

# **Criminal Justice Committee**

**17th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday  
31 May 2023**

## **Tackling online child abuse, grooming and exploitation**

### **Note by the clerk**

#### **Introduction**

1. The Committee is to hold a roundtable evidence session on tackling online child abuse, grooming and exploitation on 31 May 2023.
2. The evidence session will focus on the measures being taken, and those necessary, to tackle online child sexual abuse, grooming and exploitation. This will include consideration of the measures included in the UK Online Safety Bill.

#### **Participants**

3. The Committee will hear from:
  - Stuart Allardyce, Director, Stop It Now! Scotland, Lucy Faithfull Foundation;
  - Alison Penman, senior manager at Dumfries and Galloway Council and depute chair of the Social Work Scotland Child Protection Group;
  - Detective Superintendent Martin MacLean, Head of National Child Abuse Investigation Unit, Specialist Crime Division, Police Scotland;
  - Wendy Hart, Deputy Director Threat Leadership Child Sexual Abuse, National Crime Agency;
  - Joanne Smith, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, NSPCC Scotland; and
  - Daljeet Dagon, Programme Manager, Barnardo's Scotland

#### **Format**

4. Members of the Committee and witnesses will be attending the meeting in person for this evidence session.

## **CJ/S6/23/17/2**

5. The Committee received written evidence in advance of the session, which can be accessed at Annex A.

**Clerks to the Committee  
May 2023**

# Annex A – written submissions

## Police Scotland

### 1. Purpose

To provide written evidence for the Scottish Parliament's Criminal Justice Committee Roundtable Evidence Session on Online Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation.

### 2. What is currently defined as online child sexual abuse?

Police Scotland adheres to the definition provided within the Scottish Government's National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021:

*“Online child abuse is any type of abuse that occurs in the digital environment and the internet, facilitated through technology and devices such as computers, tablets, mobile phones, gaming devices and other online-enabled devices.*

*Online abuse can include online bullying; emotional abuse and blackmail; sharing of indecent images; grooming behaviour; coercion and preparatory behaviour for abuse including radicalisation; child abuse and exploitation.”*

### 3. Police Scotland Overview - Scale of the Threat

Police Scotland remains committed to tackling Online Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation (OCSAE). OCSAE is part of the Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation Very High Operational Priority from the National Strategic Assessment 2020-2023. Tackling OCSAE links to the following of the Chief Constable's Strategic Outcomes:

- SO1: Threats to public safety & wellbeing are resolved by a responsive police service.
- SO2: The needs of local communities are addressed through effective service delivery.
- SO5: Police Scotland is sustainable, adaptable and prepared for future challenges.

Police Scotland continues to record sustained increases in Online Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation. In 2022/23 1,928 online child sexual abuse crimes were recorded in Scotland, an increase of 6.6% on the five year mean. (The 2021/2022 figure was 1,911 crimes and constituted an 11.3% increase on the 5 year mean.)

There continues to be sustained increases in OCSAE referrals originating from the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) routed into Police Scotland via the National Crime Agency (NCA) - a 500% increase from 2015 to 2022 (509 in 2015 to 3,054 in 2022). These do not account for the daily calls received from the public that also lead to OCSAE investigations.

In 2022/23 such NCMEC referrals generated 712 investigations, with 489 arrests and 782 children safeguarded. These investigations can vary hugely in complexity, some being comparatively straightforward whilst others are hugely complex with UK or international dynamics requiring protracted investigation across jurisdictions. Many can lead to real time child protection enquiries requiring urgent safeguarding.

#### **4. Key Messages**

Police Scotland is committed to being at the forefront of international good practice and developments in the OCSAE arena. It is committed to robustly tackling perpetrators but also to partnership working and a preventative approach. This is espoused locally through the work of the now well-established Multi-Agency Preventing OCSAE (MAOCSAE) Group and internationally through the work streams described later herein.

Police Scotland's previous submission detailed the success of its perpetrator-focused #GetHelpOrGetCaught online grooming campaign in signposting individuals to Stop It Now! Scotland's online Get Help! resources. Police Scotland remains committed to developing a further perpetrator focused, image based abuse campaign during 2023. Police Scotland continues to pro-actively support the campaigns of key partners through the work of the MAOCSAE group. This included the Child Protection Committees Scotland, March 2023 'Speak Up' campaign.

Police Scotland's [submission to the Committee in 2022](#) highlighted certain legislative gaps and work continues with Scottish Government and the Crown Office & Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) on the best way forward to address the matters raised.

Police Scotland is well engaged with both the Scottish and UK Governments on the Online Safety Bill and its provisions. Through MAOCSAE an excellent working relationship has been developed with Ofcom Scotland in anticipation of its new role under the Bill. There have been a number of presentations by both the Home Office and Ofcom Scotland at MAOCSAE to police and partners on the aims and provisions of the Bill and the responsibilities of Ofcom Scotland.

