



# **CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (CSE)**

## **Guidance**

We aim for **Aberdeen City** to be the best place in Scotland to grow up and for every child in Aberdeen to enjoy being young and feel safe, healthy, active, nurtured, achieving, respected, responsible and included.

It is a tragedy for any child to be sexually exploited. CSE can rob a child of their childhood, self-esteem and opportunities for good health, education, and future employment and well-being. **Aberdeen City Council has a zero-tolerance approach to CSE.**

We want to:

- Increase awareness and improve understanding of CSE
- Support practitioners and the public to report CSE confidently
- Successfully disrupt CSE
- Increase the prosecution of offenders
- Support potential victims and survivors of CSE and prevent their further abuse

As part of this approach, Aberdeen City actively encourages everybody, whether acting as part of an agency or as an individual, to report and record any instance of CSE or suspected CSE.

We are aware that if this guidance is successful, we may see an increase in reported incidents of CSE in the short/medium term in Aberdeen City. We will continue to monitor this across the city.

Throughout this document a child or young person includes all those under 18 years of age. A 16- or 17-year-old is still a child for the purposes of considering whether they have been a victim of exploitation.



## What is Child Sexual Exploitation?

“Child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a form of child sexual abuse in which a person(s), of any age, take advantage of a power imbalance to force or entice a child into engaging in sexual activity in return for something received by the child and/or those perpetrating or facilitating the abuse. As with other forms of CSE, the presence of perceived consent does not undermine the abusive nature of the act.” (*Scottish National Action Plan*)

**GAIN FOR PERPETRATOR  
AND/OR PERCEIVED GAIN  
FOR THE CHILD  
+ SEXUAL ACTIVITY= CSE**

If a child is encourage, forced or enticed to take part in sexual activity (which includes the online sharing of indecent images, videos or live streamed activity online) by someone else (whether an adult or another child) there will always need to be consideration or whether there has been CSE.

In cases involving CSE, there will usually be a “perceived gain” for the child or young person who has been exploited or is at risk of exploitation – although this covers a huge range of circumstances. Gains might include the child having been given or offered money, drugs and alcohol, the latest tech, or a crumb of attention within a “relationship” or improved social status or perceived approval within a social group.

Importantly, the “perceived gain” can also often be the prevention of something negative, for example, if a child engages in sexual activity to stop someone carrying out a threat – to harm him/her/their self or his/her/their family; or sends an intimate image to try to prevent the sharing of images that have already been sent.

Because of the unequal power dynamic in which exploitation occurs – the normalised nature of the interaction, or the receipt of something by a child/young person of any age, may make the child feel that they are in control of a situation or are benefiting from it rather than being oppressed and injured by it.

**The child who has been exploited is always the victim in these circumstances.**

CSE can also take place where no gain for the child is identified. Where the gain is solely on the part of the perpetrator/facilitator, it must be something more than sexual gratification to constitute CSE rather than another form of sexual abuse.





**GAIN FOR PERPETRATOR AND/OR PERCEIVED GAIN  
FOR THE CHILD + SEXUAL ACTIVITY= CSE**



## Conditions enabling children and young people to share their experiences

### Staff

- Recognize signals of the need to tell
- Provide opportunity to tell: ask and provide a safe space to talk
- Give an accepting and caring response, especially when shame is experienced

### The child

Retains a feeling of choice and control of the process

- Recognises that the abuse is not “normal”
- Has access to someone trusted or perceived as safe/trustworthy
- Expects to be believed by parents and friends
- Believes that something can be done and that the benefits of telling outweigh the costs, especially in the face of threats from perpetrator

*P27 - National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021: Practice Insights 7*



## How to spot the signs:

Children and young people may have been taught to believe their experience is consensual, and struggle with feelings of loyalty and shame. They may have been taught to believe that they are in control of a situation. They may feel entirely trapped. They may feel that what is happening to them is commonplace. All of these factors increase/compound the likelihood of non-disclosure. All cases are at root typified by a power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the abuse and/or some form of vulnerability or limited availability of choice on the part of the young person. Each individual will have their own experience of “choice”.

