



Centre for excellence  
for Children's Care and Protection

# Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation 2024

Overview analysis to inform prevention and response  
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This short review and analysis was undertaken between the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024 and updated in October 2024. Due to the fast-moving and ever-change nature of the developments in this area, it provides a snapshot of what was known and understood at that time and is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the body of research and practice in this area.



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## Introduction

CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children’s Care and Protection, was asked by Scottish Government to provide an overview analysis of Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) including online abuse, excluding trafficking and child criminal exploitation to help inform planned national strategic developments within the Scottish Government on these issues. The summary is, therefore, an overview rather than a detailed analysis of the issues as that may be focus of further work. This paper concludes with identified key learning and suggestions for areas that may benefit from further exploration.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) and child sexual exploitation (CSE), sometimes referred to as child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE), including online abuse, are significant national and global problems that have a profound impact on survivors, families, and communities and present a considerable challenge to agencies in terms of prevention, recognition, response and supporting recovery.

Recent inquiries in England and Wales, Scotland and Australia, including the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales (2022), Report of the Independent Review of Child Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football (2021), the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (2014), have helped increase public awareness and consciousness of this type of abuse and helped to re-frame our understanding from the perspective of survivors.

This continues to influence and shape how we tackle CSA and CSE in all its forms. Despite the increase in knowledge and understanding, however, these inquiries have highlighted that the issue remains under-detected and under-reported, and survivors do not always get the response and recovery services they need.

In the intervening months since this analysis was written (April 2024) developments in this area have continued apace. Some small updates have been made to reflect this fast-evolving landscape. The updates are drawn in the main from grey literature that has been published in the past six months to October 2024.

## Legislation, policy and guidance, and practice development in Scotland

It has been a longstanding ambition of Scottish Government that every child in Scotland should grow up loved, safe and respected, so that they reach their full potential. Fundamental to this commitment is protecting children and young people and ensuring that each child is safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included. Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government, 2008, 2012,

2022) is the Scottish Government's key framework designed to support families to receive the right help, at the right time and from the right people and services.

GIRFEC places children and young people's wellbeing at the centre. It recognises that children and young people have different experiences in their lives and have the right to expect appropriate support from adults to enable them to grow, develop and reach their full potential. Incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) directly into Scottish law through the UNCRC Incorporation (Scotland) Act 2024 also helps realise this ambition.

While the broad ambition for children and young people is clear, there is a complex suite of legislation that sets out the duties of organisations to protect all children and young people<sup>1</sup> and in the circumstances when the state needs to intervene and support families for children and young people in need of care and protection. There is also corresponding legislation such as the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009, the Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005, and the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015, which are used to prosecute perpetrators of CSAE (see Appendix 1).

The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (Scottish Government 2021, updated 2023a) sets out the responsibilities and expectations of all who work with children, young people, their families and carers in Scotland and how agencies should work together with children, young people, parents, families and communities to protect children from abuse, harm, neglect and exploitation. The Scottish Government has also committed to keeping The Promise (Scottish Government, 2022), the report of the Independent Care Review which concluded that change is needed to strengthen Scotland's care system. The Promise advocated that the process of transformation should be built on the experiences, views and voices of children and young people.

Recent practice developments in Scotland include the national roll out of the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) (Scottish Government, 2023b), which aims to improve the trauma response of services to children interviewed to establish if a crime has been committed against them or others, and to assess risk and need and the development of Barnahus or the Bairns' Hoose approach (Mitchell, Lundy and Hill, 2023). This approach is designed to enable all children, who witness abuse or violence, or whose behaviour has caused significant harm or abuse, access to trauma informed recovery, support, and justice. These approaches are adding impetus to the drive to improve how children who have experienced abuse, including sexual offences, are responded to in a holistic and trauma-informed way.

It may also be useful in terms of horizon scanning to consider some of the current or forthcoming developments that may have implications requiring consideration when reading this analysis. For example, the development of a National Care Service and the

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<sup>1</sup> The Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011, Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, which updates the 1995 Act, and the Children Scotland Act (2020) (see Appendix 1 for relevant legislation and policy).

creation of the new National Social Work Agency will impact on how services respond to meeting the needs of children and families, particularly during any transitional phase, and the refresh of the Equally Safe policy will inform how services tackle gender-based violence and abuse. Lastly, implementation of the Online Safety Act (2023) will have implications on how services respond in relation to online offending.

While recent legislative, policy and practice developments are aimed at improving practice with, and providing greater protection, for children and young people, concerns have been expressed about the cluttered and potentially confusing landscape this has created (McTier et al., 2023). The volume of developments has presented challenges in terms of prioritisation and implementation of policy into practice in a climate where resources and the workforce are under increasing pressure and strain. Recent research has recorded that the children's services workforce in Scotland wants to see a reduction in the bureaucratic and administrative demands on them, to enable them to spend more of their time working directly with children, young people, their families and carers, and building relationships with other services (Ottaway et al., 2023).

## Definitions and language

It is important to acknowledge that there are challenges in defining child sexual abuse and, particularly, child sexual exploitation. Part of the challenge is how the definition of child sexual exploitation (CSE) relates to the broader definition of child sexual abuse (CSA). One distinguishing feature of CSE, is that many definitions emphasise some form of exchange for sexual behaviours. Another challenge is that definitions continue to evolve as knowledge and understanding increases. There are also a range of descriptions about the activities of perpetrators, including those who source, download or distribute child abuse images or videos online, those who produce child abuse images or solicit sexual contact with children both online and offline (Garrington, 2018).

Definitions and language also need careful consideration to reduce victim-blaming and maximise victim engagement (Alderson and Ireland, 2020). Using 'perpetrator' and 'victim' to describe children abused by or abusing other children can be problematic. Some children and young people prefer 'victim' to demonstrate the extent of harm whereas others prefer 'survivor' to describe their recovery. Often children who display harmful sexual behaviour or harm others have been victims of abuse themselves and may also be below the age of criminal responsibility (Children's Commissioner for England, 2023). There may be similar concerns about how language is used to describe an 'older boyfriend' or a young person's 'risky behaviour and lifestyles', for example, which can serve to normalise what may be an exploitative context.

The definition of a child is also challenging for practice within Scotland; while the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN General Assembly, 1989) and the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland ('the Guidance') (Scottish Government, 2023a) consider a child in need of protection up to the age of 18, the legal

boundaries of childhood and adulthood range between 16-18 years old across different legislation within Scotland.

For the purposes of this summary analysis report, the definitions of CSA and CSE are those set out within the Guidance (Scottish Government, 2023a). At different times, however, this summary analysis report might refer to CSA, or CSE, or both to reflect the focus and discussion within the publications reviewed.

## Child sexual abuse

The Guidance defines child sexual abuse as:

“..an act that involves a child under 16 years of age in any activity for the sexual gratification of another person, whether or not it is claimed that the child either consented or assented. Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening.”

(Scottish Government, 2023a: 13)

This can include familial abuse including sibling abuse, peer-to-peer abuse and both contact and non-contact abuse.

## Child sexual exploitation

The Guidance defines child sexual exploitation as a form of child sexual abuse:

“It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a person under 18 into sexual activity in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact. It can also occur through the use of technology. Children who are trafficked across borders or within the UK may be at particular risk of sexual abuse.”

(Scottish Government, 2023a: 13)

The Guidance also describes the element of exchange as the ‘distinguishing factor’ in various forms of CSE (2023a: 186). The exchange may be material or emotional, including food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol or cigarettes, or even a sense of belonging may be provided in exchange for sexual exploitative harm. It may take the form of compliance with sexual activity to avert other harm to self or others, however, is not transactional given the power differential inherent to abuse. Anything gained in this exchange does not make children and young people any less of a victim of abuse, whether the young person believes that they are being abused or not (Laird, Klettke and Hallford, 2023).

## Online harm

The Guidance is less specific in defining online abuse, technologically assisted sexual abuse or exploitation. The increasing access to the internet through greater availability of computers, tablets, smart mobile phones, and the constant developments in technology such as Artificial Intelligence makes it difficult to define. The Guidance distinguishes, however, between indecent images and internet-enabled sexual offending by adults<sup>2</sup> and child protection in the digital environment/online safety. Protecting children from online harm is a significant challenge in a fast-changing online environment where a sense of anonymity and disinhibition can escalate risks (Scottish Government, 2023a).

## Challenges with definitions

Shifting terminology can lead to different operational responses from public agencies and mean that risk remains under-recognised and under-reported. Differences in understanding and describing risk, little agreement for when the threshold for a protective response has been reached and different perspectives on the behaviours of perpetrators and victims can delay and impact on responses from practitioners and services. This lack of clarity can mean that children and young people being exploited are sometimes seen as engaging in 'a risky lifestyle choice' rather than being seen as victims of abuse and the response of services can leave children and young people in risky situations for longer (Mooney, 2021).

Furthermore, child sexual exploitation (CSE) may be associated with child criminal exploitation, but the latter is not defined in law (Scottish Government, 2023a). A final challenge after identification is how CSA and CSE are raised and recorded; for example, CSE can be recorded as CSA, criminal exploitation, or domestic abuse, making it harder to analyse (Mooney, 2021). This continues to be challenging for practice.

