



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

2026-2036

Strategy for Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse in Wales

[gov.uk/wales](https://www.gov.uk/wales)

This strategy discusses child sexual abuse and could therefore be triggering. If you have been affected by sexual abuse or sexual violence and need support, you can contact:

Live Fear Free Helpline on 0808 80 10 800, a free helpline available 24 hours and 7 days a week.

Mental Health 111 (Option 2) is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and is free to call from a mobile (even when the caller has no credit left) or from a landline.

C.A.L.L. Helpline offers a confidential listening and support service for anyone concerned about their mental health.

If you have concerns about a child who may be experiencing or at risk of experiencing sexual abuse, please contact the local authority children's services department in your area.

If you are a child and want to speak to someone about something you or someone else is experiencing or are worried about, contact Childline, a free, confidential helpline for children and young people on 0800 1111 or see the website [Childline | NSPCC](#)

If you have any queries about the Strategy (2026–2036) or the Delivery Plan (2026–2029) please contact safeguardingandadvocacy@gov.wales or you can write to the:

Safeguarding and Advocacy Branch,
Social Services and
Integration Directorate,
Welsh Government,
Cathays Park, CF10 3NQ

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Foreword

Child sexual abuse is one of the most profound violations of a child's rights and dignity. Its impact can be life altering, affecting health, relationships, education, employment and overall wellbeing long into adulthood.

The harm extends far beyond the child, affecting families, communities, and society as a whole. Preventing abuse and supporting those who have been harmed is therefore an absolute priority for this government and a shared moral responsibility.

Between 2019 and 2022, we delivered Wales's first National Action Plan to prevent and respond to child sexual abuse. While this work achieved progress, engagement with stakeholders and the recent public consultation were clear that a three-year strategy cycle could not fully address the complexity and scale of the challenge. This view was strongly reinforced through our recent public consultation on the draft ten-year strategy.

This ten-year strategy represents a renewed and strengthened national commitment. It sets out a long-term, whole-system approach that brings together government, public services, specialist organisations, communities, and—most importantly—children, young people and adult victim-survivors. Preventing abuse, protecting children when concerns arise, and supporting recovery requires sustained leadership, shared responsibility and collective determination over time.

I am especially grateful to those with lived experience who have shaped this strategy. Their insight, courage and honesty have been invaluable, and their voices will remain central as the strategy is implemented and delivered.

This is an ambitious strategy, because ambition is necessary to achieve meaningful and lasting change. It reflects our determination to prevent abuse before it occurs, to ensure every child is protected, and to provide compassionate, timely and effective support to all those affected support to victim survivors and their families.

Together, we can build a Wales where every child grows up feeling safe, valued and able to thrive.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the development of this strategy and the first three year Delivery Plan. Your expertise, commitment and partnership will be essential as we work together to delivering the change that children, young people and adult victim-survivors deserve.

Diolch yn fawr



Executive Summary

In 2019, the Welsh Government published a three-year National Action Plan for Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse.

This was a three-year plan, and a delivery report was published in 2022 detailing the achievements to date and further work required. (National Action Plan Delivery Report – **Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014**).

Under this Plan several key resources were developed for children, young people, parents and caregivers and professionals. A national pathway was developed and implemented for children and young people who exhibit harmful sexual behaviours and each Regional Safeguarding Board developed their own child sexual abuse action plan.

Stakeholder engagement consistently indicated that a longer-term, more strategic approach was required, including greater focus on cultural change and support for adult victim-survivors.

This Strategy sets out a ten-year, cross-government commitment to preventing and responding to child sexual abuse in Wales. Its strategic vision is that:

“All children in Wales live free from the harm of sexual abuse and all those affected are protected and supported across the lifespan”.

The Strategy is underpinned by four high-level objectives:

- preventing child sexual abuse
- protecting and responding effectively to children when there are concerns about child sexual abuse;
- supporting children, parents/caregivers, siblings and other family members ; and
- supporting adult victim-survivors.

A whole-system approach is central to achieving these objectives. The Strategy promotes shared understanding, clear roles and responsibilities, and timely information sharing across all organisations involved. It recognises that child sexual abuse occurs across multiple contexts, online and offline, within families, institutions, peer groups and communities and requires coordinated responses spanning prevention, early intervention and statutory protection.

A national core data set will play a critical role in strengthening system effectiveness. A consistent evidence base will support improved understanding of prevalence, service pressures and outcomes, enabling better planning, commissioning and accountability across Wales. Over time, this will support more data-led, consistent and transparent decision-making.

The Strategy will be delivered through a national structure designed to provide oversight, coordinate action and complement existing regional arrangements. At its centre will be a Strategic Implementation and Oversight Board, chaired by the Welsh Government, responsible for directing workstreams, monitoring progress and reporting to Ministers. Four thematic workstreams will drive action across prevention, protection and recovery, supported by task-and-finish groups focused on key enabling areas such as data, training and national pathways.

Advisory groups for children and young people, and for adult victim-survivors, will ensure lived experience continues to inform delivery, underpinned by ethical engagement and appropriate support. Monitoring and evaluation will be embedded from year one, combining quantitative and qualitative measures to track impact and adapt the strategy over time. This collaborative structure ensures that every voice is heard and that Wales moves forward with a unified, evidence-based approach to tackling child sexual abuse.

Section 1

Introduces the vision and objectives of the strategy and sets out the legal and policy context.

Section 2

Explains the principles underpinning the approach we will take – anti-oppressive, anti-stigma, inclusive, intersectional and rights based.

Section 3

Sets out a summary of evidence about child sexual abuse; this includes sections on child sexual abuse within the family environment; child sexual exploitation; harmful sexual behaviours and Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA).

Section 4

Explains how the views of children and young people and adult victim-survivors have informed the strategy and how they remain central to this strategy going forward.

Section 5

Briefly summarises the strategic vision and objectives of the strategy and how it intersects with other key policy areas. This is further explained in Appendix 1.

Section 6

Sets out the structure we will be establishing to deliver the strategy and explains how we will develop this with key stakeholders.

Section 7

Explains how we will monitor progress, evaluate outcomes and impact using quantitative and qualitative methods and how we will be ensuring transparency and accountability.

The Strategy should be read alongside the Delivery Plan 2026–2029, which sets out the specific actions that will be taken to deliver the policy intent.