Trauma can take many years to be understood, therefore a child who has been exploited may also never identify their experience as exploitation, or may need a great deal of support to understand truly what happened. If a child cannot identify an experience as exploitative, they will not tell us that it is exploitative,

so we have to be creative to develop environments where young people feel safe to share their experiences.

Children and young people who are being, or have been sexually exploited are reliant on adults to make the assessment and put support in place.

There is no absolute checklist by which practitioners can identify a child who has been subject to child sexual exploitation. We have to be very alert to how common this type of abuse is becoming and be questioning whether it may be occurring, or have previously occurred, in relation to every child or young person and situation we encounter.

For practitioners, it may often feel more reassuring to have a tool that supports identification of risk factors, however, with CSE it is near impossible to have a comprehensive list that captures everything that you might be looking for. So rather than having a list we would encourage all practitioners to build a picture of the child or young person's world which will help you see if there are concerns about CSE.



## Questions to ask:

How is the child presenting? Has there been a change? Are there any indicators of trauma? Is the child withdrawing or shutting down? Are there any other changes? Who is around the child? How well do you know what the child is doing? How are they spending their time online and offline? Where are they spending it? Who are they spending it with? What are they doing? We are returning at all times to the GIRFEC principles as we think about these questions.

Even an apparent change in confidence on the part of the child may present as an indicator of trauma. Frequently, early indicators include something that the child themselves sees as a positive change in their life (for example, gaining new “friends”/ possessions/money/devices can be an indicator of risk).

As individuals/workers we need to ensure we remain curious about the young people we are working with. This curiosity will ensure that we have a full picture of our children and

young people's lives and are therefore better able to meet their needs.

It is essential that for every child we undertake a robust assessment using GIRFEC principles and trauma informed approaches, to identify where a child's needs are not being met. This can give an indicator of how a perpetrator may have an opportunity to exploit a child.

We must identify exploitation and intervene at the earliest opportunity. It is very hard to reverse the impact of exploitation and this is compounded when a child has been exploited repeatedly. It is also very common for perpetrators of CSE to be targeting more than one individual in a social group and so early identification can be critical for other victims of the same perpetrator.

Certain behaviours amongst children and young people may increase their vulnerability to exploitation. We must raise awareness around disinhibited behaviour, emotional dysregulation and low self-worth/self-harming/self-sabotage as indicators of need.

Recent research from Barnardos and SCRA, has also particularly highlighted the impact of early exposure to age inappropriate material on vulnerability to CSE – exposure to adult sexual behaviour through social groups, behaviour of family members, online influences and materials including pornography – all having a direct relationship to risk of exploitation.