## Focussed mapping review and synthesis

As the timescales for this summary analysis were limited to three months, it was not possible to undertake a full systematic review. The decision was taken to adopt the pragmatic approach set out by Bradbury-Jones and colleagues (2017) of a Focused Mapping Review and Synthesis (FMRS). This form of review is distinct because it focuses on the overall approach to knowledge production rather than the state of the evidence and is concerned with the question 'what is happening in the field?' within a defined time period. While time-limited, this focussed review involved a systematic search strategy with identified search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria.

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<sup>2</sup> This includes possession, exchange and distribution of indecent images of and/or with children (IIOC); production of IIOC; sexual solicitation (online interaction with minors for sexual purposes); non-consensual sharing of sexual images; and conspiracy crimes such as working with others to distribute IIOC or to solicit children.



The aim of this focussed mapping review is to provide an overview of what is known currently about child sexual abuse (CSA) and child sexual exploitation (CSE) and identify key messages from research and practice. The overview draws on recent research, practice guidance and inquiry reports across the UK and internationally to understand the extent of both CSA and CSE; reflect the voice and experiences of those who have experienced abuse; and identify challenges for those working in this area and key learning for policy and practice. Our review provides an opportunity to consider recent developments and innovations, and the potential gaps that require increased focus and further exploration within the Scottish context.

Publications were identified through three routes. The first was a series of searches through peer-reviewed journals and research databases. The second route was sourcing grey literature (that is literature outside traditional academic publishing) through the websites of specialist practice organisations and public bodies, as well as through contact with organisations and academics in Scotland working in the sector. The final route was identifying key publications through discussion with colleagues at CELCIS with relevant practice experience. Unusually, several important reports were published during the time that the mapping review was underway and, decisions were taken about which publications to include. These two routes identified 'grey literature' such as data reports, research briefings, summaries of evaluations and descriptive practice developments. The report has been further updated to reflect the most recent publications of grey literature during the intervening six-month period between April and October 2024.

## Limitations

It is important to note that much of the peer-reviewed publications we looked at were literature reviews or extensive secondary statistical analyses that brought together several studies. There were fewer articles reporting on primary research than had been anticipated, and those studies were often focused on exploring or evaluating treatment programmes in relation to offenders. The most up-to-date literature was found in the grey literature, perhaps highlighting the fast-changing nature of certain aspects of CSA and CSE, particularly online abuse.

At times, the literature reviewed itself lacked clarity and consistency about child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and/or child sexual abuse and exploitation definitions, with some studies highlighting this inconsistency and the implications this can have for recognition, recording and the response of services. There is added complexity when discussion extends to whether the behaviours are contact or non-contact (and how these are defined) and this is further complicated with the growth of online abuse.

## Key messages from the focussed mapping review

The literature examined for this review was wide-ranging, so the discussion which follows has been grouped into four broad themes:

- Current context
- Impact of CSAE on children and young people
- Organisational responses
- Approaches to prevention

Our report also identifies some of the gaps in knowledge identified within the publications we reviewed, as well as through our analysis, and considers potential implications for policy and practice implementation, future research or further exploration.

## Current context

Of the 19 publications, which informed the discussion in this section, seven studies were peer-reviewed articles of which two were empirical studies including a survey of 1,100 young people aged 11-16 years on their experiences of online harm. The remaining publications reported on literature review predominantly drawing on research from UK, Europe, North America and Canada and Australia. The other publications comprise five organisation research reports, four reports from inquiries in Scotland, England, Australia and Israel and one briefing. Global statistical data in relation to prevalence figures was drawn from the websites of Childlight Global Child Safety Institute and The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF).

From these we were able to build a picture of what is known about children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse and sexual exploitation, the characteristics of perpetrators, and what is known about the extent or prevalence of CSA and CSE, including online abuse and reported offences.

## Children and young people

There are several factors that may mean some children and young people are more at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation and these were clearly identified in the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA, 2022), including children and young people who have experienced prior abuse and neglect, are homeless, are misusing alcohol and drugs, have a disability, are in care, are out of education, have run away or gone missing from home or care, or are gang-associated.

In the evidence generated and considered by the IICSA, while both boys and girls were victims of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation (CSAE), a greater proportion were girls. However, the IICSA report authors cautioned that boys may be less likely to report sexual abuse in childhood (IICSA, 2022). The challenge in recognising the risks and seeing boys as victims of CSA was acutely demonstrated by both the Scottish Football Association Review (2021) and the Football Association (2021) inquiry into

historical allegations of child sexual abuse in football in Scotland and England respectively. A recent global systematic review covering 38 countries and involving just over 250,000 boys found that far greater numbers were experiencing child sexual exploitation than anticipated, but that this exploitation was not always recognised, and boys did not always receive the necessary support or intervention (Moss et al., 2023).

Many publications (Barnardo's, 2015; Taylor, Stalker and Stewart, 2016; IICSA, 2023; Parkinson and Steele, 2024) have also highlighted that deaf and disabled children, children with learning difficulties, and the neurodiverse population are more at risk of abuse and that perpetrators will often target them because the child's capacity to tell is undermined by language or communication difficulties.

Ali, Butt and Phillips (2021) interviewed 16 professionals working within the field of CSAE who identified that children from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are under-represented in official reporting of the use of services relating to child sexual abuse. They reflected that some children and young people might struggle to name their experience as abuse because of a lack of knowledge about sex and consent, families may fear how agencies will respond, and some communities may not report due to perspectives around 'honour' and shame.

Research has shown a range of factors involved, and it is likely there is a complex interplay with family circumstances, and a child or young person's networks and communities, but the under-reporting of these offences suggests we do not have a full understanding of the factors of all children and young people impacted and how this affects risk.

## **Characteristics of perpetrators**

While an individual child sexual offender profile does not exist, there are some traits or characteristics that may be more common in perpetrators. The presence of these traits does not mean, however, that someone is more likely to sexually abuse children or young people.

Perpetrators are overwhelmingly male (IICSA, 2023). Recent figures published by the National Police Chiefs in England and Wales (2024) identifies that reported CSAE is heavily gendered with males (82% of all CSAE perpetrators) predominantly abusing females (79% of victims). Sexual offending involving male victims is more common in offences involving indecent images and younger children.

A literature review (Mooney, 2021) of 23 studies looking at research on perpetrators involved in contact child sexual exploitation identified perpetrator characteristics which included experiences of depression or low self-esteem, struggles with loneliness, social anxiety, or poor social skills. Individuals often lacked empathy, had a fear of intimacy, and had few meaningful relationships with adults. They often had a history of being sexually abused as a child or having experienced other forms of abuse or neglect.

Although studies are more limited, there is a growing understanding of female child sexual offenders (Christensen, 2021). An extensive review of 86 studies and papers published in the UK, North America and Canada between 1998 to 2020 (Augarde and Rydon Grange, 2022) identified that female perpetrators were more likely to be in their 20s or early 30s, white, have few qualifications, had experienced childhood abuse, neglect and domestic abuse and tended to marry early in life, having intimate relationships characterised by conflict, violence, and abuse. Female perpetrators are characterised as struggling to form and maintain relationships and may be isolated from friends and the local community; likely to have mental health difficulties and may present with more generalised difficulties in self-esteem, greater insecurities, and poor coping skills (Australian Inquiry, 2017; Augarde and Rydon Grange, 2022).

A third literature review of 17 research studies on the profile of Internet Only (IO) offenders (Garrington 2018), which included two UK studies, established that IO offenders were more likely to be younger, Caucasian, educated for over ten years, employed and single (and perhaps living with parents). Further indicators were that they were less likely to use alcohol or other drugs, and increasingly likely to have a more extensive criminal history than detected. IO offenders also appear less likely to have been a victim of physical or sexual abuse and had higher levels of self-control. The author reflected that this creates significant challenges for detection (Garrington, 2018).

Of significant concern also is the high number of men in the UK accessing online child sexual abuse material. This has also been reported by the Internet Watch Foundation (2021) within mainstream media stating that “analysts investigated 361,000 reports, including tip offs from the public, of suspected criminal material. This is more than they dealt with in the entire first 15 years of their existence when, from 1996 to 2011 they assessed 335,558 reports.” They also reported that during the recent COVID-19 pandemic “eight million attempts to access child sexual abuse material online during the coronavirus lockdown have been made in the UK, with experts warning the figure could be even higher” (Internet Watch Foundation, 2020). The IWF’s most recent report from 2023 published in the past months shows an increase in reports to a figure of 392,665. 275,652 URLs (webpages) were confirmed as containing child sexual abuse imagery, having links to the imagery or advertising it (8% increase from 2022) (Internet Watch Foundation, 2024).

## **Prevalence of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation**

Precise prevalence data for CSA and CSE is difficult to establish and vary across countries and within research studies. It is likely that the numbers of cases reported, and data gathered, depends on how definitions are understood by practitioners and agencies identifying CSAE and how data is recorded and collected locally and nationally.

On the 31 July 2023, there were 2,094 children on the child protection register in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2024c). Concerns which feature child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation remain among the lowest figures within the data. Possible

reasons for low rates reported could be because some children and young people may disclose sexual abuse or exploitation after the point of registration and some practitioners may not always record sexual abuse or exploitation as an immediate risk or concern if the child is safe or the alleged perpetrator has been removed from their home.

In 2020, a review of the case files of 213 children held by Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA) and Barnardo's identified 44 cases where CSE was reported by services and 30 where SCRA assessed that a child was a likely victim of sexual exploitation. This represents about 35% of the SCRA case files under review and a significant increase on the CSE concerns identified at child protection case conferences.