#### **5. Key Successes**

Police Scotland is committed to tackling OCSAE through preventative work and targeting perpetrators. It is engaged with strategic partners across Scotland, the UK and beyond to ensure we learn and are at the forefront of enforcement. Our Cyber Strategy seeks to exploit technology wherever possible to tackle criminality.

##### **UK and International Participation**

###### National Crime Agency

Police Scotland remains pro-actively engaged with the National Crime Agency (NCA) and its UK structures including its Strategic Governance Group and Pursue and Prevent Boards. A Police Scotland delegation recently visited NCA in London to meet with its Child Protection Advisor team. Discussions took place on how the

NCA can best engage with multi-agency Child Protection services across Scotland and the best pathways for sharing Child Protection concerns.

### Horizon-EU

Police Scotland is part of the Horizon-EU funded "[Prevent & Protect Through Support](#)" (2PS) project. This is a 22 strong international consortium of partners, funded for 3 years, to fight child sexual abuse, reduce the number of abused children and protect those at risk of exploitation. The consortium is made up of a number of EU law enforcement agencies, academia and other organisations.

### Childlight – Global Child Safety Institute

Police Scotland is actively engaged with [Childlight](#) with the Chief Constable speaking at its launch event at the University of Edinburgh in March 2023. Childlight aims to understand the prevalence, nature and scale of child sexual exploitation and abuse worldwide. Police Scotland is working to share data to inform Childlight's work.

### ISPCAN European International Congress 2023

Police Scotland will co-chair the upcoming conference being held on 24<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> September in Edinburgh this year. [ISPCAN](#) has also partnered with Childlight - Global Child Safety Institute. Planning for ISPCAN remains ongoing.

## **Operation Overview: pro-active approach**

In November 2022 Police Scotland approved Operation Overview to enhance its pro-active approach to tackling OCSAE, using specialist tactics online. The Operation enhances our ability to respond more efficiently and effectively to high harm OCSAE threats within Scotland, ultimately increasing our ability to protect children in Scotland.

Since the operation was launched, 17 males have been arrested and charged with various OCSAE offences, including grooming charges. 7 nominals have been identified in other jurisdictions, predominantly England and Wales, with evidential material provided to the pertinent Home Office police forces for progression.

## **Victim Identification and CAID**

Over the past two years Police Scotland has invested heavily in promoting and supporting its small but effective OCSAE Victim Identification (VID) team. These officers investigate to identify children in images recovered during investigations whose identity is unknown. It is vital to resolve these identities to ensure the welfare of the children and invoke child protection processes and ensure safeguarding. The number of investigations supported by the VID team has increased by over 300% in the past year and Victim Referrals into the NCA and CAID by over 100%.

Police Scotland's Digital Forensics team has significantly improved its compliance in terms of uploads to CAID and Police Scotland now features in the top 10 performing forces in the UK.

## Cybercrime Harm Prevention

Police Scotland's Partnerships, Prevention & Community Wellbeing (PPCW) Cybercrime Harm Prevention (CHP) Team has a multifaceted approach to educating young people about online abuse, grooming and exploitation. Where possible children and young people are addressed directly, however, work is also done with parents, schools, sports clubs service providers and various partners to reinforce messaging.

CHP is a member of MAOCSAE and national campaigns are also supported by disseminating alerts, resources and campaign materials via internal networks across local policing divisions and via an extensive external network of Web Ambassadors.

CHP is a key member of the Cyber Scotland Partnership, taking a leading role in the annual Cyber Scotland Week event, tailoring events to attract engagements from parents and schools.

CHP works with Police Scotland's Children & Young Persons team to increase the number of school liaison officers who access the Glow network. This has almost doubled to 142 nationally.

CHP has also partnered with the Children's Hearing Scotland national training leads to commence work on sessions for 22 divisional teams consisting of 3,000 panel members. These will focus on the realities of online experiences of young people, exploitation and online safety.

## Domestic Abuse Online Protection

Domestic Abuse can affect children and, as with adults, there is an increasing prevalence of an online element to Domestic Abuse. Police Scotland continues to work with [Safelives](#) and other key partners, to develop 6 Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training modules to build on the good work established by the Domestic Abuse Matters training and provide officers with a platform for continuous learning.

One of the CPD modules is "**The use of technology and social media in domestic abuse**". The training aims to provide an overview of how domestic abuse is perpetrated using technology/social media and to develop officers' knowledge of how to safely respond to technology enabled abuse. This includes specific online related safety advice and awareness raising of threats such as spyware.

A phased delivery and subsequent roll out of all modules will commence in June 2023

## **Multi-Agency Preventing OCSAE (MAOCSAE) Group**

The MAOCSAE group meets quarterly with a focus on new innovation, public safety awareness, as well as recognition of streamlining and mutually supporting media activity and campaigns.

Stop It Now! Scotland (SIN!) is a key MAOCSAE member driving the inception of a group to focus on the 'Indirect' victims of OCSAE – the partners and families of persons arrested and charged with OCSAE offences who endure enormous impact and strain but often lack support. Police Scotland continues to provide those arrested for OCSAE offences with SIN! literature which signposts to SIN!'s services.