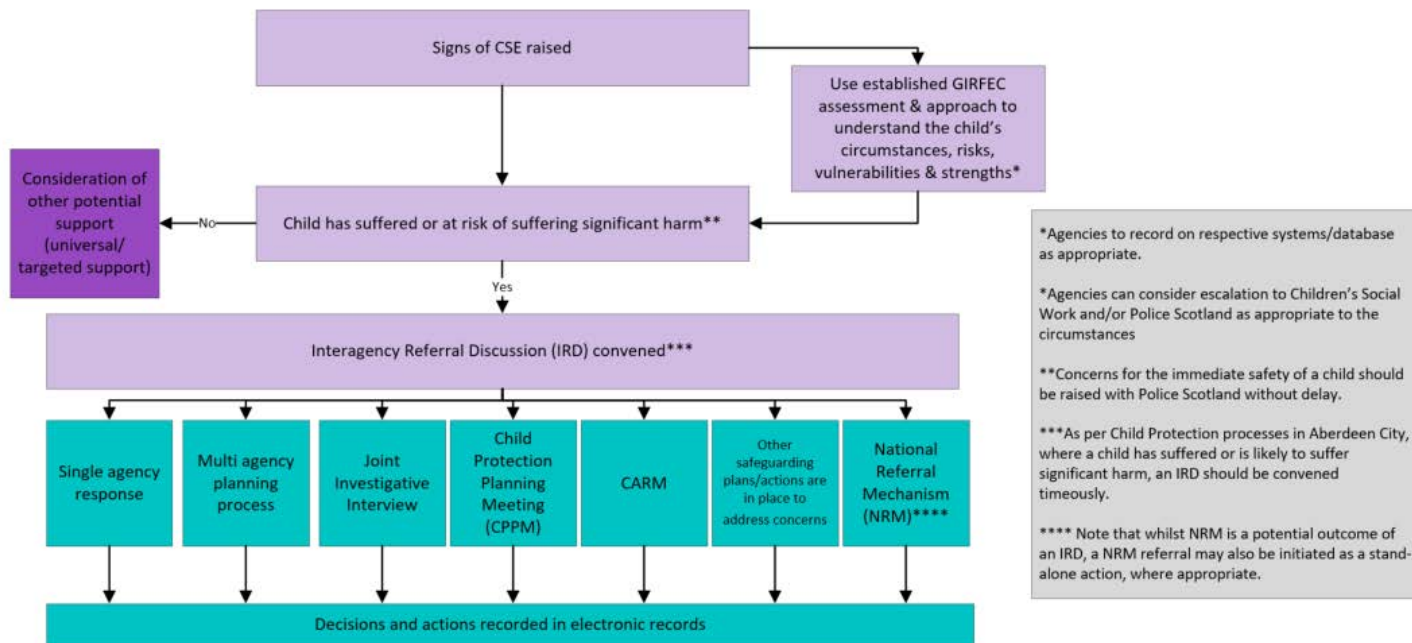
A rights-based approach to protection and recovery from sexual exploitation is fundamentally supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (*UNCRC*): and specifically, articles 19, 34, 35, 36 and 39. As reflected in Article 12 of the *UNCRC*, The Promise (*Independent Care Review 2020*) also expects that children should be “...meaningfully and appropriately involved” in all protective planning and decision making.

**National trauma training is available on NHS Scotland Turas page -**  
<https://turasdashboard.nes.nhs.scot/>



## Responding to the concerns of CSE

Fig 2. – Response flowchart





## Positive Multi Agency Working

Positive multi agency working is critical in talking CSE. All agencies and services have a role to play in disrupting and achieving the prosecution of those offenders who sexually exploit children and young people.

Inter-agency discussion and action planning is a necessary component of any intervention. When a concern is raised for a child or young person, a discussion, known as an Inter-Agency Referral Discussion (IRD), is the first step in a the process designed to bring various partner agencies together to address it. The purpose of an IRD is to:

1. Share information held by/with relevant agencies
2. To identify potential risks/safety measures
3. To make a decision (as a group) regarding what action(s) should be taken
4. Formulate a safety plan.

These discussions are held at the earliest opportunity and any decision made will be reviewed in light of new information. By working together on action and safety planning, the specialist skills held by Social Services, Health, Education and Police are brought together to keep our children and young people as safe as possible regardless of whether the subject(s) of concern have made a disclosure, or believe that they have been exploited or abused.

Inter-agency working and planning is a necessary component of any intervention. This must be constituted at the earliest opportunity and reviewed regularly throughout. It is essential in providing positive outcomes for children and young people involved in sexual exploitation.

Positive multi agency working maximises the specialist skills and expertise which many agencies, nationally and locally, have in protecting children across Scotland and in out area.



## The importance of contextual safeguarding around CSE

Contextual safeguarding is referenced in part 2B of the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 and is relevant to specific concerns about forms of abuse beyond the family, including child sexual and criminal exploitation. These areas of concern are outlined in Part 4 of the National Guidance.

The approach includes working to understand and intervene to safeguard, when there are harmful interactions between young people, their families, peers, schools, and neighbourhoods, including online.

When a system, service, team or practitioner adopts a Contextual Safeguarding approach they:

1. Target contexts (and social conditions) in which a young person is experiencing harm – for example, an app where they have been exploited or are at risk of being exploited, or an area of a city where they have been sexually assaulted by peers. As opposed to only working with the young person and their family to increase parental capacity.





2. Form and use partnership with individuals and organisations with a reach into extra-familial contexts – for example, those working in retail, parks and recreation housing, waste management services and education – in order to increase safety.
3. Measure impact contextually, to understand if the support offered is increasing safety in the places and spaces where harm occurred, and going beyond any single individual identified as being affected in that place at a given time.

