the Case is assigned

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1. Who is this document for?

This practice guide is principally aimed at police officers in a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), or in their force's Public Protection Unit (PPU) or equivalent child protection unit, to help them consider relevant issues at the start of and throughout a criminal investigation into child sexual abuse.

It is also relevant to any other professionals who support and protect children,[1] to help them understand what happens at the beginning of such an investigation.

2. What happens at this stage?

At this point, a safeguarding concern about child sexual abuse will have been raised with the police (through a call to 999 or the local police by the child

[1] In this document we use the term 'child' to refer to anyone under the age of 18. See *An introduction to the child sexual abuse response pathway* for more about terminology.

themselves or a concerned individual, or through a child protection referral made to the MASH or a local authority's other 'front door' arrangements).

If this has prompted an immediate safety visit by a police officer, that officer will have completed a child protection referral form before going off duty – see our practice guide *Police log the concerns and take initial actions.*

The MASH or the police force's Public Protection Unit (PPU)/specialist child safeguarding team will now receive the information about the child(ren) and consider next steps; if a decision is made to investigate further, a detective is assigned to the case (becoming the 'Officer in the Case' or sometimes called the Officer in Charge (OIC) and liaises with children's social care to arrange a multi-agency strategy discussion and plan other next steps.

3. How may the child be feeling?

If the child is aware that the police are becoming involved, they may be feeling **relieved** – but they may have experienced **trauma**, **anxiety** and **confusion** if the police have made an immediate safety visit which they were not expecting.

They may also be feeling **responsible** for the abuse and for any distress caused to their family, especially if they think family members are blaming them for the police's involvement.

They are likely to be **worried** about what may happen and when, and the uncertainty of what lies ahead. They may feel particularly **vulnerable** if the person who has harmed them is aware of the police's involvement and has threatened to harm them or others if they talk about the abuse. It will be important that the concerns of the child are acknowledged and addressed.

> *"I remember that there was one police officer who was good and, like, she was good at like keeping my mum informed and she just – she'd always, like, you know – ask and like – ask her what was going on – and she'd ring us – instead of like us ringing her." (1)*

> *"I had two police officers who used to always deal with my cases and got a new one when I moved. Every six months [she phones to] check up on you. Sometimes just, 'You're doing really well' or, 'Has anything happened?' I feel better having a police officer, 'cos we get to know each other and she understands me and the situation." (2)*

> *"They [the police] were helpful but then I wouldn't hear from them for ages and didn't know what was going on … They would ring up and stuff but they wouldn't come and see me face-to-face." (3)*

4. Assigning an officer to the case

The senior officer in the MASH/PPU will decide which of their available officers to assign to the case. Ideally, this should be a **child protection officer** who has received up-to-date training in conducting formal 'Achieving Best Evidence' interviews and has an understanding of child sexual abuse.

Where possible, it may be beneficial for a female officer to be assigned to the case if the child thought to have been sexually abused was abused by a male, regardless of their gender. Consideration may also be given to the child's ethnic/cultural background when assigning an officer. Thought needs to be given to how children from marginalised and discriminated communities may perceive the police, and how this can be addressed.

Try to ensure that the same officer will be involved in the investigation throughout, so that the child can get to know them.

5. How can the Officer in the Case best help the child at this initial stage?

At the beginning of a criminal investigation, your priority is to ensure that the child is **protected** from further harm. It is important not to lose sight of the child at the centre of the investigation: you should also be considering how they can be kept **informed**, **involved** and **supported** while the investigation takes place.

Crucial to this is **thinking about the child as an individual** and not jumping to conclusions based on their individual characteristics or circumstances. Sometimes professionals think that a child of a certain age, sex or social class is unlikely to have experienced certain forms of sexual abuse, for example, or they regard children from some ethnic backgrounds as more 'adult' than others: **assumptions like these must be avoided**. This is often referred to as Adultification and is a process whereby ideas of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children because of their personal characteristics, socio-economic influences and/or lived experiences. The impact results in children's rights being either diminished or not upheld. See Taking account of diversity for further information.