Barnardo's and Police Scotland have worked collaboratively for a number of years to tackle OCSAE through the RISE (Reducing the Impact of Sexual Exploitation) Service. This seeks to support Police Scotland's operational child protection response by improving support to children under 18 who have been affected by Child Sexual Exploitation through the provision of additional specialist advice and consultation.

Police Scotland has strengthened relationships with Ofcom Scotland in anticipation of the new Online Safety Bill and Ofcom Scotland's enhanced regulatory role in the Bill. A memorandum of understanding has been developed to ensure clarity of process to allow Police Scotland to effectively recover any Child Sexual Abuse Material received by Ofcom in Scotland.

Given the prevalence of female victims in OCSAE offending Police Scotland recognises the importance of ensuring our VAWG (Violence Against Women & Girls) work is informed by our OCSAE work and there is integration where possible. As such the emerging trends and threats discussed at MAOCSAE can help make informed assessments and decisions regarding VAWG.

## **6. Gaps & Challenges**

### **Demand**

There can be little doubt that the sheer scale of the continued demand poses ongoing challenges. Police Scotland recognises that, in the current landscape, exploiting technology and working closely with partners, locally and internationally, as well as supporting academic research are all of vital importance in holistically tackling this threat.

### **Legislative Gaps**

Work continues with Scottish Government and COPFS on whether legislative reform is required or would be beneficial to address gaps or vulnerabilities in the existing legislative framework. The key areas of focus for Police Scotland are:

- s.52 Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982: Indecent Images of Children

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- Extreme Pornographic Material / Prohibited Images (CGI, cartoons etc.)
- Preparatory Acts & Collection of Relevant Information
- Child-like Sex-Dolls

### **7. Conclusion**

This submission is provided for information in advance of the Round Table session.



## Social Work Scotland

Social Work Scotland (SWS) is the professional body for social work leaders, collaborating closely with our partners to shape policy and practice, and improve the quality and experience of social services. We welcome this opportunity to comment on Tackling Online Child Abuse, Grooming and Exploitation.

### Definition of online child abuse

Social Work adhere to the definition in the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2021)<sup>1</sup>:

*Online child abuse is any type of abuse that occurs in the digital environment and the internet, facilitated through technology and devices such as computers, tablets, mobile phones, gaming devices and other online-enabled devices. (Para 4.235)*

*Online abuse can include online bullying; emotional abuse and blackmail; sharing of indecent images; grooming behaviour; coercion and preparatory behaviour for abuse including radicalisation; child abuse and exploitation. (Para 4.237)*

*Internet-enabled sexual offending 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. All such behaviour causes significant harm to children. (Para 4.207)*

Beyond the direct and indirect abuse of children caused by the behaviour listed above, practitioners concerned with child protection will be concerned to know:

- is this person likely to commit a contact sexual offence with a child?
- has the person already committed contact sexual offences with a child? (Para 4.209)

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) is defined as “sexual behaviour(s) expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others and/or may be abusive towards another child or young person or adult” (Hackett, 2014).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-guidance-child-protection-scotland-2021/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/expert-group-preventing-sexual-offending-involving-children-young-people-prevention-responses-harmful-sexual-behaviour-children-young-people/>  
(Scottish Government 2020)

### Scale and extent of online abuse

Children's Social Work Statistics<sup>3</sup> are published annually by Scottish Government. This includes child protection data including **concerns identified at** child protection planning meetings **of children registered**. All local authorities are responsible for maintaining a central child protection register for all children who are the subject of an inter-agency child protection plan. A child may be placed on the register if there are reasonable grounds to believe or suspect that a child has suffered or will suffer significant harm from abuse or neglect, and that a child protection plan is needed to protect and support the child.

Of the total number of concerns identified in 2021-22, the most common concerns were: domestic abuse (16%), neglect (15%), parental mental health problems (14%), parental substance use (15%), and emotional abuse (13%) (Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland: 2021 to 2022).

Other categories of registration include child exploitation, child sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and child placing self at risk. These concerns account for a small percentage of child protection registrations nationally.

The national data does not cover the full extent of activity in relation to child protection and does not give specific data in relation to online harm and abuse or grooming.

Local self-evaluation and data activity<sup>4</sup> monitors and evaluates the impact of the changes with oversight by Child Protection Committees (CPC) and Chief Officer Groups (COG). Areas are subject to inspection by the Care Inspectorate in relation to services for children and young people at risk of harm.