Scottish Government's (2023d) recently published crime statistics for 2022-23 noted that the specific age of the victim in sexual crime cannot generally be determined from Police Scotland data, however 'many of the sexual crime codes used by the police to record crime are based on specific age groupings in line with the legislation'. Scottish Government notes that at least 37% of 14,602 sexual crimes recorded in 2022-23 by the police related to a victim under the age of 18. This proportion is similar to recent years. Police Scotland advise that they are currently reviewing what data can be analysed to gain a better understanding of CSAE. At this time Police Scotland is in the process of embedding a new crime recording system, which will operate nationwide, it is hoped that this will assist with this process in due course. A recent article in the Herald (Stewart, 9 January 2024), however, reported on sexual offences figures sourced from Police Scotland by the NSPCC through a freedom of information request. This showed that 5,557 sexual offences against under-16s were recorded in 2022/23.

Scottish Government also reported increases in the volume of sexual crimes that featured cyber-crime rising from 1,100 in 2013-14 to 3,830 in 2022-23 with cyber-crimes accounted for an estimated 26% of Sexual crimes in 2022-2. (Scottish Government 2023d).

The National Police Chiefs Council in England and Wales<sup>3</sup> reported in January 2024 that there were around 107,000 sexual offences against children and young people under 16 reported in 2022 – a 7.6% increase compared with 2021 and nearly quadruple what it was ten years ago. The report's authors suggest many crimes remain unreported due to factors such as the control exerted by a perpetrator to silence a victim, whether victims can identify abuse or their abuser, whether warning signs are identified, and if appropriate action is taken. Around 75% of CSAE offences related to sexual offences committed directly against children, and around 25% relate to online offences of Indecent Images of Children. The crime types regarding CSAE are changing. For example, historically Child-on-Child Abuse accounted for around one third of offences. The data in the report suggests that this is now just over half.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://news.npcc.police.uk/releases/vkpp-launch-national-analysis-of-police-recorded-child-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation-csae-crimes-report-2022crimes-report-2022>

More worryingly, Garrington's literature review (2018) indicated that of those convicted of internet only offences, just over half reported prior contact offence/s but those had not been detected by authorities. Recently, the Childlight Global Child Safety Institute, based at the University of Edinburgh, (2023) reported findings from a survey of men in the UK (1,473), Australia (1,945), and the US (1,506) asking about their online behaviour including sexual offending against children. Of those who reported sexual offending behaviours, they said that they were 2-3 times more likely to seek sexual contact with children between the ages of 10-12 if they were certain no-one would find out. Childlight states:

"The findings from this survey suggest that a significant proportion of the adult male population in Australia, UK and the USA may have engaged in at least one online offending behaviour against children including knowingly and deliberately viewing what is known as 'child sexual abuse material' or sexually explicit videos and images of children under the age of 18, paying for this content, flirting or having sexual conversations online with children and/or engaging in sexually explicit webcam interactions with children under the age of 18."

(Childlight, [2023a](#))

Under-reporting and recognition are not unique to Scotland. A recent media statement from the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse (Feb 2024) highlighted that as child protection plans in England record one reason only for registration purposes, child sexual abuse may not be recorded if it is not deemed to be the primary reason for the plan or was not known about at the point of registration. It is also thought that children's sexual abuse may be undetected because 'sexual abuse may at times become 'lost' in a complex picture of wider abuse, neglect and other adverse childhood experiences that often accompany sexual abuse.' (Wales and Love, 2017: 6). These authors suggest that the workforces working to support children and families lacks confidence in dealing with CSA or in raising concerns where abuse is suspected.

There is a similar pattern seen internationally. The Childlight Global Child Safety Institute has explored international data to improve understanding of the prevalence and nature of child sexual exploitation and abuse. From self-reported surveys of adolescents (aged 13-17) in 17 countries across Europe, Africa and Latin America, they found that:

"Lifetime child sexual abuse prevalence is on average very high in this sample of countries: 17.2% for women and 8.2% for men (as reported retrospectively by persons 18 to 24 years old)"

(Childlight, [2024b](#))

For about half, this had occurred before the age of 13 (47%: girls; 53%: boys) and between 60-70% of had occurred within private dwellings, for example, the home of the child, perpetrator, or someone else's home. Their findings also suggest that this abuse often occurs in the context of other harms, for example, physical and emotional harm.

The prevalence rates identified by Childlight echoes an earlier meta-analysis of 217 publications which looked at a total sample of nearly ten million participants from North and South America, Asia, Europe, Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

This study found the overall estimated prevalence rate for CSA to be 12.7% (7.6% among boys; and 18% among girls) (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015:37). The authors reported a vast gap between the combined prevalence rates of informant studies (usually reports by practitioners working within child protection systems) and studies using self-report measures of child abuse from victims/survivors, suggesting that reports by practitioners “capture only part of the proverbial iceberg compared to self-report studies.” (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015:45).

## Online abuse

While we have acknowledged that child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation (CSAE) has been a longstanding challenge for both protection and law enforcement agencies, the additional layers of challenge presented by ‘technology assisted CSAE’ and online Child Sexual Abuse Materials (CSAM) has significantly changed the risk, prevalence and nature of abuse, even in the past five years. This presents a much greater problem of detection and disruption (Internet Watch Foundation, 2021; NSPCC, 2024a, 2024b).

A recent evidence review by the NSPCC (2023a; 2023b) comprehensively examined both academic and grey literature focusing on online safety and harm related to CSAE. The review identified learning as well as gaps in research in the UK and internationally, and helpfully analysed and refined specific types of CSAE-related online harm.

The evidence review distinguishes between four different categories of online sexual harm or victimisation:

- peer-to-peer online sexual harm (OSH) as sexual harassment by peers,
- peer-to-peer intimate image abuse,
- technology-assisted child sexual abuse (TA-CSA) by adults, and
- child sexual abuse material (CSAM), which can result from the actions of adults and peers.

However, the volume of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) evident from data collected highlights the likelihood that there are many undetected victims of sexual abuse and exploitation (NSPCC, 2023b).

The report notes that:

“...a sizeable minority of children – at least one in 20...have encountered sexual risks when they have been online.”

(NSPCC, 2023b:4)

The Internet Watch Foundation (2024a) removed a 'record-breaking amount of child sexual abuse imagery in 2023' and of significant concern is that children as young as 10 years of age were being groomed 'like never before'. Additionally, the same report highlighted that:

"92% of webpages it [Internet Watch Foundation] worked to remove in 2023 included "self-generated"<sup>4</sup> material extorted/coerced from children by predators by way of webcams or other devices (including category A material<sup>5</sup>)."

(Internet Watch Foundation, 2024a)

This raises immediate and future concerns about heightened online risks, including risks for very young children. Some of this is attributed to the actions of technology platforms and the challenges of the introduction of end-to-end encryption (E2EE), as well as the absence of active protective systems provided by technology companies. The report comments that:

"End-to-end encryption will mean Meta's current apparatus for detecting known child sexual abuse imagery will be rendered useless and the company will be unable to spot criminal material being spread through its channels."

(Internet Watch Foundation, 2024a)

The National Police Chiefs Council (2024) also identified that the number of recorded incidents of Online Sexual Abuse continues to grow and accounts for at least 32% of cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation. This highlights very significant challenges for systems working to prevent harm to children and young people and raises questions about the willingness, investment, and motivation of some technology providers to prioritise child protection over the privacy of individuals and this may be one of the many conversations that needs to form part of any national strategy. The role of the recently passed UK online safety legislation<sup>6</sup> in contributing to the protective response is also an ongoing topic of discussion which will need further exploration.

The speed and pace of technological development and the way in which technology is used to target and access children and young people through certain platforms is an added hurdle to the capacity of policy, practice and research to keep pace with the growing concern about online abuse. As stated earlier, the implementation of the new Online Safety Act (2023) in the UK will be critical in helping to address some of these developing concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> There is debate within the published literature about the terminology used but the meaning behind the term 'self-generated' infers images that the child or young person has taken of themselves (whether voluntarily or through coercion). This term has been replaced in some literature by 'first person produced' imagery (NSPCC 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Category A material indicates that the images, actions or behaviour within the material is of the highest level of concern about harm perpetrated against children including, for example, penetration, torture or bestiality.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/50/contents>



## The role of online pornography

An online survey of 1,001 young people aged 11-16 from across the UK on their experiences of pornography (Martellozzo et al., 2020) and an examination of 379 video transcripts of children who had been harmed or had harmed another child (Children's Commissioner for England, 2023) recognised that young people are curious about sex and sexual relationships and that this is an element of their development that needs support. The increased easy access to online adult material is a concern which the studies suggest may influence young people in potentially adverse ways, put them at additional risk of harm, and may have longer term implications for how they navigate future relationships in adult life.

There are particular concerns about the impact on very young children who are also exposed to, or indeed targeted by, pornographic content. The Children's Commissioner for England report highlights where this may be a deliberate attempt to draw very young children towards adult material:

“Recent research by the BBFC<sup>7</sup> found that children aged six to 12 are disproportionately exposed to pornography sites hosting non-photographic pornographic content featuring cartoons likely to appeal to children.”