Section 1: Introduction and Context

Our vision in Wales is clear: All children live free from the harm of child sexual abuse, and everyone affected is protected and supported across the lifespan.

Child sexual abuse is a profound violation of a child's rights, with devastating and often lifelong consequences for victim-survivors, their families, and society. Tackling this issue demands a comprehensive, coordinated approach encompassing prevention, early identification, effective response, and sustained support.

This strategy sets out a whole-system approach to addressing all forms of child sexual abuse—including sexual exploitation and harmful sexual behaviours. Our goal is to prevent abuse before it occurs, ensure swift and effective action when concerns arise, and provide holistic support for victims and their families (including parents/caregivers, siblings, and extended family), enabling recovery and building resilience.

A whole-system response relies on strong, coordinated partnerships across all safeguarding agencies—from political and strategic leaders to frontline practitioners—and spans universal prevention through to statutory interventions.

Effective multi-agency collaboration must be rooted in mutual respect, shared understanding, and a collective commitment to act decisively and together.

To achieve this, we must:

- Develop a common understanding of child sexual abuse.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities across agencies and organisations.
- Prioritise timely and effective information sharing.
- Ensure support for children, families, and victim-survivors is well-coordinated and responsive to their needs.

This strategy addresses child sexual abuse and its impact across the lifespan and in every context: online and offline; within institutions, families, social groups, and communities; and whether perpetrated by individuals or groups, adults or other children.

During the development of the strategy key stakeholders identified four strategic objectives and these were strongly supported by people/organisations that responded to the consultation on the draft strategy undertaken between July and October 2025.

1. Preventing child sexual abuse
2. Protecting and responding effectively to children when there are concerns about child sexual abuse
3. Supporting children, non-abusing parents/caregivers, siblings and other family members
4. Supporting adult victim-survivors

1.1 Strategy fit with legislation, policy and guidance

The strategy is underpinned by a legislative framework that enables Welsh Ministers to address the needs of both children and adult victim survivors of child sexual abuse. **Section 25 of the Children Act 2004** requires key agencies to co operate in promoting children's welfare and this extends to establishing the multi agency safeguarding arrangements on which the strategy is built. **Section 28 of the Children Act 2004** requires key agencies to make arrangements to ensure not only that their functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children but also to ensure that those who provide services on their behalf do the same.

Complementing this, **Section 135 of the Social Services and Well being (Wales) Act 2014** extends these safeguarding responsibilities to adults by setting out the functions and duties of Safeguarding Boards in relation to both children and adults at risk. Together, these provisions create a coherent whole system safeguarding framework, ensuring that the national strategy can appropriately include actions to support adult victim survivors, strengthen multi agency coordination, and embed trauma informed, recovery focused services across the lifespan.

This strategy has been developed ensuring it is aligned with and has considered the most relevant legislation, policy and guidance relating to the prevention of child sexual abuse, the multi-agency response and supporting victim-survivors (adults and children) and their families.

Social Services and Wellbeing Wales Act 2014

Provides the legal framework for safeguarding adults and children in Wales. Established Regional Safeguarding Boards and the National Independent Safeguarding Board.

Safeguarding people: an introduction | GOV.WALES Volume 1 – Introduction and overview

- › This Code of Practice is statutory guidance that provides an introduction and overview of the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 and sets out the policy intent.

Working together to safeguard people: code of safeguarding practice | GOV.WALES

- › This Code is non-statutory and was developed to guide individuals, groups and organisations that provide services to children, families and adults at risk, in developing robust safeguarding systems.

1.1

These are groups and organisations in the voluntary sector, private sector and are sometimes groups that are not overseen by regulators such as Care Inspectorate Wales.

Safeguarding children at risk of abuse or neglect | GOV. WALES Working Together to Safeguard People Volume 5 – Handling Individual Cases to Protect Children at Risk

- › This Code of Practice is statutory guidance that sets out how organisations must respond to safeguard children and young people who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing child abuse and/or neglect.

Safeguarding adults at risk of abuse or neglect | GOV. WALES Working Together to Safeguard People Volume 6

- › This Code of Practice is statutory guidance that sets out how organisations must respond to safeguard adults at risk who are or are at risk of experiencing abuse and/or neglect.

Safeguarding children from child sexual exploitation | GOV.WALES Working Together to Safeguard People, Volume 7

- › Statutory guidance for local authorities and key partners that sets out the way organisations will support children who are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing child sexual abuse.

The criminal justice system in Wales (including courts, police, probation and prison services) are reserved and so responsibility rests with the UK Parliament and Government.

Current legislation relevant to child sexual abuse includes the following:

Sexual Offences Act 2003

is the principal legislation governing sexual offences in England and Wales. It defines and criminalises various sexual offences. The Act also includes provisions for the notification requirements of people with sexual convictions and civil orders to manage the risk posed by people with sexual convictions.

Part 2 of the Act concerns the management of people with sexual convictions. It establishes:

- **Notification Requirements:** Convicted sexual offenders must regularly inform the police of personal details, including their address, travel plans, and any changes to their circumstances.

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- **Sexual Harm Prevention Orders (SHPOs):** These civil orders can impose restrictions on individuals to prevent sexual harm, such as limiting internet use or unsupervised contact with minors.
- **Sexual Risk Orders (SROs):** Applicable to individuals who have not been convicted but are deemed to pose a risk of sexual harm, allowing for proactive intervention.

These measures enable law enforcement to monitor and manage offenders effectively within the community.

Malicious Communications Act 1988 and Communications Act 2003

makes it an offence to send (by means of a public electronic communications network) indecent, offensive, or threatening letters, a message or other matter, electronic communications, or other articles that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene, or menacing character with the intent to cause distress or anxiety.

Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022

strengthens notification requirements. It introduces more rigorous obligations for offenders to report certain activities and changes in their circumstances and law enforcement agencies are granted broader authority

to monitor and enforce compliance among people subjected to notification requirements.

Criminal Justice Act 2003

established Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA). MAPPA provides a framework for various agencies, including police, probation services, and social services, to collaborate in assessing and managing the risks posed by sexual and violent offenders. This coordinated approach ensures that appropriate measures are in place to protect the public.

The **Online Safety Act (OSA)** introduces a strengthened statutory framework designed to prevent, detect, and disrupt online sexual exploitation and abuse of children. It places legally binding duties on online platforms—including social media services, messaging apps, search engines, and any service with UK users—to identify risks to children and take effective steps to mitigate them.