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) annual report (2022) on child sexual abuse imagery online discovered 255,588 URLs contained child sexual abuse imagery and more Category A<sup>5</sup> child sexual abuse material online than in previous years. Findings include: 199,363 of the imagery was self-generated content; a 60% increase in children identified as aged 7-10 seen in images compared to previous years; 51,369 URLs contained images of the most extreme category of sexual abuse - double the number compared with 2020<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-social-work-statistics-scotland-2021-22/pages/child-protection/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.celcis.org/knowledge-bank/protecting-children/legislation-and-policy/child-protection-committees/minimum-dataset-child-protection-committees>

<sup>5</sup> Child sexual abuse images and videos based on UK law, according to the levels in the Sentencing Council's Sexual Offences Definitive Guidelines. Since April 2014, there have been three levels:

**A:** Images involving penetrative sexual activity; images involving sexual activity with an animal or sadism.

**B:** Images involving non-penetrative sexual activity.

**C:** Other indecent images not falling within categories A or B.

<sup>6</sup> [Annual report 2022](#)

This report demonstrates that there was a significant growth in online activity during the Covid 19 Pandemic. 'The amount of Category A child sexual material discovered online has doubled since 2020, with newborn babies and toddlers among the victims of the most severe kinds of sexual abuse, new data reveals.'<sup>7</sup>

Around a third of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by children and young people themselves, and an increasing proportion includes sexual abuse and exploitation online.<sup>8</sup>

### Multi-Agency Preventing Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Group (OCSAE)

Social Work Scotland attend the Police Scotland led Multi-Agency Preventing OCSAE Group aiming to prevent OCSAE by coordinating and developing learning and supporting partners' campaigns and work to maximise exposure. The group meets quarterly to discuss emerging trends, recent technological advancements in tackling online child sexual abuse and exploitation, new projects and support available for victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as data gathering.

### **The role of Social Work**

All relevant partners work together collaboratively to support children and families and work within the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) approach.<sup>9</sup> This approach is firmly grounded in securing both the child's best interests and wellbeing, and supporting families by ensuring children receive the right help, at the right time. This approach ensures that the child's health, education, and wellbeing needs are at the fore and that intervention and support is as early as possible and proportionate.

The Promise<sup>10</sup> emphasises that families must be given support to overcome the difficulties they may encounter. Meaningful engagement with families must ensure their voices are heard and they are involved in decisions that affect them.

### National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021

Following publication of the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021, local authorities and their partners have been working towards full implementation including changes to practice and local guidance, procedures, and practice to align with the revised Guidance. Social Work Scotland are members of the National Implementation Group established in September 2021 which provides strategic oversight and support to local areas to implement Guidance.

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<sup>7</sup> ['Extreme' Category A child sexual abuse found online doubles in two years](#)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cycj.org.uk/resource/ta-hsb-stuart-allardyce/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://thepromise.scot/>

The role of a Local Authority in child protection is outlined in the National Guidance:

*Local authorities have a duty to promote, support and safeguard the wellbeing of all children in need in their area, and, insofar as is consistent with that duty, to promote the upbringing of children by their families by providing a range and level of services appropriate to children's welfare and wellbeing needs. (Para 2.124)*

Guidance for local authorities on the role of the registered social worker in statutory interventions stipulates that, where children are in need of protection and/or in danger of serious exploitation or significant harm, a registered social worker will be accountable for carrying out enquiries and making recommendations, where necessary, as to whether or not the child or young person should be the subject of compulsory protection measures.

Where either children or adults are:

- in need of protection; and/or
- in danger of serious exploitation or significant harm; and/or
- at risk of causing significant harm to themselves or others; and/or
- unable to give informed consent.

A registered social worker must retain accountability for:

- carrying out enquiries and making recommendations where necessary as to whether or not a person requires to be the subject of compulsory protection measures;
- implementation of the social work component of a risk management plan and take appropriate action where there is concern that a multi-agency plan is not being actioned;
- making recommendations to a children's hearing or court about whether a child should be accommodated away from home;
- making recommendations on behalf of the local authority to a children's hearing or court about permanence or the termination/variation of supervision requirements;
- carrying out the measures identified in the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 and The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009.<sup>11</sup>

In fulfilling the local authorities' responsibilities to children in need of protection, social work services have a number of key roles. These include:

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/role-registered-social-worker-statutory-interventions-guidance-local-authorities/pages/2/#:~:text=Social%20workers%20are%20trained%20to,21>.

- co-ordinating multi-agency risk assessments
- arranging Child Protection Planning Meetings
- maintaining the child protection register
- discharging the local authority's duty to refer to the Principal Reporter children who may need a Compulsory Supervision Order
- supervising the child on behalf of the local authority as 'the implementation authority,' giving effect to the decisions of children's hearings

For children in need of care and protection, social workers usually act as lead professional<sup>12</sup>, co-ordinating services and support as agreed in the child protection plan.

### Interagency Referral Discussion (IRD)

An inter-agency referral discussion (IRD) is the start of the formal process of information sharing, assessment, analysis and decision-making following reported concern about abuse or neglect of a child or young person up to the age of 18 years, in relation to familial and non-familial concerns, and of siblings or other children within the same context. This includes an unborn baby that may be exposed to current or future risk. Police, social work, and health participate in IRD with essential input from education and work together to ensure a co-ordinated inter-agency child protection response to concerns.