(Children's Commissioner for England, 2023:19)

This is not only a disturbing development, but strongly reinforces the need for age-appropriate education for children and young people responsive to their curiosity and what they need to know at appropriate stages in their development. It also suggests a strong need for parents and carers to be supported with guidance on keeping their children safe, both online and offline. Again, this reinforces the need for a confident well trained, competent, and supported multi-agency workforce. In a Scottish context, Wales and Love (2017: 6) note that “issues around staff confidence and skills in working with children who have experienced sexual abuse - or where abuse is suspected - were identified during discussions as affecting different professions. Training needs were identified for staff in different settings and at different stages in a child's potential journey following sexual abuse, including to support children's access to services and the identification of abuse.”

## Peer-to-peer abuse

Literature on peer-to-peer child sexual abuse notes the gaps in research on younger children and their experience of sexual harms. Disclosure of harm in this context is often minimised by practitioners responding to this, where disclosure can be seen - or misunderstood - as part of reciprocal 'sexual play' and within the normal range of sexual healthy development. Practitioners struggle to identify abuse when this does not fit with

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<sup>7</sup> British Board of Film Classification (BBFC)

traditional 'perpetrator-victim' narratives. Given the rise in children having access to online pornography it is important to consider that further research is now needed into the impact this may have on pre-adolescent children and potential links to peer-to-peer sexual abuse (Tener and Katz, 2021).

Recent figures in England and Wales reported that 52% of all child sexual abuse and exploitation cases involved reports of children (aged 10 to 17) offending against other children, with 14 years being the most common age of those young people causing the harm. This is a growing and concerning trend involving a wide range of offending. Whilst some offences included exploratory online sexual behaviours, some of the most prevalent forms took the form of serious sexual assaults (25%), including rape (20%).

Raising awareness of peer-to-peer abuse for all practitioners working across organisations to understand is vital to ensure appropriate early intervention for both those causing harm and those who are being harmed. Tener and Katz refer to Eisikovits and Lev-Wiesel's 2016 epidemiological study which also suggests that there may be benefits to asking more direct questions to fully understand what has happened, thus supporting more disclosures of peer-to-peer sexual harm (Tener and Katz, 2021).

Given that the data from National Analysis of Police-Recorded Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation (CSAE) Crimes Report in England and Wales (NPCC 2024) increasingly indicates that sexual harm is perpetrated by children and young people, it is imperative that we have a grasp of the scale and nature of peer-to-peer sexual abuse in Scotland to ensure all children can access the right support.

Despite variations in definitions and in the prevalence studies, clearly the numbers of children and young people who have disclosed is the tip of an iceberg and that huge numbers of children and young people who experience both child sexual abuse and/or exploitation do not disclose. Without identification and disclosure, children and young people cannot be supported.

## **Key learning about the current context, nature and prevalence of CSA and CSE:**

- There are challenges in defining CSA and CSE which impact on local and national responses and data collection. Global prevalence figures, however, are relatively consistent with almost half of victims experiencing child sexual abuse or exploitation by age 13.
- Under-recognition and under-reporting continue to be challenges for all organisations. This under recognition of abuse is particularly acute in the areas of disability, learning difficulty and children and young people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

- Given that the data indicates increasing rates of sexual harms being perpetrated by children and young people, it is imperative to understand the scale and nature of peer-to-peer sexual abuse in Scotland to ensure all children can access the right support.
- There are increasing challenges in the recognition and detection of perpetrators, particularly the role of women, and the detection of internet only offenders.
- The reported offending statistics highlight, however, that CSAE remains a gendered crime with the majority of perpetrators being male.
- The education needs of young people in terms of sex and sexual relationships needs support as increased access to online adult material may put them at additional risk of harm and may have implications for how they navigate future relationships in adult life.
- There are concerns about the impact on very young children who are also exposed to, or indeed targeted, in relation to pornographic materials.
- The speed of the continuously changing landscape of technologically assisted and online abuse presents a much greater problem of detection and disruption requiring national and international efforts.
- The role of the recently passed UK online safety legislation in contributing to the protective response is also an ongoing topic of discussion which will need further exploration.
- Of significant concern is the high number of men in the UK accessing online child sexual abuse material.

## **The impact of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation on children and young people**

The mapping review also explored literature on the impact of abuse and exploitation on children and young people and, particularly, the importance of being heard, approaches to disclosures and what this means for recovery. Listening, hearing and acknowledging the stories, experiences and views of children and young people is core to their own healing. These perspectives should inform policy and practice responses to abuse, trauma and violence, approaches to disclosure and the support need for recovery.

Twenty-five publications informed the discussion in this section. Thirteen publications were sourced through peer-reviewed journals including five empirical studies, three literature reviews or meta-analysis, and five discussion papers or commentaries. The remaining twelve documents included four organisation research or evaluation reports, three inquiry reports, two discussion papers, one evidence review, one practice guidance and one publication from the National Police Chiefs Council.

## The impact of child sexual abuse and exploitation

One of the discussion papers (Debelle and Powell, 2021), alongside an analysis of 29 forensic interviews of children and young people aged 8-14, who had experiences of sexual abuse (Katz and Field, 2022), identified that many children and young people report experiencing emotional distress including fear, anger, shock, sadness, shame, helplessness and self-blame as well as sustaining physical injuries and struggling with their mental health. Children and young people often feel a sense of shame for what happened to them. Feelings of shame are significant because these can impact on sense of self and capacity to place the responsibility for the abuse with the perpetrator, rather than with the child themselves (Finkelhor and Browne, 1986; Vera-Gray, 2023).

Some children and young people adopt less healthy coping mechanisms as a way of living with the impact of the abuse, including drug and alcohol use (IICSA, 2022; Katz and Field, 2022). Some also engage in self-harming behaviours and may consider suicide (Borg, Snowdon and Hodes, 2019; Debelle and Powell, 2021). Depression and anxiety are reported to often continue into adulthood impacting on many areas of personal lives, including health, education and relationships (Finkelhor and Browne, 1986).

## Importance of being heard

Common themes emerged in the literature reviewed reiterate and reinforce the importance of recognising the voices of survivors (Tamarit Sumalla and Hernández Hidalgo, 2018; Scott, 2023). This acknowledges and validates their experience of abuse and trauma and helps to inform and direct the supportive responses needed. It also informs our understanding about the effectiveness of services and interventions, potentially highlighting where changes are needed. Some survivors also refer to how powerful disclosure and voice is in the recovery from their experiences (Tamarit Sumalla and Hernández-Hidalgo, 2018).

A recent examination of 29 narratives from women who had experienced child sexual abuse, written for the independent public inquiry into CSA in Israel, highlighted the intensified impact on victims of CSAE when they are not heard or believed (Attrash-Najjar and Katz, 2023). This reiterated the messages in previous discussion papers about children's experiences (Borg, Snowdon and Hodes, 2019; Debelle and Powell 2021) and (IICSA, 2022; Independent Review of Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football, 2021). Further, the impact on some survivors is intensified when they do not feel they have experienced a sense of justice or when their experiences are not recognised or acknowledged, are minimised, or dismissed (Borg, Snowdon and Hodes, 2019; Debelle and Powell, 2021; Attrash-Najjar and Katz, 2023).

Despite the clear messages within the literature reviewed about the importance of being heard, the Independent Review of Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football (2021) raised issues around young players' concerns about disclosing CSA due to the authority and standing of perpetrators in Scottish football and a fear of not being believed:

“The themes of power and control have particular resonance with the issue of child sexual abuse and with wellbeing and protection of young people in general. This is particularly so in an organisational system dominated by men and a culture often immersed in hypermasculine concerns.”

(Independent Review of Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football, 2021)

A recently published inspection report (HMIC, 2024) into the Metropolitan Police’s handling of allegations of child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation demonstrates that ten years on from the Rotherham Inquiry into child sexual exploitation (Jay, 2014), the same problems persist: failure to recognise abuse; not listening to children and young people and blaming the victim; and that these issues are likely to be more widespread across institutions. It also highlighted that a culture still exists in some organisations where victims are routinely blamed for the harm experienced, compounding any real or perceived barriers to disclosure.

It is important to note that in relation to identification, recognition, and response to CSE, disclosure is not a pre-requisite. Multi-agency, contextual approaches which divert, disrupt and promote collective community responses can be fruitful. The emergence of contextual safeguarding approaches in recent years has been a key development in the work to tackle non familial abuse including CSE (Firmin, 2017).

Firmin describes contextual safeguarding as:

“...an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people’s experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships that young people form in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can feature violence and abuse. Parents and carers have little influence over these contexts and young people’s experiences of extra-familial abuse can undermine parent-child relationships.”

(Firmin 2017:3)

## Supporting disclosure

There is a growing evidence-base regarding best practice in interviewing children following disclosures of sexual abuse or exploitation which reinforces what is known about what supports disclosure and recovery. Attention is also needed on how to manage the tension of whether it is right to wait for a child to disclose, or whether adults need to be better at observation and listening. This includes sensitive routine enquiry carried out in a trauma-enhanced way by skilled professionals who provide safe spaces and places for children to seek support and protection. We know from the large-scale inquiries that

have captured people's lived experience that it can take many years for them to disclose, and this may be well into adulthood or even later life for many.

How and when an individual shares their story, or makes their disclosure about their experiences, can be greatly influenced by their current context and functioning which can help facilitate readiness. Disclosure and the ability to tell their story and how this is achieved can be significant in terms of their emotional or mental health and capacity to recover (Debelle and Powell, 2021; Carr, 2022). An attuned, trauma informed, well planned and reflective interview is more likely to improve the experience for children and the overall readiness of the child to tell their story (Carr, 2022).