Platforms must:

- conduct child specific risk assessments and address features that could facilitate grooming, harmful contact, or exposure to child sexual abuse material (CSAM).
[acsh.org]

1.1

- proactively identify and remove illegal content, including CSAM
- report detected child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA) content to the National Crime Agency (NCA)
- implement robust age assurance measures, including secure verification methods for accessing pornography and ensuring strangers cannot message under 18s
- embed safety by design principles, requiring services to implement technical and operational safeguards to detect suspicious patterns, limit grooming pathways, and respond rapidly to concerns.
- Ofcom oversees compliance with the above.

1.2 Reports that have informed this strategy

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA)

The Inquiry was established in 2015 following calls from the public for a national inquiry to respond to the ongoing revelations about high profile people sexually abusing children, particularly from Operation Yewtree, the investigations into Jimmy Saville. It published its final report in October 2022. The final report made recommendations to UK Government and the Welsh Government.¹ All six recommendations made to the Welsh Government were either accepted or accepted in principle. The response from the Welsh Government was published on 20 April 2023.²

National Audit of Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, Baroness Casey of Blackstock DBE CB June 2025³

The national audit identified:

- Gaps remain in the data and in work to properly understand the nature of group-based child sexual exploitation, the motivations and drivers of offenders and the impacts on victims.
- Improvements have not been implemented with sufficient rigour or determination, have been allowed to drift, or have not been acted on.

¹ The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse | IICSA Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse ² Written Statement: Update on the Welsh Government response to the IICSA final report recommendations (20 April 2023) | GOV.WALES ³ National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse - GOV.UK ⁴ A healthier Wales: long term plan for health and social care | GOV.WALES

1.3 Links to other strategies

This strategy builds on the National Action Plan for Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse (2019–2022).

This strategy links to the Wellbeing Objectives set by the Welsh Government for 2021–2026:

- Protect, re-build and develop our services for vulnerable people.
- Provide effective, high quality and sustainable healthcare.
- Celebrate diversity and move to eliminate inequality in all its forms.

‘A Healthier Wales: our plan for health and social care’⁴

published in 2021 is a cornerstone of the Programme for Government. The plan sets out the long-term future vision of a ‘whole system approach to health and social care’, which is focussed on health and wellbeing, and on prevention.

The strategy directly supports the seven connected wellbeing goals for Wales in the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015** including a resilient Wales; a healthier Wales; and a more equal Wales. The strategy has been developed in line with the five ways of working set out in the Act.

Tackling Child Sexual Abuse – UK Government

In April 2025, the UK Government published an update on the Tackling Child Sexual Abuse action plan and implementation of IICSA recommendations.⁵

Freedom from Violence and Abuse: A (Ten-Year) Cross Government Strategy to Build a Safer Society for Women and Girls

The strategy and accompanying action plan were published in December 2025 setting out the actions UK Government intend to take to reduce violence against women and girls by half in the next decade. There are three strands in the strategy: Prevention and Early Intervention; Relentless Pursuit of Perpetrators; and Support. The commitments made as part of the Tackling Child Sexual Abuse action plan have been re-stated in the strategy and action plan.

Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan⁶

The **Anti-racist Wales Action Plan (ArWAP)**, published in June 2022, highlighted the deeply rooted racial inequalities experienced by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people in Wales. It focuses on the realities of institutional and structural racism, emphasising that ethnic minority people are disproportionately disadvantaged at nearly every level of every system.

⁵ Tackling child sexual abuse: progress update – GOV.UK

⁶ Anti-racist Wales Action Plan: 2024 update [HTML] | GOV.WALES

1.3

By acknowledging this uncomfortable truth, ArWAP urges Wales’s Public, Private and Third Sectors to confront the extensive nature of racial inequalities and recognise the often-unintentional advantages experienced by certain groups. It calls for the courage, as a nation, to confront systemic injustices and work collectively towards meaningful change.

LGBTQ+ Action Plan⁷

The LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales has been established to help coordinate action by the Welsh Government and other agencies. The plan sets out an overarching vision to improve the lives of, and outcomes for, LGBTQ+ people.

For all LGBTQ+ people, the Welsh Government has committed to:

- strengthen equality and human rights (**Welsh Government 2022a**)
- make Wales a safer place
- make Wales a Nation of Sanctuary for LGBTQ+ migrants
- improve healthcare outcomes
- ensure education in Wales is inclusive
- improve inclusion and participation in all areas of life

- listen to, and work with, our LGBTQ+ communities
- defend and promote the rights of trans and non-binary people

Disability Rights Action Plan⁸

According to the social model of disability, impairment is what has historically been referred to as a “disability” or a health condition. For many (but not all) disabled people, their impairment is a significant part of their life and may form part of their personal identity. Everyone’s experience is different. That experience is always valid and always important.

Disability by contrast is the inequality, disadvantage, disempowerment or discrimination which may affect people with impairments because of barriers to access and inclusion. For example, a staircase is a barrier to a wheelchair user; providing a lift removes that barrier. Disability is therefore something which affects people with impairments but is different from impairment. Disability is something which disables someone with an impairment. Barriers can be removed. If you remove the barrier then you remove the disability.

⁷ LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales | GOV.WALES

⁸ Draft Disabled People’s Rights Plan: 2025 to 2035 [HTML] | GOV.WALES

Section 2: Principles and values underpinning the strategy

The strategy is underpinned by the Human Rights Act 1998 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the following principles and values:

Person-centred

Ensuring we are placing the voice of victim-survivors centrally in relation to actions taken under this strategy.

Co-production

Treating people as equal partners when designing, developing and delivering policies and services.

Rights-based approach

Ensuring the strategy is underpinned by a human rights and a children's rights approach.

Trauma-informed

Build a public understanding of how trauma and adversity can impact people and how we can support those affected by trauma.

Equity of access, experience and outcomes without discrimination

Ensure that any products /services developed are accessible and appropriate for all.

Taking an intersectionality approach

Recognising that people are shaped by their membership of multiple interconnected social categories that can interact to create unique challenges, and this will inform the actions taken.

Preventative

Taking a preventative approach seeking to reduce vulnerability and provide the right interventions at the right time.