A decision can be made at an IRD to plan for and undertake a Joint Investigative Interview with a child (JII).

### Joint Investigative Interview of child victims and witnesses

The purpose of a JII is to:

- learn the child's account of the circumstances that prompted the enquiry.
- gather information to permit decision-making on whether the child in question, or any other child, is in need of protection.
- gather sufficient evidence to suggest whether a crime may have been committed against the child or anyone else.
- secure best evidence as may be needed for court proceedings, such as a criminal trial; or for a children's hearing proof.

Social Work Scotland, COSLA, Police Scotland and justice partners are working in partnership with the Scottish Government to take forward recommendations of the

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/lead-professional/#:~:text=The%20lead%20professional%20is%20an,young%20person%20and%20their%20family>

Evidence and Procedure Review<sup>13</sup> to improve the quality and consistency of Joint Investigative Interviews (JIIs) of children.<sup>14</sup> The aim is that JII statements are of a sufficiently high standard that they can be used as Evidence in Chief and contribute to the range of improvements being made to remove the need for children to give evidence in court and so reduce the potential of further trauma for child victims and witnesses.

This work is being led by local authorities and Police Scotland who both have statutory responsibility for the investigation of concerns about children.

A National JII Project Team, made up of experienced social workers and police officers, was set up in November 2017 to develop a new approach to JII's in Scotland, drawing on national and international research and best practice.

This led to the development of the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) for joint investigative interviewing and to a new, comprehensive training programme for child interviewers. This model is being implemented across all areas in Scotland.

### Children and young people who display harmful behaviour

It is important that relevant professionals view the needs of the child holistically, within the context of their own environment and family.<sup>15</sup> Identifying supports early can help to minimise or prevent the risk of future harmful behaviour. Early and Effective Intervention (EEI)<sup>16</sup> aims to ensure children and families get the right support as early as possible. This approach supports agencies working together to take prompt action to respond to behaviour.

Where a child has displayed harmful behaviour the Child's Plan<sup>17</sup> should be holistic and tailored to need and context, including risk assessment and management measures and interventions. This includes the assessment of risk in relation to other children and action may be required where there is risk within the household. This can include consideration of alternative placement out with the home, including a referral to the Children's Reporter and the consideration of compulsory measures of care.

The Framework for Risk Assessment and Management and Evaluation (FRAME)<sup>18</sup> sets out standards for children involved in harmful behaviour. The Care and Risk Management (CARM) Guidance for children aged 12 to 18 years who present a risk

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<sup>13</sup> Evidence and Procedure Review

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.cosla.gov.uk/about-cosla/our-teams/children-and-young-people/joint-investigative-interviews-of-child-victims-and-witnesses>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/getting-right-child-girfec-practice-guidance-1-using-national-practice-model/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/early-effective-intervention-framework-core-elements/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/childs-plan/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.cycj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Info-sheet-55.pdf>

of serious harm is a multi-agency framework designed to assist with the early identification, assessment and management of children who display harmful behaviours whilst ensuring that, in line with GIRFEC, their needs are met and links are made with any Child's Plan and Child Protection procedures.

A Contextual Safeguarding (CS)<sup>19</sup> approach may be useful to support the exploration of the behaviour within the context of family, peer, school, and neighbourhood. Local partnerships have started to develop processes and practice that support CS responses.

### Justice Social Work

Multi-agency assessment and close co-operation between child and family services and Justice Social Work and Sex Offender Policing Units evaluate the level of risk to children and recommend proportionate protective measures.

In 2020 a multi-agency group was set up by Risk Management Authority (RMA) to support the development of a framework for assessment for those convicted of offences relating to indecent images of children. The framework includes the use of the Child Pornography Offender Risk Tool (C-PORT) and the Correlates of Admitted Sexual Interest in Children (CASIC) as a method of assessing the risk presented by individuals convicted of internet offending.

It was agreed that a number of pilot areas would be used to test the tools. The pilot is at an early stage of evidence and reporting.

The pilots started in June 2022 and are scheduled to run until mid-2024 and is being overseen by the multi-agency working group chaired by the RMA.

The new assessment framework:

- is applied to inform the justice social work report for court.
- includes two assessment tools developed in Canada - the Child Pornography Offender Risk Tool (CPORT) and the Correlates of Admission of Sexual Interest in Children (CASIC).
- incorporates a structure to consider the pattern, nature and seriousness of all offending the individual has been involved in, to date, which is very similar to the *Initial Assessment* used with the LS/CMI system to inform assessments for court (a key difference relates to the application of the CPORT and CASIC rather than the screening version of the level of service method - the LSI-R:SV).