"Disclosure often serves as an antidote to the silence, secrecy, and seclusion upon which perpetrators rely."

(Easton 2020:1)

While the use of screening tools, particularly in relation to CSE within the literature is mixed, Hanson and Wallis (2018) propose that practitioners screen for trauma to ensure children and young people access the right help at the right time in line with the Getting it Right for Every Child in Scotland:

"There is nevertheless a cogent argument for routine trauma screening across mental health and primary care practice settings as this offers the opportunity for children and families to access a professional with the knowledge, skills, expertise and resources to provide needed assistance."

(Hanson and Wallis, 2018: 1067)

In their commentary paper, Debelle and Powell (2021) identified what they see as a need for better listening skills among practitioners in all professions and services who come into contact with children. This involves recognising the spoken and unspoken indicators in a child who may be showing or telling us about their worries about CSAE, being alert to a child or young person's relationships with family and people close to them, and the young person's circumstances or environmental dynamics that may act to silence them. Debelle and Powell highlight the need for safe spaces and non-judgemental approaches which would support conversations with children who are ready to tell us what is happening to them:

"...questions did not need to be about sexual abuse per se but rather questions prompted by the young person's psychological distress."

(Debelle and Powell, 2021:1)

The Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) for joint investigative interviews in Scotland seeks to provide interviewers with the skills to attune to the needs of a child being interviewed, supporting the child to be as regulated as possible and minimise the risk of further traumatisation. This requires the interviewers to apply the trauma-informed

principles of safety, choice, collaboration, trust and empowerment to their planning and practice within the interview. This model was informed by the evidence about how best to support children and young people and is being rolled out across Scotland this year.

Again, it is essential to understand that each and every child is an individual and that their experiences, needs and responses to their experiences will differ. Accordingly, there cannot be a 'one size fits all' approach to disclosure. Differences, and different dynamics, have been noted in relation to male survivors (Easton, 2020; Tamarit Sumalla and Hernández-Hidalgo, 2018). Attending to time, space and place will be important to an individual's readiness to disclose (Easton, 2020). Men may find the process of disclosing abuse challenging due to traditional masculine norms, their own limited support and networks, confusion surrounding sexual orientation, difficulties in acknowledging and naming the abuse (Independent Review of Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football, 2021).

## **Recovery responses from child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation**

Disclosure of CSAE should lead to support for recovery. It is imperative that everyone working to support children and young people has increased awareness of CSAE and feels confident enough to respond effectively, including signposting to other services if appropriate. Many people do not disclose CSAE until adulthood, consequently not accessing the support they need until much later, with less opportunity to mitigate against potential long-term impact on their health and wellbeing. In line with Article 39 of the UNCRC, the right to recovery for children and young people who have experienced trauma, abuse, and exploitation, is key. Access to high quality support is critical to process this harmful experience and to seek meaning and understanding of individual wellbeing needs and recovery.

A concern for practitioners is that all agencies need to give CSAE the same priority for investigation and intervention. A small research study in Scotland with multi-agency practitioners (police, health, social work and child and adolescent mental health practitioners) was completed to augment the NSPCC Right to Recover (2017) study and found that the route for assessment and access to therapeutic support was widely believed to be via social work. Police, health staff and social workers shared anxiety that this was not being prioritised due to workload capacity or because the child, who had experienced sexual harm, was no longer felt to be at immediate risk of harm and did not require ongoing social work support (Wales and Love, 2017). Practitioners wanted to explore ways that offered a more consistent approach to responding to children and young people's emotional wellbeing needs in the context of CSAE.

In 2019, Del Campo and Fávero undertook an extensive literature review of 70 evaluation studies of the effectiveness of recovery programmes predominantly from North America and Canada. The authors suggested that ways should be found to equip practitioners and

professionals to be highly attuned to the possibility of children at risk of CSAE who are exhibiting distress and changes in behaviour at an early stage. They also suggest that a multi-layered prevention approach is needed at a societal level to raise awareness combined with school-based prevention programmes which consider children both as potential victims and those who may cause harm.

Once a child has disclosed about CSAE, they should have the right to access recovery support. We know the longer-term implications of unresolved harm from CSA, which may be mitigated, reduced or prevented with earlier help, available when a child or young person feels ready to be supported with this help:

“Children and families are likely to experience a diverse range of needs after maltreatment. These will vary according to a range of factors (including the nature of abuse, children’s circumstance and biography, and their wider family context). There is a clear need for all children who experience abuse and violence to be able to access timely, individually tailored support to address mental health and recovery needs.”

(Mitchell et al., 2023: 3)

A narrative literature review (Narang et al., 2019) of over 200 documents published between 1985 and 2018 on therapeutic interventions with child and adolescent survivors of CSA, identified that holistic approaches to treatment and recovery often combined trauma-based cognitive behavioural therapy, psychoeducation, play and creative therapies, meditation, and mindfulness with support from peers and mentoring frequently referenced. There was more limited evidence, however, to suggest which approaches were more effective.

Narang and colleagues reflected that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (TCBT) have been the subject of several evaluations, but that evidence of its effectiveness remains mixed. They concluded that the evidence of effectiveness of these approaches and models for CSA therapy with children and adolescents is inconclusive, contradictory and controversial and little was known about the effectiveness of briefer interventions compared with long-term therapies in order to ascertain appropriate length and duration of treatment.

In Scotland, Galloway and colleagues (2017) published an overview of recovery services for children and young people available in the West of Scotland and highlighted some concerns. There was no specialist assessment for children and young people who have experienced child sexual abuse, and the provision of recovery support for children and young people across Scotland was inconsistent. Services, often provided by the third sector, were subject to insecure short-term funding and there was greater demand than available capacity within services.

While there is no update on this report in Scotland, these findings have been reiterated in research in England and Wales carried out by the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual



Abuse of 168 services providing therapeutic or wellbeing focused support to victims or survivors of child sexual abuse (Parkinson and Steele, 2024).

One recent development in Scotland has been to establish Scotland's first Bairns' Hoose based on the Barnahus model, which was established in Iceland in 1998 as a response to child sexual abuse. The Bairns' Hoose in Scotland has been designed to offer holistic, child-centred support to those who have been victims or witness of abuse and to children under the age of criminal responsibility whose behaviour has caused harm. A recent evaluation by the University of Edinburgh on the first phase of implementation reflected that, without oversight of a child or young person's involvement with several services, their inter-related needs can be missed and opportunities for timely intervention may be lost (Mitchell et al., 2023). The report concludes:

"The hope is that implementation of the Bairns' Hoose model will go some way towards addressing these issues: helping children and their needs become more visible within the system; responding to them in a timely manner; ensuring recovery, safety and justice interventions are coordinated and that re-traumatisation is avoided."

(Mitchell et al., 2023: 32)

Moreover, the ambition for a highly skilled multi-agency team supporting children in a welcoming environment embodied in the Bairns' Hoose should improve national consistency and equity of support nationally and may lend itself to support recovery.

The NSPCC's *Letting the Future In* is a structured guide to therapeutic intervention with children affected by sexual abuse and has been implemented by 20 NSPCC teams across England, Wales and Northern Ireland since 2011. This intervention utilises an individualised approach with a combination of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and creative therapies such as interactive play, drama, art, and stories across 16 sessions. A large, randomised control trial evaluation (Carpenter et al., 2018) of 242 children (aged 6-16) measured the change in the proportion of children with clinical symptoms or significant difficulties, between assessment on referral and six-month research follow-up. These were measured using standardised instruments, the Trauma Symptoms Checklist or Trauma Symptoms Checklist for Young Children (TSCC/TSCYC).

The research found there was a statistically significant reduction in the emotional and psychological difficulties after the six-month period for those aged eight or over. For those aged under eight, there was no significant difference at six-months after the intervention, however, some improvements were noted at 12 months including improved mood, confidence, and being less withdrawn, a reduction in guilt and self-blame, reduced depression, anxiety and anger, improved sleep patterns and better understanding of appropriate sexual behaviour.

The research also explored the effectiveness of the carer support intervention as a secondary outcome of the evaluation. For carers, the four sessions of support tended to

be offered towards the end of the child's therapeutic intervention, close to six months. The researchers reflected that it was perhaps not surprising that there was no evidence of change in carer stress levels but noted at the 12-month mark there was some improvement. They acknowledged, however, that it could not be assumed that this was a result of the intervention rather than the passage of time (Carpenter et al., 2018).

The importance of a safe adult carer was a theme identified by Bryce and colleagues (2023) in their evidence review looking at online harm and risk. The support for the child or young person of a safe adult carer who was fully invested in helping them recover was fundamental to successful recovery. Adult carers also required support to process what has happened.