Free of stigma and shame, blame and judgement

Tackling stigma, and the societal views associated with child sexual abuse.

Outcome focused

Delivering against the outcomes that matter to people and have a system that can measure these outcomes and be held to account for them.

2.1 A focus on anti-oppressive practice

Some groups of children are disproportionately at risk of experiencing sexual abuse which are linked to wider inequalities in society. Marginalised groups who experience discrimination, racism or exclusion solely based on age, race, sex, sexual orientation, disability or other characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010 will be disproportionately impacted. This includes disabled children, children who are care experienced, children who are seeking asylum and are refugees and children who are living in poverty.

The priorities in this strategy relate to:

- Embedding collaborative action to protect children and young people from sexual harm.
- Empowering children and young people to know about and feel able to claim their rights.
- Listening to people's needs to shape and inform the services and support they receive.
- Putting in place systems that enable equitable access and outcomes for all people, without exception.

The strategy will support human rights and children's rights (for example by addressing inequalities in outcomes) in line with the Equality Act 2010, the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 and the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC). There will be an ongoing focus on the individual articles of the UNCRC and the recommendations in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations 2023 Report.

Over the next decade, the strategy will ensure that issues around equality, diversity, inclusion and intersectionality are fully considered and addressed within each workstream and as part of a comprehensive approach to change.

2.2 A focus on Welsh Language

The Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 gives the Welsh language official status in Wales and reinforces the principle that the Welsh language should not be treated less favourably than the English language when providing services.

The Welsh Government has ambitions for Wales to be a welcoming, bilingual, diverse and inclusive nation. Cymraeg 2050: Welsh Language Strategy sets out our long-term approach to achieving a million Welsh speakers. This strategy will support the delivery of the **More Than Just Words Five Year Plan (2022–2027)** which is the Welsh Government's strategic framework for promoting the Welsh language in health and social care. At its core is the principle of 'the Active Offer'.

It places a responsibility on health and social care providers to offer services in Welsh, rather than on the patient or service user to have to request them. The More Than Just Words Framework seeks to drive progress through a focus on the themes of leadership; Welsh language planning and policies including data; supporting and developing the Welsh language skills of the current and future workforce; and sharing good practice and an enabling approach.

Receiving support and treatment in one's own language can be particularly important particularly when people are experiencing trauma. In delivering the strategy, there will be a specific focus on promoting the use of the HEIW Guidance on Workforce Planning for the Welsh Language; promoting the opportunities in place for the workforce to learn and improve their Welsh language skills – for example, through the training and resources available as part of the National Centre for Learning Welsh **“Work Welsh Scheme” for Health and Social Care**; and by supporting action to increase the recording of a person's language in order to deliver the **Active Offer**, and provide safe, equitable and person-centred care.

2.3 Intersectionality

Intersectionality is the way in which power structures based on factors such as gender, race, sexuality, disability, class, age, and faith, interact with each other to create inequalities, discrimination, and oppression. It is crucial to understand how these characteristics can interact and produce unique and often multiple experiences of disadvantage in specific situations.

A truly intersectional approach ensures that no single form of discrimination is understood in isolation from others. Having more than one protected characteristic can amplify the impact of child sexual abuse and exploitation on children, families and adult victim-survivors.

In the first year of the strategy a communication and engagement plan will be developed, detailing how we intend to engage with individuals who have protected characteristics, ensuring their contributions influence and shape policy and practice.

Additionally, we will prioritise improving our methods for collecting data regarding child sexual abuse and the protected characteristics of those who are affected. This will enable us to develop a better understanding of the scale and prevalence of abuse and how best to target resources.

“Over the next decade, the strategy will ensure that issues around equality, diversity, inclusion and intersectionality are fully considered and addressed within each workstream and as part of a comprehensive approach to change.”

Section 3: Child Sexual Abuse – Evidence and Context

Child sexual abuse encompasses all forms of sexual harm experienced by children under the age of 18. It includes abuse perpetrated by adults or other children and can occur in a wide range of contexts, both offline and online.

Forms of child sexual abuse include:

- sexual abuse by adults within or connected to the family
- sexual abuse by other trusted adults
- harmful sexual behaviour by siblings
- harmful sexual behaviour by other children and young people
- child sexual exploitation by individuals or groups
- online child sexual abuse and exploitation, including grooming, image based abuse and sexual extortion

Digital technology can feature in almost all forms of child sexual abuse, whether as the primary context for abuse or as a facilitating factor.

The impact of child sexual abuse can be lifelong and can affect every aspect of an individual's life. Though each individual's experience is unique, research has identified the following potential impacts on the lives of victim-survivors⁹:

- Anxiety, depression, eating disorders, sleep disruption, dissociation, PTSD, and personality disorders.
- Various physical health issues, including gastrointestinal, gynaecological, cardiopulmonary health, and chronic pain.
- Impacts on psychosexual and psychosocial development, impacting sexual functioning and relationships in adolescence and adulthood.

- While some victim-survivors practice protective parenting, others face challenges with boundaries.
- The impact varies based on the child's age, relationship to the abuser, duration of abuse, other childhood experiences, and responses to disclosure.
- The impact is also influenced by sex, culture, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity¹⁰.
- The abuse affects non-abusing parents and society, with high emotional and financial costs (over £10 billion annually)¹¹.