Equally, it is important to take account of the child's age and stage of development; their sex; their ethnicity, religion and culture; their social class; any disabilities or learning difficulties they may have; and their sexual orientation and gender identity.

a) Protecting the child

The information already available to you may give you an idea of the child's immediate safeguarding needs, although you may not get a full picture until the

multi-agency strategy discussion takes place. Immediate protective action may be taken, if appropriate.

Keeping the person(s) of concern away from the child

If the person(s) of concern are not arrested but it is necessary to remove them from the child's household or wider environment, or otherwise to limit their behaviour, consider the civil orders available to you. For example:

- **Child abduction warning notices** (CAWNs) can be served on individuals believed to present a risk to the child, and prevent them from having any contact with the child. It is an offence to break the terms of a CAWN.
- A **sexual risk order** (SRO) places restrictions on a person of concern who is identified as being likely to cause sexual harm. These restrictions can include prohibiting foreign travel, internet use, or being in the company of children.

The Home Office's child exploitation disruption toolkit contains more information about civil orders.

If the person(s) of concern are arrested, consider the bail conditions that can be imposed on them.

Removing the child from the risk of harm

If the child can only be protected by removing them from their current environment, police protection powers can be used to place them with their wider family or in local authority care. The Child Law Advice website contains a useful summary of what this involves.

b) Supporting the child

- Child Sexual Abuse: Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse | The Crown Prosecution Service makes clear the importance of a child and their family being provided with support, with the police being responsible for facilitating this. Any child going through the criminal justice process, whether their case is recent or non-recent, is entitled to support from an **independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA)** or a **child and young person's sexual violence advocate (CYPSVA[2])**. Normally it will fall to you or the SARC to make the referral. The Home Office has published a guide to *The Role of the Independent Sexual Violence Adviser*.
- There is a common misconception that the child cannot receive **emotional support or therapy** during a police investigation, but the Crown Prosecution Service's 2022 legal guidance *Pre-trial Therapy* makes clear that they can,

[2] Also abbreviated to CHISVA or ChISVA.

and should, as the child's best interests are paramount; there is no requirement to delay therapy on account of an ongoing investigation or prosecution. Professionals can talk with the child about how they are feeling and the impact on them and their family, as long as the Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interview has taken place, and the information of what has been disclosed in this interview is not re-visited. During subsequent conversations or interventions the child may tell someone more information or detail about what happened to them, in which case a further ABE interview will need to be planned.

- In addition to making forensic and evidential findings, a **paediatric medical examination** can provide a holistic assessment of the child's health and wellbeing; you can find out more in our video *Understanding Medical Examinations for Child Sexual Abuse Concerns*. The multi-agency strategy discussion will decide whether the child should receive a medical examination, but note that *only professionals who are knowledgeable about medical examinations should talk to the child and their non-abusing parent(s)[3] about them*. It will normally be your responsibility to liaise with the local sexual assault referral centre (SARC) to arrange the medical examination.

This support will need to be connected to any other safeguarding processes, such as child protection or child in need planning. Appropriate liaison is needed to ensure that a holistic support package is provided to the child.

c) Communicating with the child and their non-abusing parent(s)

You will be communicating with the child and their family throughout the investigation, so it is important to consider and address their communication needs in advance.

Think about any **adjustments** you may need to make to support effective, child centred communication with the child and their parent(s). Establish whether the child has any communication needs – these may be based on their developmental stage, their spoken language (English as a second language), or any disability or communication needs they may have as well as the possible effect that the trauma the child has experienced may have had on them. See Taking account of

[3] By 'parent' we mean someone in a parental or principal care-giving role to a child; this may be their biological parent, step-parent, adoptive parent, foster parent or other relative fulfilling that role. We use the term 'non-abusing' to mean a family member who is *not considered to have been involved in sexually abusing the child*, even if they may have previously come to agencies' attention for other reasons.

diversity, our Communicating with Children Guide and the College of Policing's briefing note for first responders., for further information.