If the disposal from court involves social work supervision (either via a CPO or via a release licence) then a full (LS/CMI 1-8) assessment will also be completed to inform management planning decisions.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/about-us/what-is-contextual-safeguarding/>

**Challenges in responding to and tackling online child abuse and exploitation, grooming and exploitation**

The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 provides a context for tackling issues within the current child protection processes. However, the complexity and continued development of online concerns and increased level of risk for children and young people means that a specific, national, multi-agency strategy would be beneficial for services. Any strategy would need to evolve and develop as new and emerging risks are identified. Critically it must also contain an implementation and resourcing plan.

Online harm is a challenging and fast changing context and social work services must continue to develop the skills and knowledge to assess and respond to online risk. A nationally funded training programme and fora for shared learning would support local areas to maintain expertise and knowledge in a specialist area of practice.

While agencies respond to child protection concerns in a timely manner, in line with national guidance, the increased volume of concerns identified adds to the pressures on stretched social work resources; for example, through the increased volume of IRD's.

The Social Work Scotland 'Setting the Bar'<sup>20</sup> report identifies some of the current challenges facing the workforce, and SWS is working with the Scottish Government, our members, and key partners to address them.

Additional resources are essential to support victims and their families to recover from the trauma and ensuring the voice of lived experience informs the nature of the support needed. Indirect victims of these harms report that they do not always receive support and are not defined as 'victims' through the justice system and therefore may not meet the criteria for support services.

**Protecting children from sexual content online and on social media.**

The social work role supports intervention after an incident takes place, but more can and should be done to support prevention of harm.

Local and national partnerships have a key role to work together to develop strategies to prevent harm, provide public information as well as working with local communities and schools to provide relevant information. This activity requires significant investment and resourcing.

Supporting young people through preventative strategies is critical. Exposure to abusive images can confuse children about what is appropriate behaviour. There is

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<sup>20</sup> <https://socialworkscotland.org/reports/settingthebar2/>



increased concern about the understanding of normative behaviour. If this is not tackled children may become criminalized due to their involvement in inappropriate behaviour. Approaches must be national and properly funded. These prevention strategies must be seen as early intervention to prevent harm and the possible criminalisation of children.

Local and national agencies and Scottish Government must work together under a national strategy to keep children safe by:

- Developing a national strategy.
- Providing national specialist training.
- Providing implementation support and resource to respond to new and emerging risk.
- Investing in information campaigns for children, families, and communities.
- Working with young people to support them to stay safe online.
- Taking a whole community/ school approach.
- Ensuring effective law enforcement and legislation is in place to tackle emerging risk.
- Working with those that have caused harm (adults and young people) to prevent future harm.
- Providing support and counselling to victims and their families under a national framework for support.<sup>21</sup>
- Ensuring that companies and businesses are regulated and held responsible for content and safety of children and young people.

Sharon Glasgow  
Protecting Children Policy and Practice Advisor  
Social Work Scotland

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/managing-risk-and-trauma-after-online-sexual-offending/>

## Stop It Now! Scotland

Stop It Now! Scotland is part of The Lucy Faithfull Foundation, the only UK charity focused on preventing child sexual abuse.

We work with individuals who present a risk of sexual harm to children. We also support families and professionals to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation. We take learning from our direct work with those who have committed sexual offences to develop prevention resources for professionals and the general public, providing evidence-driven approaches to prevent sexual abuse before it happens.

The majority of those we work with in Scotland have been involved with online sexual offending, typically viewing indecent images of children or communication offences with a minor. Often these individuals self-refer following arrest, having been given information about Stop It Now! by Police Scotland as part of its suicide deterrence strategy. We also provide confidential support and challenge to those who have offended or are at risk of doing so to help them manage their thoughts, feelings and behaviours more safely. As a child protection charity with close links to Police Scotland, we can only provide confidential advice to un-arrested individuals if they do not reveal their identity in calls and online support.

In 2022-23, we supported:

- Ninety-six people worried about their thoughts, feelings or behaviours towards children, some of whom had been arrested for online offences against children.
- Seventy-four family members of those who have been arrested for sexual offences, helping them to understand the offending behaviour, talk openly about the issues and gain support in protecting any child that may be at risk.
- Twenty-nine young people who had gotten into trouble or displayed harmful sexual behaviour, helping them understand the consequences of their actions and the impact of their behaviour. In addition, we provided one-to-one support to the parents of these young people.

As an organisation operating for over 15 years across Scotland, we have gained a reputation as a centre for expertise in child sexual abuse prevention perpetrated by adults and adolescents, both online and offline. Our Director is currently chair of the National Organisation of Treatment of Abuse, the principal membership organisation in the UK and Ireland for professionals working with those who have committed sexual offences.

We are a small team of social workers, law enforcement colleagues, and counsellors, and a forensic psychologist leads our clinical work. Our extensive backgrounds in public protection and sex offender treatment allow us to use our expertise to equip parents and organisations to create safer environments within families, in communities, and online. Last financial year, we supported 36 organisations in Scotland and delivered training on child sexual abuse prevention to over 300 social work and forensic psychology university students.