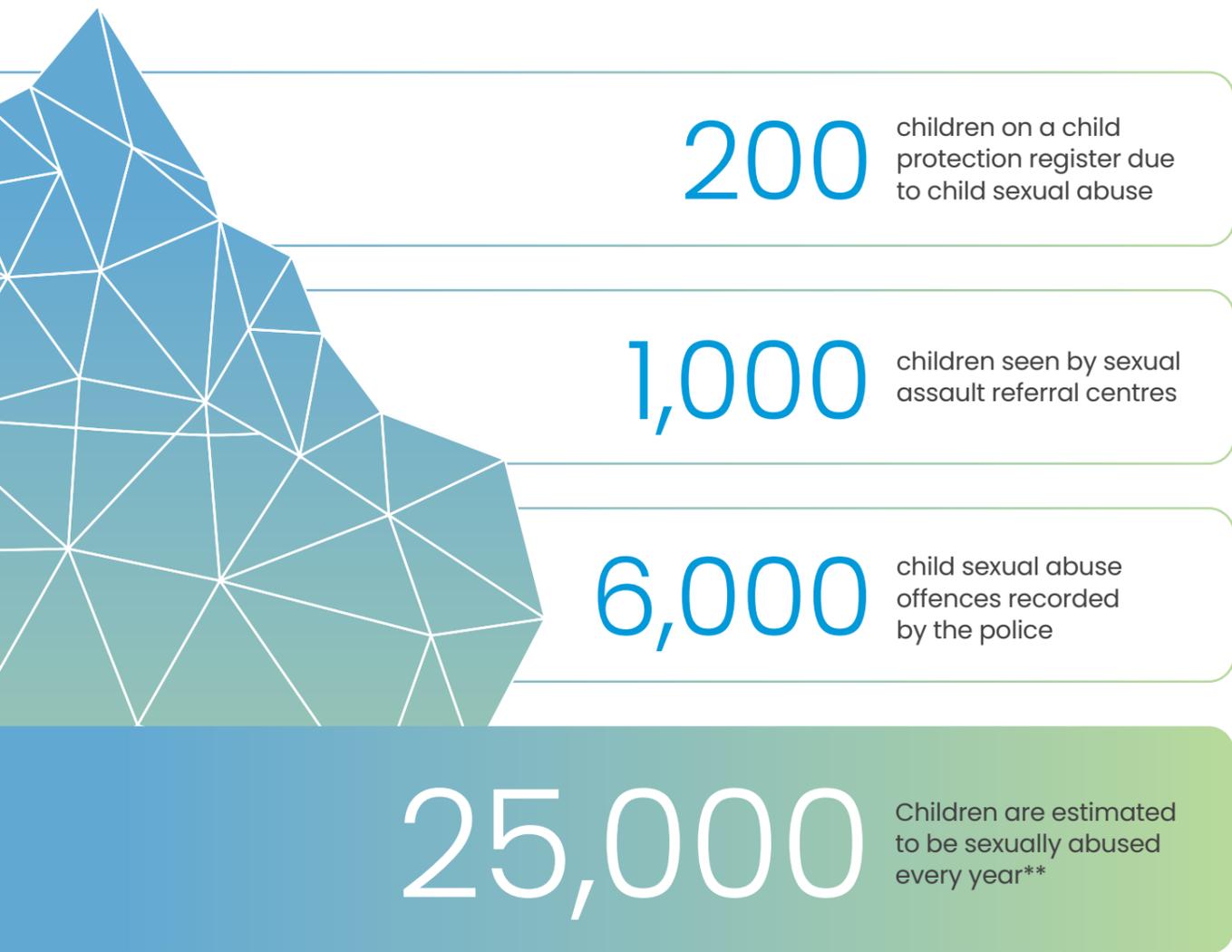
3.0

It is estimated that 25,000 children and young people are sexually abused each year in Wales.

In Wales, the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse’s Child sexual abuse in 2023/24: Trends in official

data¹² shows that close to 6,000 child sexual abuse offences were recorded by the police in 2023/24 but only 14% of investigations in Wales resulted in a decision to charge the offender(s)

Far more children are sexually abused than services identify in Wales.



Sources: Home Office, Police recorded crime and outcomes 2023/24, Welsh Government, 2025, NHS Wales, 2024. **Estimate calculated using single-year prevalence estimated by age group (Radford et al. 2011, Childhood abuse and neglect in the UK today) and the Office for National Statistics mid-year population estimated, 2023. Please note numbers rounded to the nearest hundred/thousand.

¹² Child sexual abuse in 2023/24: Trends in official data

3.0

The number of children placed on the child protection register under the category of sexual abuse has declined steadily in Wales over the past 20 years (Karsna and Kelly, 2021). In 2023/24, just under 200 children in Wales were registered on the Child Protection Register due to sexual abuse, 15% fewer than in the previous year and accounting for only 5% of all registrations in that year.

The variation among local authorities in the use of registrations due to sexual abuse is significant: the proportion of children whose registration included sexual abuse as a reason, ranged from 0% to 19% of all child protection registrations in 2023/24. More information about the local data in Wales can be found in the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse **Data Insights Hub**.

Child Protection Registration is only one measure used as an indicator of the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Wales. This refers to the number of children and young people who have a care and support protection plan in place and their names have been added to the Child Protection Register because of sexual harm/abuse.

Stakeholders advise they are working with many more children and young people under a voluntary care and support plan and that children who are care experienced are also at high risk of sexual abuse. Systems to capture this experience at a national level will be developed. Improving data collection, reporting and embedding multi-agency data analysis is a priority for this strategy.

3.1 Who is affected by child sexual abuse?

When considering child sexual abuse, the primary focus is, quite appropriately, on the child who has experienced harm. Ensuring their safety and well-being remains paramount. However, the responsibility of safeguarding extends beyond the individual child. The effects of child sexual abuse can be far-reaching, impacting families, parents/caregivers, siblings and wider communities.

An effective safeguarding partnership must adopt a comprehensive approach that recognises these broader implications and ensures that appropriate support is available to all those affected, whether directly or indirectly.

This means recognising and addressing the needs of:

- **Children who are vulnerable to risk of sexual abuse** – ensuring early intervention and prevention.
- **Children who have been sexually abused** – providing timely protection and therapeutic support.
- **Parents/caregivers, siblings, and wider family members** – who may experience trauma, confusion, and distress as they navigate the impact of abuse.

- **Adults who were sexually abused in childhood** – whose experiences may continue to affect their wellbeing and relationships.
- **Children who display harmful sexual behaviour** – requiring tailored interventions to prevent further harm and promote healthy development.
- **Families of children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour** – who often need guidance and support to manage complex emotions and behaviours.
- **Adults who are a potential risk for sexually abusing children** – where proactive measures can prevent abuse before it occurs.
- **Adults who have sexually abused children** – including those who engage in online offences such as viewing child sexual abuse material, ensuring accountability and rehabilitation where appropriate.
- **Families of adults who have sexually abused children** – who may face stigma, isolation, and emotional turmoil.

A holistic approach is required, one that balances safety, accountability and recovery, and recognises the interconnected impacts across families and communities.