## **Key Learning about the impact of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation on children and young people**

- Greater recognition of the importance and power of disclosure and voice in children's recovery from their experiences of CSAE.
- It is important to note that in relation to identification, recognition, and response to CSE, disclosure is not a pre-requisite. Multi-agency, contextual safeguarding approaches which divert, disrupt and promote collective community responses can be fruitful.
- Institutional problems persist, failure to recognise abuse; not listening to children and young people and blaming the victim. These issues are likely to be more widespread than reported.
- The importance of sensitive routine enquiry carried out in a trauma-enhanced way by skilled professionals who can have sensitive conversations with children and to provide the safe spaces and places for children to seek support in relation to their wellbeing and protection. Increasing the skills and confidence of the multi-agency workforce to help them create safe spaces in which children can disclose and be protected.
- The use of CSE screening tools is not supported by the evidence, but some argue that practitioners screen for trauma to ensure children and young people access the right help at the right time, in line with GIRFEC (Getting it Right for Every Child).
- The right to recovery is key for children and young people who have experienced trauma, abuse and exploitation.

- Recovery support for children and young people is under-resourced, and inconsistent nationally across Scotland.
- The evidence on recovery is not clear regarding best practice. However, rights based, trauma-informed, individualised approaches show early promise and would benefit from further exploration.
- The reflection from those who contributed to the large-scale inquiries and the views gathered through research of individuals who have experienced abuse, suggest that longer term responsive and recovery supports for adults may be required.

## Organisational responses to child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

This mapping review identified some of the challenges for organisations working with CSAE and highlights the importance of the role of leadership, the need for a supported, confident and competent workforce, and effective multi-agency working.

Nine publications informed this section of the paper. The two publications sourced through peer-reviewed journal were both discussion papers. Publications also comprised two inquiry reports, one organisational research, one practice evaluation, government guidance, one briefing paper and one inspection report from His Majesty's Inspection of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Service in England.

### Role of leadership

At a national level, the need for committed recognition of the issues, robust data collection and well-led, responsive universal and protection services remain.

Recommendations from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales noted that these would be “reinforced by cabinet-level ministerial positions for children to provide senior leadership and increased priority within government.” (IICSA, 2022: 2).

The literature examined identified a clear need for leaders at both strategic and operational levels to commit to understand the nature, scale and root cause of this public health and protection issue to help develop confident, competent, responsive services that better serve children and their families. This includes the need for early intervention and support which addresses the wellbeing, welfare and protection of children and young people and it is clear services are finding it challenging to provide this. (HMIC, 2024).

Key to the development of effective service response is a set of consistent values and a culture supportive of listening to those affected by this type of trauma and understanding what is being communicated, either verbally or through behaviour:

“The public hearing identified several important dimensions to good leadership practice. These included embedding child-centred values, making child protection everyone’s responsibility, creating strong governance and clear individual accountability, providing a visible role model of listening to children and involving them, ensuring diverse and inclusive practice, creating a ‘speak up’ culture, gathering good data and making best use of it, and learning from institutional failure.”

(IICSA, 2022:14)

This has been similarly recognised elsewhere: a “culture of leadership through example also forms an important backdrop to progressing the protection of young people” (The Report of the Independent Review of Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football, 2021).

It is perhaps worth acknowledging that this is reinforced in recent findings from the Children's Services Reform Research study undertaken by CELCIS (Ottaway et al., 2023) which highlighted the complex and challenging role for leaders in managing increasing demands across services against reduced resources or workforce shortages in Scotland.

## **Workforce**

Children should not be responsible for identifying CSAE; many very young children will not have the language and will not comprehend the concept of abuse. Older children may also perceive what is happening as something other than abuse and exploitation. It needs a highly skilled and supported workforce able to work alongside children and young people to prevent and stop abuse and exploitation.

Borg and colleagues (2019) conclude that services need to be responsive and child centred, requiring skilled practitioners with strong interpersonal and communication skills. This raises consideration around how we develop workforce awareness, knowledge and skills, so that they are confident in how to approach these conversations with children or their family.

It is also essential to recognise and understand the potential immediate and longer-term implications of abusive experiences, not just for the individual in the here and now, but also their potential needs for support and services over a longer period. A trauma-informed and skilled workforce will be an essential component in this; for example, utilising the NHS Education for Scotland Transforming Psychological Trauma Knowledge and Skills Framework. Given the increased reporting of peer-to-peer abuse in police statistics, the importance of raising awareness of peer-to-peer abuse for all practitioners

working across organisations is vital to ensure appropriate early intervention for both those causing the harm and those being harmed.

Studies (Borg et al., 2019; Debelle and Powell, 2021) strongly support early identification, early help (a key principle of GIRFEC) and a multi-agency approach across partner agencies. This suggests a strong need also for collaborative knowledge and skill development across relevant multi-agency workforces. Against a backdrop of a workforce that is currently under pressure, exhausted and often feels a disconnect between national policy makers, civil servants, local leaders, managers and frontline practitioners (Ottaway et al., 2023), achieving this is particularly challenging in Scotland's current context.

## Multi-agency working

Coy, Sharp-Jeffs and Kelly (2017) reflected that while an integrated approach to sexual exploitation through multi-agency working is recognised, supporting young people who have been sexually exploited and disrupting perpetrators are complex processes that require appropriate interventions from a range of stakeholders. Multi-agency approaches are essential and enable organisations to contribute their specific role whilst also developing shared actions to protect young people and pro-actively investigate abusers.

In some areas, specialist sexual exploitation workers are co-located in statutory settings, for example, with police forces, children's services and youth offending teams. The location is significant: police stations and medical settings may have negative associations for children and young people. Buildings should therefore be chosen where young people are able to feel at ease, do not feel that they have done something wrong, and not subject to stigma or scrutiny.

Sexual exploitation does not stop at age 18, and services for adults in the sex industry and violence against women sector are key partners. A wide range of support and work can be covered by multi-agency approaches including identification of sexually exploited young people; prevention and early intervention; delivery of support; disruption of perpetrators; training and community awareness raising (Harris et al. 2015).

Whatever the precise set-up of the multi-agency or inter-agency arrangement, the key factor is co-ordination. In 2023, the UK Government published eight practice principles to support a more holistic response to child exploitation and extra-familial harm:

1. Putting children and young people first.
2. Recognising and challenging inequalities, exclusion and discrimination.
3. Respecting the voice, experience and expertise of children and young people.
4. Being strengths-based and relationship-based.

5. Recognising and responding to trauma.
6. Being curious, evidence-informed and knowledgeable.
7. Approaching parents and carers as partners, wherever possible.
8. Creating safer spaces and places for children and young people.

These principles are inter-dependent, and none can be considered in isolation from the others (HM Government, 2023).

## **Key learning for improving organisational responses to child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation:**

- CSA may at times become 'lost' in a complex picture of wider abuse, neglect and other adverse childhood experiences that often accompany sexual abuse.
- Services remain limited in the extent to which they can protect children from CSAE through proactive recognition and preventative action.
- There is a need to commit to understand the nature, scale and root cause of this public health and protection issue and to develop confident, competent, responsive services that better serve children and their families.
- It is important to listen to those affected by this type of trauma and hear their spoken and behavioural voices. This needs a highly skilled and supported workforce able to work alongside children and young people and a culture of leadership supportive of multi-agency working and partnerships.

## **What is known about approaches to prevention**

The literature explored in this section included 11 publications. The eight peer-reviewed articles reviewed included one empirical study, one service evaluation, four literature reviews and two discussion or exploratory papers. The three remaining publications were two organisational research reports and an inquiry report.

The literature described child sexual abuse and exploitation as a major public health matter and a children's rights issue which merits a significant public health response in terms of prevention (Cant et al., 2022). Prevention is needed at primary, secondary as well as tertiary levels, and successful approaches to the prevention of CSA require a whole system approach (Cant et al., 2022).

## Public health approach

While a public health approach was discussed in the literature in relation to CSAE, it was also identified that for these approaches to achieve success a pre-requisite is an open dialogue and discussion at a societal level of difficult topics in relation to sex, relationships, abuse and challenging the often secretive and hidden nature of sexual abuse and exploitation which has helped to maintain the silence, protect offenders and blame victims. While the large-scale public scandals and inquiries in the UK in the last decade were thought to have helped increase public consciousness, some authors felt that more was needed to develop “policies and legislation aimed at improving underlying social and environmental conditions, including cultural understanding of childhood, to prevent or reduce exposure to risk factors associated with adversity” (Cant et al., 2022 p.3). This would include efforts to tackle poverty, gendered and race-based inequalities and societal attitudes that support the prevailing conditions.

### Primary approaches to prevention

Developing an integrated public health approach to tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation represents an opportunity to incorporate a range of approaches to prevention, interventions and develop comprehensive prevention strategies at a local and national level. Developing integrated approaches to public services is complex, and an ad hoc approach will be of limited value (McTier et al., 2023). A public health approach would need to:

- be diverse to meet diverse need – one size does not fit all
- be integrated across programmes and services (to avoid silo working)
- be evidence-based – based on what works
- acknowledge impact that change will bring elsewhere in system
- provide services to address the substantial gaps in resources (resource intensive) (Cant et al., 2022); and
- be well evaluated to ascertain what works (Broadley and Goddard 2015)

There has been little evidence of countries developing integrated and evidence-based strategies to prevent individuals at risk of harming a child becoming actual or repeat offenders (Cant et al., 2022).

A first step in recognition of this might be to determine a proactive and preventative approach, through the provision of sound and effective sexual education, which reflects the principles of gender-based violence and healthy consensual relationships.

## Secondary approaches to prevention

Secondary preventative approaches need to target children, young people, parents and carers, for example, through school-based programmes for children and involving parents, such as the NSPCC Pants resource. Targeting adults who may be at risk of committing child sexual abuse offences is also required.