## **Scale and extent of online child sexual abuse from our experience**

Since providing evidence to the Justice Committee in 2022 about online harm, we have seen increased demand for our services across the UK. Our UK helpline received 16,764 contacts (calls, emails and live chat) from 9,769 individuals in 2022-23. This compares with 15,435 contacts from 7,658 people in the previous year. Around half of the contacts are from adults worried about their sexual feelings towards children and young people. Most have been arrested for a sexual crime, but approximately 20% are either un-arrested or have not committed a crime but are worried they may do so in the future. The second biggest service user group are individuals concerned about the behaviour of an adult known to them, either online or directly in relation to children.

This level of increase is happening in Scotland too. Our latest data shows that over 12,500 people in Scotland sought help via our online self-help resource, Get Help, in 2022 - a 265% increase since 2020.

These figures suggest that more people are showing help-seeking behaviours each year, but it is likely also to be an indicator of the growing scale of the problem of online child sexual exploitation.

From our clinical and helpline work with those who have viewed sexual images of children online, as well as our own and others' published research, problematic legal adult pornography use is highlighted as a common pathway to viewing sexual images of children.

### **Youth-perpetrated technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour**

We have seen a growing trend of young people being arrested for online sexual offences, which has escalated since the last time the Justice Committee looked at the issue of online sexual exploitation. In discussions with the police, we are aware that in 2022, a significant proportion of investigations concerning online sexual offences featured someone under the age of 18 as a perpetrator. We have shared case studies with Police Scotland about the experiences of young people arrested for online sexual offences as well as the experiences of their parents. Without underplaying the seriousness of this behaviour, responses need to be grounded in the fact that these are children under the relevant UNCRC definition.

Peer-led online sexual abuse and exploitation is critically important to understand, as much of our messaging to children and parents about online safety focuses on risks presented by adults rather than peers. Emerging data from the US looks at the prevalence of online child sexual abuse based on population, including non-consensual image taking or sharing, forced image recruitment, threatened sharing of sexual pictures, unwanted sexual talk, questions, or sexual act requests by adults, and commercial sexual exploitation ([Finkelhor, 2022](#)). Perpetrators in most categories were predominantly dating partners, friends, and acquaintances, not online strangers. This finding is replicated in other recent studies (e.g. [Thorn, 2023](#)).

We published [a study in June 2022](#) examining trajectories into online harmful sexual behaviour for over 60 young people we worked with in Glasgow over three years. There was a wide range of behaviours reported, including coercing peers to share

sexual images of themselves, non-consensual sharing (revenge porn), viewing of indecent images of children, cyber stalking, and sexual harassment online. Sixty-two per cent of those we worked with were male, females being more likely to be involved with inappropriate or problematic behaviour rather than sexually abusive behaviour. LGBTQ+ young people, autism and mental health issues were overrepresented amongst those we worked with, and 44% had experienced some form of harm or abuse themselves, particularly sexual exploitation online.

We took the learning from this project and worked with young people at Shawlands Academy, a Glasgow high school, to pilot and evaluate prevention initiatives in the context of the school. Key aspects involved redesigning the RSHP curriculum with young people and parent workshops and piloting anonymised support in the school. The work was positively evaluated by Strathclyde University and is now being replicated in two high schools in Edinburgh.

There is growing evidence that the increased prevalence of technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviour may be associated with young people's unrestricted exposure to online pornography. In a [survey conducted by the Children's Commissioner for England and Wales](#) of 1000 young adults asked about their exposure to pornography in childhood, the average age at which children first see pornography is 13. By age nine, 10% had seen pornography, 27% had seen it by age 11 and half of children who had seen pornography had seen it by age 13. Frequent users of pornography and early onset of exposure were associated with self-reported physically aggressive sex acts.

### **The impact of online sexual investigations on family members**

In March of this year, we published a [report](#) looking at the impact on partners, children and family members after a loved one has been arrested for an online sexual offence. Stop It Now! Scotland provides support to approximately 80 family members each year who are in this situation. Families typically become aware of offending behaviour when the police arrive at the family home, often called 'the knock'. When children are in the family, safeguarding practices require the police to conduct 'the knock' when children are at home to ensure their safety – but this can also cause trauma.

The report analyses the potential for post-traumatic stress disorders in families. Family members report feelings of guilt, shame, perceived discrimination and stigmatisation and, for some, these impacts are likely made worse by loneliness and isolation, with little or no access to support. A non-offending partner can also face financial hardships, including loss of income or costs associated with recovery or building a new life.

In January of this year, Stop It Now! Scotland established a working group to promote better outcomes for families in this situation, which includes representation from Police Scotland, CPC Scotland, Social Work Scotland and the Scottish Government. We also contributed to [a recent publication](#) by the Home Office-funded *Centre of Expertise on child sexual abuse* for social workers engaged with families when a parent has viewed sexual images of children online, which helps social

workers make proportionate, informed decisions to minimise the risk of reoffending, safeguard children and support the family.