3.2 What is intrafamilial child sexual abuse?

Intrafamilial child sexual abuse refers to sexual abuse perpetrated by family members or individuals in a familial context, such as parents, siblings, step-parents, or other relatives. It often occurs in the context of ongoing relationships and trust, making disclosure particularly complex. Intrafamilial child sexual abuse involves a range of sexually abusive behaviours that including contact and non-contact acts which frequently coexist with other forms of harm such as emotional abuse or neglect. The dynamics of family relationships mean that intrafamilial child sexual abuse is often hidden, with victims facing significant barriers to recognition and support.

The prevalence of intrafamilial child sexual abuse

Research indicates that intrafamilial child sexual abuse is one of the most common forms of child sexual abuse. Estimates suggest that between one-third and two-thirds of all child sexual abuse cases involve a family member. However, prevalence figures vary due to underreporting and methodological challenges.

Few victims disclose their experiences, and many wait until adulthood or never speak out at all. Because so much abuse remains hidden, official statistics greatly underestimate how widespread intrafamilial child sexual abuse truly is. Both boys and girls are impacted, though official reports more often identify girls as victims.

Diversity and intrafamilial child sexual abuse

Intrafamilial child sexual abuse occurs across all communities, cultures, and socioeconomic groups. While research shows no single profile of families where intrafamilial child sexual abuse happens, certain factors, such as isolation, family stress, and secrecy can increase vulnerability. Cultural norms and beliefs may influence disclosure and responses, with some communities facing additional barriers due to stigma or fear of family breakdown.

Children with disabilities and those in stepfamilies may be at heightened risk. Understanding diversity is essential for tailoring prevention and support, ensuring responses are sensitive to cultural and individual circumstances.

3.2

Working together to address intrafamilial child sexual abuse

Effective responses to intrafamilial child sexual abuse require coordinated, multi-agency working. Professionals across social care, health, education, and criminal justice must share information and collaborate to safeguard children and support non-abusing family members.

Building trust with families is critical, as is providing specialist therapeutic support for victims. Prevention strategies should include raising awareness, improving professional confidence in identifying and responding to intrafamilial child sexual abuse, and addressing systemic barriers to disclosure.

Long-term engagement is often needed, given the profound impact of intrafamilial child sexual abuse on victims and family dynamics. A whole-system, child-centred approach is required. Professionals should:

- Be alert to indicators and not rely solely on verbal disclosure.
- Build trust through authenticity, compassion and advocacy, enabling choice, control, and safety.

- Provide early and ongoing support, including therapeutic help that involves non-abusing carers.
- Strengthen multi-agency practice so it is not overly police-led but maintains priority for intrafamilial child sexual abuse alongside other safeguarding issues.
- Invest in training to raise professional confidence on denial, retraction, and safety planning in complex family contexts

Sibling sexual abuse

Research indicates that children are as likely to be sexually abused by their siblings (brothers, sisters, stepbrothers, and stepsisters) as by their parents¹³.

Research indicates that sibling sexual abuse can have severe and long-lasting effects on survivors' health and well-being. The trauma experienced can lead to various emotional, psychological, and behavioural issues. Efforts to address this issue include raising awareness, providing support for survivors, and improving professional responses to disclosures of sibling sexual abuse. During the development of this strategy, stakeholders have consistently raised the need for a whole family approach to this issue.

¹³ Sibling sexual abuse project – SARSAS

3.2

The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse (CSA Centre) has stated that sibling sexual abuse is a common form of sexual abuse that has devastating consequences for the whole family. Differentiating between normative sexual behaviour among siblings and abusive behaviour is crucial for effective intervention and support¹⁴.

Sibling sexual abuse has severe and long-term impacts. Responses to such abuse should balance safety, healing, and justice. Professionals must be able to recognise the range of sibling sexual behaviours and understand the experiences of the children involved.

Responses must balance:

- immediate safety
- therapeutic support for all children involved
- support for parents and carers
- prevention of further harm

Stakeholders consistently emphasised the need for a whole family approach, underpinned by clear guidance, professional training and access to specialist support.

3.3 Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB)**Definition**

Harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) refer to developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviours displayed by children and young people under 18 that are harmful to themselves or others, including contact, non contact and online behaviours (All Wales Practice Guide, 2019). Harm is equally significant across contexts, requiring proportionate, child centred safeguarding responses for both children who display HSB and those who are harmed.

Prevalence

HSB remains a significant component of child sexual abuse (CSA) in the UK. Research indicates that approximately one third of contact CSA is perpetrated by another child (Radford et al., 2011). This pattern has remained consistent over time. In Wales, police data since 2020 indicates that around 50% of CSA suspects are under 18 (Tarian ROCU & Hydrant, 2024).

¹⁴ Sibling sexual abuse: A knowledge and practice overview – CSA Centre

3.3

Estyn's We Don't Tell Our Teachers (2021) highlights online environments as the most common context for peer on peer sexual harm. Despite growing awareness, inconsistent data capture limits understanding of true prevalence, hindering effective service planning and evaluation.

Children Who Display HSB: Complexity and Diversity

Children who display HSB are not a homogeneous group. Research consistently shows high levels of vulnerability, adversity and trauma among this population (McNeish & Scott, 2023). Older children displaying HSB are predominantly boys with histories of adverse childhood experiences, though girls and younger children are also affected.

Evidence highlights gendered responses, with girls more likely to receive welfare based interventions and boys more often subject to criminal justice responses (Hallett et al., 2019). Barnardo's Cymru data suggest that around 50% of children accessing specialist HSB services also experience sexual exploitation, with many having multiple, unresolved trauma histories.

Distinct Needs of Specific Groups

- **Younger children (pre pubescent):**
HSB is more likely to be reactive, communicative or mimicked behaviour linked to distress or exposure to harm, requiring developmentally informed responses.
- **Disabled and neurodivergent children:**
These children are overrepresented both as victims of CSA and among those who display HSB, and face additional barriers to disclosure, understanding harm and accessing appropriate education and support.

Proportionate and Preventative Responses

HSB exists along a continuum, from inappropriate or problematic behaviour to abusive or violent acts (Hackett continuum). Distinguishing HSB from normative sexual development is complex and requires professional understanding of healthy development, consent and power dynamics.

Evidence shows most children who experience sexual abuse do not go on to display HSB, and most children who display HSB do not offend as adults (McNeish & Scott, 2023). Early identification and intervention are therefore critical.