Protection should not depend on disclosure. Disclosure of this form of abuse is rare. Children and young people are often not able to recognise the exploitative situations they are in, and/or may be threatened with violence if they were to disclose.

The incentives for young people not to tell can include a mix of fear, peer pressure, loss of material reward and recognition, emotional need and manipulation of relationships. They may be affected by other forms of abuse and neglect. Contextual Safeguarding here enabled support to still reach the children and young people in need.

## **This approach to safeguarding will have 2 levels in practice in Aberdeen.**

When we consider and record context carefully we do so at these 2 levels. The first considers and records the where and the why for that young person e.g., if a young person is sexually exploited via an online platform, the location where they have been abused is recorded on the referral in addition to their home address logged on the system.

When assessing that young person's needs, practitioners then use opportunities to map and understand the spaces (both online and offline) where that young person spends their time and how safe or unsafe they are in each space. This mapping informs each young person's plan e.g., travelling through a particular area to meet a worker or adjusting communication platforms to account for trauma and vulnerabilities.

In parallel to this first level, a second level must be considered, where practitioners identify, assess, and respond to the contexts in which abuse is occurring. e.g., Are there patterns of vulnerabilities and exploitation in the same spaces (online/offline) across their peer group?

- What are their group dynamics in these spaces? Who leads and follows? How are their peers behaving? Are there group behaviours which increase vulnerabilities? Where are the positive relationships in each space?
- Where is the guardianship capacity around the group? (parents/youth workers /teachers /members of the community with a caring investment in the group's needs)? How far does this guardianship capacity stretch to all areas? Are any elements of it missing from particular spaces (whether physical or online)?

- Does peer behaviour change depending on where they are (a particular physical location or particular online space).

These 2 levels can then help practitioners identify the partners needed to increase safety in schools, public places and peer groups, and to source collective and contextual solutions.



## Notes for key points of disclosure

### Children's Social Work

The eligibility criteria sets out the circumstances in which children and young people may be entitled to a service from Children's Social Work. The guide to tiered intervention including current eligibility criteria and the five tier model is available at [Eligibility-Criteria-for-Childrens-Services\\_1.pdf \(aberdeencity.gov.uk\)](#). Specialist social work services may be appropriate for children who require support within level 3 (targeted), and will certainly be appropriate for children within level 4 (specialist) or level 5 (acute).

Where the referral relates to a child or young person who is not already open to the social work service, the entry point to the social work service will be within the Intake Services, in the case of CSE being either the Joint Child Protection Team (JCPT), or the Reception Team (CRT).

The threshold for receiving a specialist social work service is consistent across all teams and Units

and therefore is the same in both the JCPT and the Reception team. The remit for the respective teams is divided with the JCPT focusing on referrals where a joint police/social work response is deemed likely, and the Reception Team on all other cases where a child care and protection concerns are indicated. As you may expect, there is fluidity between the two teams and anyone unsure about what the team to refer to, should speak with the duty social worker in either team to discuss further.

Where a child/family has previously been open to a social work unit or team within the previous 6 months, then in the spirit of offering consistency for children and families, the previous case holding unit/team may be best placed to pick up the new referral. A flexible child centred approach will be adopted across children's social work in line with best practice. Children's social work has particular duties and responsibilities in relation to young people who may have been or who may be at risk of sexual exploitation. These includes a duty and responsibility:

- To give paramount consideration to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of such children and young people.
- To inquire into the circumstances when information is received suggesting that the child or young person may be at risk of being subject to sexual abuse.
- To properly consider how best to intervene in the life of the child or young person and his or her family.
- To seek the views of the child or young person and take account of these.
- To inform and involve the parents/guardians/those caring for the children and young people.
- To refer a child or young person to the Reporter if he or she may be in need of compulsory measures of supervision



- To develop and implement, along with other agencies, a child protection plan for those young people deemed to be at risk of significant harm, to plan to include the references to how a sexually exploited young person should be helped to recover from sexual exploitation.
- To recognise that children and young people looked after away from home require advice on sexual health and to work with other agencies towards providing that.