Some have argued that early identification of CSE through screening is paramount in preventing further sexual exploitation of vulnerable children and adolescents (Laird et al., 2020) and that effective screening tools could provide an opportunity to identify and intervene (Panlilio et al., 2019). Tools, however, would need to "*be brief and easily completed and scored*" to ensure routine use.

More recent discussion appears to have moved away from or cautioned against the use of such tools. The Welsh Government's national CSE guidance (2021) advises against their use and one study in England and Wales asserted that tools to assess the risk of CSE, which were developed based on practitioners' experience, had little evidential basis in their development, and little or no evaluation (Franklin, Brown and Brady, 2018). Additionally, how these are used in practice was unclear and this raised concerns about the use of such tools.

## School-based programmes

Specific preventative approaches targeting pupils at school are well established in certain countries - Australia and the USA notably - and there has been extensive research into the evaluation of these approaches.

One large-scale study looking at school-based programmes (Lu et al., 2023) reported that there was some merit in the effectiveness of these approaches, particularly with children over the age of eight. Developmentally, they appeared more receptive to the learning, which focused on scenario-based approaches involving safe and unsafe situations, safe and unsafe touch and children's rights. No UK-based studies of school-based programmes were included, however, and this may point to a lack of available school-based programmes.

Another longitudinal study looking at the implementation of a 'Safe Touches' programme in 718 classrooms across 58 school districts in a US state found evidence of knowledge retention up to 12 months following implementation of a school-based programme but the researchers were cautious in their reflections that it may have helped facilitate or encourage disclosure (Guastaferrero et al., 2023). The researchers commented that such programmes need to be part of a wider preventative and integrated strategy that also targets parents, perpetrators and other relevant parties as it cannot be the responsibility of children alone to keep themselves safe. They also argued that there was no evidence to suggest that in a real-life situation, education programmes alone will safeguard children from abuse.



One literature review (Rudolph et al., 2023) examined 24 evaluations across four decades of intervention programmes with parental involvement. However, this acknowledged that the limitations of programme design and evaluative methodology meant that evidence of effectiveness as a preventative measure was limited. A crucial limitation of these programmes is the lack of empirical evidence about which specific programme factors are genuinely protective and preventative. This pessimistic conclusion is balanced with the view that further research would be required to assess whether improved measures over the short term have a genuine preventative effect, which would require careful construction and evaluation of any proposed programmes. If such approaches were to be explored or developed, further consideration of what works would be required.

Another challenge identified in the literature reviewed was that being absent or missing from school is a factor associated with risk of CSE and so school-based programmes may not be the most viable approach for some older young people whom services may wish to support. Unwin and Jones (2021) evaluated a primary preventative service targeting female young people in England, many of whom had disengaged from formal education. The approach built on the recommendations from the Rotherham Inquiry (Jay, 2014). Locally based, therapeutic services that listen to young people's lived experience, was premised on relational-based counselling and art therapy focussed youth work, which was evaluated positively by participants. The coaching or mentoring approach which took account of lived experience and voice was viewed as empowering by the programme's participants. Findings from this small-scale study in one local area cannot be generalised, but a similar intervention with a more diverse group, evaluated over a longer period could provide useful learning.

While there is a lack of evidence that these programmes prevent future risk of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, they do create a culture of transparency about the issues concerned, offer a shared language and provide opportunities for those harmed to disclose, should they choose to (Del Campo and Fávero, 2019).

## **Support to prevent offending**

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation provides services to young people and adults who may be at risk of committing child sexual abuse offences. One of these projects our review identified was formerly known as *Stop It Now*. Early evaluations indicate some positive developments in supporting individuals to access support, challenging their thinking underlying the risk of committing CSAE (Brown et al., 2014).

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation also provides the *Get Help* website which is aimed at people who access child sexual abuse material and who are concerned about their sexual thoughts in relation to children, or who have committed an offence against a child (Bailey et al., 2018). These self-guided web-based therapeutic interventions consist of cognitive behavioural online modules with psychoeducation about online behaviour, as well as management strategies and worksheets. More recently, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation has piloted the use of a Chatbot tool in online pornography websites which is designed to

confront and redirect people searching for sexual images of children. Already the Chatbot has shown significant success in reducing searches for illegal material and directing users to the Stop It Now helpline and online self-help (Lucy Faithfull Foundation Sept 2024).

The final report of Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales (2022) made 20 recommendations to the UK Government. Among these recommendations is the mandatory reporting of concerns as a means of supporting a more preventative, proactive and responsive system and approach. The report notes that this option was welcomed by a significant number of survivors consulted for the Inquiry. In early 2024, the UK Government announced that it would introduce amendments to the Criminal Justice Bill to introduce mandatory reporting. The outcome of the government's consultation on mandatory reporting highlighted the potential benefits, and detailed potential impacts along with a view that reporting needs to be aligned with a fully integrated approach to prevention and safeguarding responses. The change of administration and the dissolution of Parliament in May means that the bill did not proceed. As of October 2024, it has not yet been announced whether or how the new UK Government will seek to introduce mandatory reporting through new legislation for England and Wales.

Cant and colleagues (2022) highlight that mandatory reporting could be a barrier to individuals accessing some services, such as The Lucy Faithfull Foundation (formerly known as) Stop It Now service. Although Stop It Now allows anonymity for those at risk of offending, mandatory reporting "may be an insurmountable barrier to accessing treatment were it to be available" (Cant et al., 2022).

Evaluations of different preventative approaches (Cant et al., 2022) are indicative of positive developments in this area of intervention, but further research is required. In a recent study, Finkelhor et al. (2023) suggested that it seems likely that it is the public health, primary and tertiary factors in combination, rather than any individual factor by itself, which has the greater likelihood of producing positive changes in behaviour.

## Tertiary approaches to prevention

### Interventions

While it was not the focus of this summary analysis to consider criminal justice interventions with offenders, several studies explored prevention approaches through intervention and initiatives directed at people who have already offended, and which seek to prevent recidivism.

One literature review published (Mooney, 2021) of 23 UK studies on perpetrators of contact sexual exploitation concluded that the information on CSE perpetrators is scarce, and there is limited data on effectiveness of different types of treatment regarding reoffending. While this focused on one group of offenders, the broader messages were

that offline and online perpetration were not 'clearly distinguishable', there was a rapid increase in online offending, interventions were rarely tested or evaluated, and there was high demand for under-resourced services.

Another approach examined was a review of how web-based interventions (WBIs) might be developed and implemented with individuals who feel at risk of committing or have committed sexual offences against children (Schroder et al., 2023). These included one to-one, self-guided and human-supported web-based interventions such as Troubled Desire and Help Wanted (self-guided) and Prevent It and @myTabu (human-supported). The researchers here concluded that the evidence was unclear in terms of what effects WBIs had on reducing risk factors or preventing reoffending, which components of the interventions were effective, and for whom they were effective (e.g., individuals who accessed child sexual abuse material, individuals who committed sexual offences against children, or individuals who are sexually interested in children), and whether these WBIs were cost-effective. This is a developing area that would benefit from further research.

## Key learning about approaches to prevention:

- Developing an integrated public health approach to tackling CSAE represents an opportunity to incorporate a range of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention interventions and develop comprehensive prevention strategies at a local and national level.
- The evidence for education-based preventative approaches is unclear but may merit further consideration and scoping within a Scottish context, particularly for children of aged eight and older. The role of educational approaches to help increase online safety is a developing one that would benefit from further scoping.
- While there is a lack of evidence that education programmes prevent future risk of CSAE the focus of the programme is directed at children and young people only, these programmes may begin to create a culture of transparency about the issues, offer a shared language and opportunities to disclose for those who have been harmed.
- Such programmes need to be part of a wider preventative and integrated strategy that also targets parents, children and young people out of education. It is not, and cannot be, the responsibility of children alone to keep themselves safe. Interventions also need to be targeted at perpetrators.
- A range of community-based therapeutic, relational, strengths-based approaches are needed for children and young people which work with lived experience, voice and building resilience.

- Initial evaluations of different web-based and online preventative approaches in the UK and internationally have indicated some positive developments, but much more research in this area is required.

## Implications of this overview for policy and practice in Scotland and areas of future research

### Implications for policy:

- The complexity of the policy and legislative landscape needs full consideration in strategic approaches to tackling CSAE.
- At a societal level, a gendered analysis of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation is critical in considering how to prevent CSAE; how this intersects with children's and adult's access to and use of adult content and pornography; and peer-to-peer sexual abuse.
- Disclosure alone will not prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation and the additional complex challenge presented by technology-assisted CSAE and online Child Sexual Abuse Materials (CSAM) is an ever-evolving landscape. This presents considerable obstacles to detection, prevention and intervention.
- A whole system integrated and strategic approach to prevention is needed.
- Recovery is under-resourced and there is inconsistent provision of services across Scotland.
- The role of the UK's Online Safety Act 2023 in contributing to the protective response is also an ongoing topic of discussion which needs further exploration.
- There continues to be challenges in data collection because of lack of recognition, under-reporting and differential understandings of definitions in relation to CSAE. Gathering data sensitively and in a trauma-informed way is an important additional and continuing challenge.

### Implications for practice:

- Practitioners work within complex systems. Recent research by CELCIS (McTier et al. 2023) highlighted the complex challenges of implementing integrated, multi-agency and whole system responses within children's services in Scotland and this is the context in which safeguarding in Scotland operates.