3.3

Barnardo's Discovery Project (2019) found that 66% of children referred for abusive or violent HSB had previously displayed inappropriate sexual behaviour, often on multiple occasions, with families reporting missed opportunities for earlier help.

There is no single effective intervention model; however, research and practice evidence consistently support:

- Holistic, trauma informed, child centred approaches
- Interventions involving parents and carers
- Developmentally informed, relational and multi systemic practice
- Whole school, long term prevention education
- Public health approaches addressing gender inequality and harmful norms

Key Messages

- Strengthen consistent implementation and oversight of the national HSB pathway across Wales.
- Improve national data collection on HSB, including online contexts.
- Prioritise early help and preventative responses to avoid escalation.
- Ensure equity and proportionality across gender, age, disability and geography.
- Embed the voices of children and families to inform service design and evaluation.

3.4 Child Sexual Exploitation

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) involves children under 18 and is a form of child sexual abuse that occurs when an individual or group attempts to or engages a child into participating in contact or non-contact sexual acts:

- a. in exchange for something the child or young person needs or wants, and/or
- b. for the financial gain, increased status or other reward for the perpetrator.

The thing that the child wants or need can include the withdrawal of something, for example threats to harm themselves or someone they care about. Perpetrators can include those who may not engage in sexual acts themselves but facilitate sexual abuse by others¹⁵.

There is no single ‘type’ or perpetrator of CSE. Perpetrators can include those who target children and young people deliberately and/or opportunistically. Coercion and control are often employed by perpetrators and facilitators of CSE as a tool to ensure that children engage in sexual acts.

Research highlights that children may perceive exploitative relationships or abusive sexual exchanges as consensual due to unmet emotional needs, trauma, or constrained choices. Some children can understand

they are being harmed but struggle to ask for help because their needs are being met in some way or they fear what will happen to them and that they will be blamed if they do ask for help. When grooming processes occur this can be –both offline and online– typically including stages of access, trust building, need fulfilment, isolation, and sexualisation¹⁶.

In Wales, Working Together to Safeguard People: Volume 7 – Safeguarding Children from Child Sexual Exploitation defines CSE as a form of child sexual abuse and mandates a rights based, child centred, and multi agency safeguarding approach. This statutory guidance applies to all devolved and non devolved safeguarding partners and embeds CSE within Wales’s unique legislative framework under the Social Services and Well being (Wales) Act 2014.

Academic findings align closely with Welsh practice and statutory guidance, which emphasises that the way in which sexual exploitation is understood by the child will vary from child to child, and that children frequently experience exploitation alongside other adversities such as neglect, emotional abuse, going missing, or criminal exploitation¹⁷.

¹⁵ Working Together to Safeguard People ¹⁶ Guide to the OSA and its implementation – October 2025 – web version
¹⁷ Safeguarding Wales

3.4

Prevalence of Child Sexual Exploitation

Peer reviewed studies show that CSE is a widespread and evolving safeguarding concern. Research on UK offender networks demonstrates that network based CSE is structurally fluid, often involving loosely connected offenders and peer facilitated victim recruitment¹⁸.

Wales specific evidence reinforces this picture.

- The **Keeping Safe? study** (Cardiff University), examining 10 years of CSE casework in Wales involving 205 children, found high levels of trauma, complex needs, previous familial and non-familial sexual abuse, and long term instability in outcomes¹⁹.
- The **Welsh Government’s Review of Wales’s CSE Guidance** identified variation in practitioner understanding, inconsistent assessment using the SERAF, and widespread misconceptions about consent, agency, and exchange²⁰.

- Academic research into policy implementation shows that, one year after introduction, many Welsh practitioners were still unaware of the new CSE guidance—highlighting major challenges in implementation and consistency across local authorities²¹.

Online CSE is rapidly increasing and closely associated with significant psychological harm. A systematic review of online CSE shows escalating complexity in technological grooming, coercion, and sexual extortion²².

National Welsh safeguarding documents confirm that CSE remains a priority across regional safeguarding boards, including the need for consistent thresholds, multi agency pathways, and aligned disruption plans²³.

¹⁸ Summary of the National audit on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse | NSPCC Learning
¹⁹ <https://www.anncrafttrust.org/keeping-safe-an-analysis-of-work-with-sexually-exploited-young-people-in-wales/> ²⁰ Review of the Wales Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Statutory Guidance ²¹ Understanding the implementation of children’s social care policy in Wales: A study of the new Child Sexual Exploitation guidance | Health Care Research Wales ²² child sexual exploitation and abuse ²³ child-exploitation-strategy-document.pdf

3.4

Diversity among Children Affected by CSE

Academic research consistently demonstrates that children affected by CSE—both across the UK and within Wales—form a heterogeneous cohort shaped by intersecting vulnerabilities.

Wales specific research provides clear examples:

- The **Review of Wales' CSE Guidance** found that children vulnerable to or with experiences of sexual abuse by exploitation in Wales often had histories of adverse childhood experiences, disrupted education, poverty related stressors, and limited supportive networks.
- The **Keeping Safe? study** identified high levels of trauma, mental health difficulties, unstable accommodation, poor family relationships, and previous experience of sexual abuse. Many children experienced overlapping harms including sexual abuse, physical abuse and child criminal exploitation.

These are children whose experiences and circumstances make it more likely that they have unmet needs and poor self-esteem. This in turn means that they are vulnerable to exploitation²⁴.

Academic research on grooming identifies vulnerability factors such as disability, developmental immaturity, isolation, and previous abuse. These findings complement the All Wales Practice Guides, which emphasise that disabled children and those with communication needs face heightened barriers in recognising or reporting CSE. Other research also shows that gendered assumptions influence risk assessments—girls are more likely to be viewed as making “risky choices”, while boys remain under recognised—an issue also reflected in Welsh multi agency reviews²⁵.

²⁴ Working Together to Safeguard People ²⁵ Confronting group-based child sexual exploitation in the UK - Humanium

3.4

Responses to CSE

Academic research highlights the need for trauma informed, developmentally appropriate, and holistic responses that address children's care and support needs. Effective assessment must be based on a clear understanding of a child's care and support needs including what is important to them, alongside their trauma history, relational context, psychological wellbeing, and understanding of their abuse.

These academic principles align strongly with Wales specific statutory duties in **Working Together to Safeguard People: Volume 7**, which requires:

- child centred, rights based safeguarding
- consistent multi agency procedures across Wales
- early intervention and prevention
- coordinated disruption of perpetrators
- holistic care and support that prioritises recovery
- clear child friendly justice pathways.