When talking to the parents, you should also be sensitive to the impact of their own experiences (of domestic abuse, for example, or being sexually abused themselves as a child). You will need to consider their communication needs, including the use of translators. There is advice about working effectively with translators in our Communication with Children Guide: appendix Three.

Avoid using **jargon or specialist language** when talking to the child or their family.

When recording your conversations with the child, write down the **exact words** they used rather than interpreting what they said or what you think they meant.

For more information, see our Communicating with Children Guide and our Supporting Parents and Carers Guide.

6. How can the Officer in the Case best help the child during the investigation?

There are several things that you can do to make sure that the child's needs remain central while the criminal investigation is continuing.

Provide continuity

Ideally, you will be the officer communicating with the child throughout the investigation. If you have to stop being involved in the investigation, either temporarily or permanently, ensure that the incoming officer is fully briefed so that the child does not have to give details of the abuse again and again. Where possible, explain the reasons for the handover to the child and their family, and introduce the incoming officer to them.

Act sensitively and appropriately

Be sensitive to the child's feelings about other people finding out what has happened to them: make sure that the investigation is conducted in a way that will protect the child's **confidentiality** as much as possible. For example:

- Avoid police visits to their home or school, or taking the child out of school.
- If home or school visits are unavoidable, plan how to make the visit as discreet as possible, using an unmarked vehicle with radios on silent or with the volume turned down; officers should be in plain clothes or have their uniforms covered up. This will help make your visit less obvious to others as well as less frightening for the child.

Provide **regular updates** – even if only to say that nothing has progressed – to the child, their family and other professionals closely involved with them. Ensure they have realistic expectations of the time that police investigations and prosecutions can take.

Liaise with children's social care and keep other professionals updated

Inform the **social worker** allocated to the child that you are the key point of contact for the criminal investigation. Regular liaison and sharing of information between the two of you will be critical to the investigation and to the child's welfare – especially if the multi-agency strategy discussion decides that a **joint enquiry** (a criminal investigation and a child protection enquiry) is needed.

Whenever *any* information emerges from the criminal investigation that affects the welfare of the child, ensure that you share it with children's social care and any other appropriate agencies. Ensure that children's social care and other agencies are aware of the importance of sharing information that could help with the police investigation.

There may be many **meetings** (such as child in need meetings or child protection conferences) to consider the needs and circumstances of the child and their family. You may also be asked to attend multidisciplinary meetings in the course of Family Court proceedings. All these meetings will need to be updated regularly about the progress of the criminal investigation.

7. Where next?

- A multi-agency strategy discussion is held.

Or return to the response pathway.

Sources of quotations

The quotations in this practice guide, from children who have received a criminal justice response after being sexually abused, illustrate how the child may be feeling at this point and how your actions can make a difference:

(1) Beckett, H. and Warrington, C. (2015) *Making Justice Work: Experiences of Criminal Justice for Children and Young People Affected by Sexual Exploitation as Victims and Witnesses*. Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

(2) Gasper, L., Noblet, E. and Kennedy, K. (2016) *Alternatives to High-cost and Secure Accommodation for Victims of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in Greater Manchester: The Child's Voice.* London: The Children's Society.

(3) Franklin, A., Raws, P, and Smeaton, E. (2015).*Unprotected, Overprotected: Meeting the Needs of Young People with Learning Disabilities Who Experience, or Are at Risk of, Sexual Exploitation*. Barkingside: Barnardo's.

Procedures to be followed in cases of child abuse are set out in the UK Government's statutory guidance for England, Working together to safeguard children 2026: statutory guidance, and in the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (2020). Authorised Professional Practice for police is outlined in the College of Policing's Investigating child abuse and safeguarding children (2022). The Ministry of Justice's Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings (updated 2023) is also relevant.

*This practice guide outlines specific considerations when there are concerns of child **sexual** abuse. It is underpinned by the above documents, and is not intended to repeat or replace them. It should be read alongside your local child protection procedures.*

This guide is part of our child sexual abuse response pathway, designed to ensure that professional responses to concerns about child sexual abuse meet the needs of children and their families. It aims to bring clarity to key response points, helping you keep the child's needs and perspectives central.