- It is imperative to raise awareness and understanding of the scale and nature of peer-to-peer sexual abuse in Scotland to ensure all children can access the right support.
- Greater awareness of the role and profile of female perpetrators, who may also be victims is required among practitioners, services and the public so that risk and abuse can be better identified, detected and prevented.
- The role of leadership at all levels within and across agencies in developing cultures supportive of their staff with trauma-informed services for children and families and effective preventative approaches is key to supporting change and improvements.
- The identification and disclosure of CSAE remains low with disclosure often not made until adulthood. There are challenges for children and young people disclosing due to the nature of this abuse and the complex reasons that make it difficult for children to disclose. It is important therefore to consider how we explore and extend opportunities for children and young people to disclose by creating space and trauma-informed enquiries rooted in a wellbeing approach in line with the principles of GIRFEC.
- Multi-agency services and frontline practitioners working with children, young people and families need to be attuned to the signs and indicators of abuse, and to the needs of children and young people, to help to better recognise risk, harm and abuse and respond. This includes male victims and their specific needs.
- While evidence for preventative education programmes is inconclusive, these may support increasing knowledge and awareness for children, young people, families and communities.
- Responding effectively to CSAE requires a well-trained, supported confident and trauma-informed workforce at all levels who are clear about their duties and responsibilities, sensitive to the complexities of this area of practice.
- Services need to provide an open door for children to be heard and practitioners need to be able to listen.
- Effective new approaches need to be supported and sustained. The context of the cost-of-living crisis, and recruitment and retention issues within public services across Scotland, are a considerable challenge to this.

## Implications for research:

- The evidence for the effectiveness of recovery services is not clear regarding best practice. Rights-based, trauma-informed, individualised approaches show early promise, but this is an area that requires further research.
- Preventative approaches are largely piecemeal, siloed and not always well evaluated.
- While there are some positive indications about web-based interventions with perpetrators this is an area that would benefit from further research.
- There are gaps in the evidence base and the changing context of CSAE. In particular, online abuse and harm requires further detailed exploration.
- It is essential to continue to evaluate and learn from current best practice, new research and practice evaluations.

## Strengths and limitations of this review

This overview analysis highlights areas that have implications for potential further exploration and development that will inevitably have practice and fiscal implications for policy and service development if taken forward and any necessary changes are to be implemented. It was beyond the scope of the current report to explore these in any depth.

Our report has been limited to what was possible given the wide scope of the task within the timeframe available. This has necessitated an overview approach rather than detailed analysis of the issues and more limited discussion of some of the areas, nuances and complexities of practice. We have indicated which in our view would benefit from fuller exploration and deeper analysis and potential scoping within a Scottish context.

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## Approach to Focussed Mapping Review

As the timescales for the mapping review were limited to three months, it was not possible to undertake a full systematic review. The decision was taken to adopt the pragmatic approach set out by Bradbury-Jones and colleagues (2017) of a Focused Mapping Review and Synthesis (FMRS). This form of review is distinct because it focuses on the overall approach to knowledge production rather than the state of the evidence and is concerned with the question 'what is happening in the field?' within a defined time period. While time-limited, this focussed review involved a systematic search strategy with identified search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The main aim of this focussed mapping review was to provide an overview of what is known currently about child sexual abuse (CSA) and child sexual exploitation (CSE) including online abuse to help inform planned national strategic developments within the Scottish Government. The summary analysis is, therefore, an overview rather than a detailed analysis of the issues as that may be the focus of further work.

The overview draws on recent research, practice guidance and inquiry reports across the UK and internationally to:

- understand the extent of both CSA and CSE including online abuse;
- reflect the voice and experiences of those who have experienced abuse; and
- identify challenges for those working in this area; and
- identify learning and potential gaps for policy, practice and research.

Our review provides an opportunity to consider recent developments and innovations, and the potential gaps that require increased focus and further exploration within the Scottish context. This paper concludes with identified key learning and suggestions for areas that may benefit from further exploration.

Publications were identified through three routes. The first was a series of searches through peer-reviewed journals and research databases. The second route was sourcing grey literature (i.e. literature outwith traditional academic publishing) through the websites of specialist practice organisations and public bodies, as well as through contact with organisations and academics in Scotland working in the sector. The final route was identifying key publications through discussion with colleagues at CELCIS with relevant practice experience. Unusually, several important reports were published during the time that the mapping review was underway and decisions were taken about which publications to include.

### Search strategy

Two searches were undertaken relevant articles and publications:



- Search 1 for relevant peer-reviewed articles via relevant health, psychological, education and sociological database searches including MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Scopus and CINAHL.
- Search 2 for relevant grey literature (wider reports, reviews and commentaries) through media, practice and research briefings from academic and specialist practice institutions including the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, Childlight Global Child Safety Institute (University of Edinburgh) and NSPCC, contact with organisations and academics in Scotland working in the sector, and through discussion with colleagues at CELCIS.

### *Search 1: Identification of peer-reviewed literature*

The initial search was to identify available articles written in English, published within the past five years and available in full. The timescale of five years was agreed due to the tight timescales and because the technological change associated with child sexual abuse and exploitation is constantly evolving. Searches were undertaken using the same search terms exploring the literature for child sexual abuse and for child sexual exploitation.

### *Initial sift and data filter*

One reviewer assessed the titles and abstracts of articles in relation to child sexual abuse and whether to keep, discard or discuss. The second reviewer undertook the same activity in relation to child sexual exploitation literature. This initial sifts identified just over 2,000 peer-reviewed articles, practice summaries and reviews for possible inclusion. The review did not focus on trafficking or criminal exploitation so articles relevant to those issues were removed. Duplications and material with no direct relevance to the mapping review or focused on local or specific interventions too detailed to have a broader relevance were excluded at this stage before any further screening took place.

### *Data abstraction*

From this initial sift, a total of 111 peer-reviewed articles were identified as being eligible for the initial stage of filtering. Views about whether to keep, discard or discuss articles were recorded on individual data filter forms and as members of the team had undertaken individual searches, the team discussed all 111 data filter forms and decided collectively which articles to keep and which to discard. Fifty-two articles were then subject to a full appraisal, with 23 included in the final review. The reasons for excluding articles were that: some publications had the same author(s) and the detail of those articles duplicated overlapped, so decisions were taken to include the most relevant and up-to-date; and that though a more detailed examination of the research that, again,

some studies were too small or specific to have a broader relevance. Through discussions, the team also identified where there might be gaps in the evidence.

### *Search 2: Identification of grey literature*

Relevant grey literature of wider reports, reviews and commentaries was sourced through searches of government, academic and specialist practice websites such as the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, Childlight Global Child Safety Institute (University of Edinburgh) and NSPCC, contact with organisations and academics in Scotland working in the sector, and through discussion with colleagues at CELCIS with significant expertise in child sexual abuse. This identified a further 40 publications including eight empirical research studies undertaken by organisations such as the Centre for Expertise of CSA, NSPCC, Barnardo's and CELCIS. The team sourced a further seven research, discussion or exploratory papers in peer-reviewed journals through this route either because links were available on websites to peer-reviewed journals and through bibliographies. This material was included as it helped to address some of the gaps identified through the search of peer-reviewed journals. This was predominantly statistical and prevalence data, and on the changing understanding of online abuse.

As mentioned, several reports or articles were published during the review period, and the team took decisions about which to include. This included a further seven reports, articles and publications.

A total of 70 publications were included in this review.

### **Included articles and publications**

Of the 30 peer-reviewed articles, nine were from the UK; seven articles were from North America and Canada, eight from Australia and New Zealand, three from Europe; and three from the Middle East. Five articles concerned primary research studies and four had undertaken meta-analysis of secondary analysis of collected data. Nine were extensive literature reviews and most had adopted recognised methods for assessing quality and 12 were either evaluations, commentaries, or discussion papers.

Of the 33 grey literature publications and seven reports identified during the review, almost all were from the UK with only a few publications from North America and Canada, Europe and the Middle East. This included government publications and inquiry reports from UK, Australia and the Middle East.

### Key Legislation, Policy and Guidance Context

#### UNCRC

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation)(Scotland) Act 2024 relevant articles include 19, 34, 35 and 39.

#### Legislation defining certain offences against children

- Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009
- The Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005
- Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015
- Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 • Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Act 2019

#### Legislation on managing adults who may pose a risk to children

- Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010
- Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016

#### Legislation on criminal proceedings and witness supports

- Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995
- Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014
- Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Act 2019
- Forensic Medical Services (Victims of Sexual Offences) (Scotland) Act 2021

#### Additional relevant legislation

- Children (Scotland) Act 1995
- Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011
- Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014
- Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020

[Equally Safe](#) is Scotland's strategy to combat violence against women and girls, specifically, violence, abuse and exploitation was updated in December 2023. Evidence suggests that there are higher rates of prevalence of child sexual abuse and exploitation for girls.

Within Scotland, the distinctive rights based national approach and framework encompassing GIRFEC has been recently refreshed and provides a multi-agency response to address the needs of children and planned response to identified need. If a child protection response is required, this sits within the continuum of the health and wellbeing needs detailed within the national GIRFEC guidance.

### **About CELCIS**

CELCIS is a leading improvement and innovation centre in Scotland. We improve children's lives by supporting people and organisations to drive long-lasting change in the services they need, and the practices used by people responsible for their care.

### **For more information**

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