The first priority will be the safety of the child. If assessed to be unsafe, appropriate interventions will be taken immediately. When the safety of the child has been considered and addressed, then a fuller assessment of the child's circumstances and the risks to the child will proceed.

Liaison with other agencies will be instigated at an early stage and arrangements will be made for the staff involved to maintain contact with each other throughout the joint investigations.

Staff will utilise the tools for working with CSE to progress their assessment. Following the initial inquiry phase of the work, where concerns regarding CSE are validated, the involved social worker will follow the flowchart on page 9. The planning process culminates in a Children's Social Work manager endorsing the action which is felt to be most appropriate and proportionate to safeguard the wellbeing of the child or young person. This is likely to be in the form of a child protection planning meeting, a care and risk management (CARM) meeting, or another appropriate multi agency planning forum. Such meetings will be arranged to share information, consider the circumstances, establish an intervention plan and to consider whether it is necessary to make a referral to the Reporter. Where the concerns relate to more than one child, and there is a need to share information and formulate a strategic plan of intervention and response, it may be most appropriate for a strategy meeting to be convened. Strategy meetings are deemed

appropriate where information relating to individual children requires to be explored together in order to understand the potential risk of harm to any or all of the children or young people.

By nature, strategy meetings do not involve the child or their family hence it may be necessary for these to be followed up by another forum such as a care and risk management meeting or a child protection case conference to be held for individual children and their families.





## Police Scotland

When Police Scotland receive information that a child or young person is being (or has been) abused or exploited the matter will be investigated. The information gathered will be assessed and where there is evidence of criminality the matter will be recorded. During the investigation, where there is sufficient evidence to do so the circumstances may be reported to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) and/or the Scottish Children's Reporter Authority (SCRA). As part of their inquiries Police Scotland will liaise with all relevant partner agencies.

## NHS Grampian

Children and young people for whom there are child protection concerns may come to the attention of a wide number of any health professionals. Specific CSE training to key staff groups and is available to all relevant NHS employees.

Following identification of concerns the child or young person will continue to receive appropriate health interventions. All professionals should follow forward reporting procedures. The Specialist CHILD Protection Team is available to advise and assist any health practitioner make a referral.



## Education

Education staff can respond in a variety of ways to the issue of children and young people involved in sexual exploitation. Most commonly this would be in terms of Prevention, Recognition, Referral and Post Referral.

**Prevention:** Each school has a strategy to support the health and wellbeing of its children and young people. This may include abuse prevention programmes as well as Personal and Social Education in the Health and Wellbeing Curriculum. Education staff can also provide intelligence and raise awareness among staff, children and young people, parents and carers.

**Recognition:** Daily contact with children and young people allows education staff to recognise concerning behaviours and respond. Every school has a trained Child Protection Coordinator who provides support/ advice to school staff. Children and Family Services provide guidance material linked to recognising signs & symptoms of Child Sexual Exploitation.







**Referral:** Concerns about a child or young person's involvement in sexual exploitation will be reported to the designated Child Protection Coordinator who will follow the Children and Family Services Child Protection and Safeguarding Guidance. For children who are not open cases to social work, this will involve liaising with the Children's Social Work Reception Team or the Joint Child Protection Team, to ascertain the best course of action for the child or young person involved. For children who are open cases to social work, the allocated worker may be the Lead Professional and concerns should be discussed with them directly.

Most children suspected of being involved in Child Sexual Exploitation will be of school age. Children and Family Services provide the Named Person service for these children. As Named Person (NP), education staff should be involved in IRDs and other multiagency planning meetings. Arrangements are in place during school holidays/closures for Quality Improvement Officers to support IRDs, in the absence of school staff.

**Post Referral:** Education should remain a priority for children and young people involved in sexual exploitation and education staff should be closely involved with any Child Protection Plan/Assessment.



**Contact Details:**

**Police Scotland - 101**

**Joint Child Protection Unit - 01224 306877**

**Emergency Out of Hours Social Work - 0800 731 5520**

**Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital Child Protection Team - 01224 551706**