### **How are we responding**

Stop It Now! Scotland's approach to child sexual abuse prevention is predicated on there being an understanding that child sexual abuse is a public health issue and that there are steps that every adult can take to make Scotland a safer place for children to grow up.

Criminal justice responses to sexual offending and child sexual abuse are critically important: we must bring offenders to justice and ensure the needs of victims are at the heart of our judicial system. But if our only frame of reference for tackling child sexual abuse continues to be through the criminal justice system, we miss an opportunity to **prevent** rather than "just" respond to it.

This involves a pivot towards prevention and early intervention. Our responses to these are:

### **Raising awareness of online child sexual abuse**

As the risk of online sexual offending is not diminishing, raising public awareness of our services is more important than ever so that people know about our support to help prevent child sexual abuse. This includes messaging to parents – and children – about practical steps to take to prevent abuse.

### **Deterrence and disruption of those who present a risk to children**

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation runs annual campaigns to tackle online viewing of indecent images of children or having online sexual conversations with under 16s by disrupting and deterring individuals from offending and instead driving them towards resources and support to change their behaviour in England and Wales. In Scotland, since 2018, and in partnership with Police Scotland, we have run our own campaigns. The last campaign in 2021 contributed to over 2,000 people in Scotland accessing our Get Help online resources for adults who are worried about their viewing of sexual images of children online and want to seek help to stop.

### **Reducing opportunities to offend**

Search deterrence has been deployed on **Google**. When UK users make an indicative search, they are presented with a warning message that signposts to Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) (to report) and to Stop It Now! (for help to change).

In addition, internet service providers in the UK deploy warning messages (Splash pages) when users attempt to access a URL blocked by the IWF due to its hosting illegal content. Over five years, this led to 26,500 click-throughs to online self-help.

We have also supported Facebook in implementing a help centre page for people concerned about their online sexual behaviour towards children and deterrence messaging for users who search for illegal content.

In 2021, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation worked with MindGeek, the owner of adult pornography websites, including Pornhub. Similar to Google and Facebook search deterrence – a message is now deployed when a search indicative of offending is

made on their websites. Between February 2021 and February 2023, the warning messages brought over 260,000 users worldwide to our online self-help.

We have also [partnered with the tech company Nominet](#) in a new project to work with technology companies, researchers and law enforcement agencies to test further and improve the effectiveness of warning messages and implement them in more online spaces.

### **Online Safety Bill**

The Online Safety Bill will protect children from a wide range of online harms, and we welcome the commitment from the UK Government to making the UK the safest place for children to be online.

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation is part of a consortium of child protection charities advocating to strengthen the protections for children within the Online Safety Bill. We supported Barnardo's in a recent briefing to Parliamentarians on pornography amendments in preparation for the committee stage in the House of Lords. The briefing featured one of our case studies and information about how pornography use can become problematic for some people.

We are also supporting amendments being tabled at the committee stage in the House of Lords on:

1. Robust age verification so that children cannot access pornography.
2. Creating parity between offline and online content across all platforms.
3. A duty on pornography companies to verify the age and consent of performers.

### **Our ask of this committee**

We have three requests for the committee, echoing those made at the last Justice Committee.

**1. The development of a Scotland-wide strategy to tackle online child sexual abuse.** The strategy would focus on the prevention of abuse, looking not only at who the victims are and how to support them but addressing offender behaviour and examining pathways into offending and how potential offenders can be disrupted to prevent abuse from occurring at all. At present, we have significant activity around preventing online harm, but no coordination or action plan to work to, unlike in England and Wales.

**2. Resourcing for deterrence campaigning across Scotland aimed at deterring and disrupting potential online offenders before they commit harm.** This is funded by the Home Office in England and Wales, but there is no ring-fenced funding in Scotland despite [growing evidence](#) that deterrence and disruption of online offenders and signposting to early anonymous and confidential support is effective.

**3. Finding out what young people and teachers require in tackling online abuse, grooming and exploitation and supporting children to recognise they are being abused, groomed or exploited.** [RSHP](#) is our central resource for schools concerning this subject. The complex nature of online harm, the prevalence

of adolescent and young adult perpetration and the increased exposure of children to online pornography create key educational challenges in this space. There is a need to recognise that young people sexual development is occurring in the digital environment. The challenges relate not just to content but also to how RSHP is delivered. Some form of review of the RSHP material for S1, S2 and S3, involving children, particularly the sequencing and appropriateness would be beneficial. Research suggests that children want an interactive and non-didactic way of learning about sex, safety and boundaries online. Promoting key messages around consent needs to be at the heart of preventing sexual abuse and exploitation, including preventing technology-assisted harmful sexual behaviours. Sometimes online safety is presented as separate from sexual violence prevention, but this is an artificial distinction. Successful school-based activities look at what trust and consent mean in a relationship and practice skills, including how to respond to online and offline solicitations. Young people need opportunities to share their views about consent, explore values, and discuss relationships. Education can help them distinguish when someone cares about them from when someone is sexually exploitative, both offline and online.