Academic literature on offender behaviour underscores the importance of understanding grooming stages and digital offending typologies to inform early identification and effective disruption²⁶.

Prevention research shows that awareness raising alone is insufficient; effective programmes must reduce vulnerabilities which is why this strategy is related to wider prevention approaches.

²⁶ Guide to the OSA and its implementation - October 2025 - web version

3.5 Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (OCSEA)

To Note: this can also be referred to as Technology Assisted Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (TACSEA)

Definition

Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation happens when digital or online technology is used at any stage of abuse. This can happen only online or move between online and offline contact. It includes:

- Creating or sharing child sexual abuse material (CSAM)
- Online grooming and sexual messaging
- Live streamed sexual abuse
- Sexual extortion (“sextortion”)
- Pressured or unwanted sharing of sexual images
- Online harassment or threats
- Exposure to pornography

OCSEA is growing because new technologies (including AI) make it easier to create and share harmful content. All Wales Safeguarding Procedures and Working Together to Safeguard People: Volume 7 – Safeguarding Children from Child Sexual Exploitation require practitioners to recognise online abuse as equally serious as contact abuse and to respond in a child centred, rights based way.

A major challenge is that countries and sectors use different terms. This leads to confusion and makes it harder to protect children:

- OCSEA is used internationally.
- TACSEA/TACSA is common in the UK and highlights that abuse involving technology must be treated as real sexual abuse, not “less serious”.
- CSAM (child sexual abuse material) emphasises that children cannot consent to being in sexual images.

Different terms can lead to unequal protection for online victims—something this strategy is committed to avoiding.

Online risks sit across four categories:

- Content children see
- Contact from others
- Conduct (children’s own actions online)
- Contract (commercial risks like scams or exploitation)

Not all online risks lead to harm. Whether harm occurs depends on the child’s circumstances, the platform design, and the safety features available.

3.5

Evidence shows most online grooming begins in private messaging spaces, not public platforms. Offenders often move children from public sites to encrypted apps, where abuse is harder to detect.

Prevalence

Global and UK evidence shows large scale and increasing levels of online abuse:

Global data

- Over 300 million children have experienced online sexual exploitation or abuse in the past year.
- 1 in 8 children have been sexually solicited online.
- 1 in 8 children have been shown or sent sexual images without consent.

UK data

- The Internet Watch Foundation confirmed 291,273 webpages containing CSAM in 2024, 91% of which were self generated by children.
- UK hosted CSAM URLs rose by 244% in one year.
- There were 7,263 recorded online grooming offences last year—a 99% increase since 2017/18. Most involved girls, and the youngest victim was four years old.

Wales lacks comprehensive prevalence data due to issues with disaggregation, but what is known shows growing harm:

- Online grooming crimes doubled since 2017/18.
- 549 offences were recorded in 2024, with South Wales Police recording the highest number.

The Strategy commits to strengthening Wales level data availability and analysis.

Impact

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse can cause serious and lasting harm, even without physical contact. Evidence shows children may experience:

- Depression, anxiety, fear and shame
- Post Traumatic Stress symptoms
- Self blame and long term emotional distress
- Ongoing re victimisation when abuse images circulate online
- Increased vulnerability to further exploitation

Abuse experienced in virtual or immersive environments can be as psychologically damaging as physical sexual abuse. Professionals often underestimate these harms because the abuse happens online.

3.5

OCSEA is a public health issue affecting mental health services, schools, families, and communities. Wales's approach includes:

- Working Together to Safeguard People: Volume 7 (statutory CSE guidance)
- All Wales Safeguarding Procedures – Online Abuse Guide
- The Digital Resilience in Education Action Plan
- Commitment to the WeProtect Model National Response
- Work to ensure OCSEA victims receive equal protection and support as victims of contact abuse.

This strategy is committed to embedding OCSEA within the wider child sexual abuse response, ensuring children are safe and supported.

Key Messages

- Online sexual abuse is real sexual abuse.
- Technology enables new forms of exploitation, often hidden and fast moving.
- Many children do not recognise abuse, and professionals sometimes underestimate it.
- OCSEA is widespread, severe, and growing, including in Wales.
- Online harm needs a whole system, public health, and child centred response.
- Wales has strong frameworks in place but needs improved data, consistency, and early intervention.
- Support must address both psychological harm and ongoing risks created by persistent online images.

“When considering child sexual abuse, the primary focus is, quite appropriately, on the child who has experienced harm. Ensuring their safety and well-being remains paramount.”

Section 4:

The voices of children, young people and adult victim-survivors

4.1 Key messages from children

Careful consideration was given to how the voices of children and young people could be captured in the strategy and delivery plan without risking re-traumatisation.

A Rapid Review was commissioned of the last five years of international research that included talking and listening to children and in which they had expressed views on how to prevent child sexual abuse, the effectiveness of the multi-agency safeguarding response to child sexual abuse and the support they had been offered/received.

The author was asked to capture any good practice identified by children and young people and conversely to capture any messages from them about how this can be improved.

A summary of issues identified by children and young people has been used to develop statements that describe what good practice should look like. These are set out in the table below and have been used to shape actions in the Delivery Plan 2026-2029.

| Issue identified | Good looks like... |
|---|--|
| Online safety courses are either non-existent or insufficient to protect them against the threats they face online. | Online safety courses are available and cover issues around child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours. |
| Children and young people did not feel that they were given the right tools to manage their safety online. | Safety education provides children and young people with the tools and knowledge to reduce their risk of child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours. |
| Adults not understanding the importance of the online world to children and young people, and of the risks they face. | Caregivers and other significant adults have sufficient knowledge of online safety and risk to support children and young people. |
| Sexual education in schools is out of date and insufficient. | Sexual education curriculum is codesigned with children and young people, ensuring that the content is relevant and useful. |

| Issue identified | Good looks like... |
|--|--|
| Online platform providers not taking responsibility for the safety of their users. | Online platform providers are proactive in their approach to protecting their users, focusing on preventing harm and taking action when harms/crimes are identified. |
| Family and other adults (including schools) feeling uncomfortable talking about bodies and sex, leading to abuse being even harder to discuss. | Caregivers and other relevant adults combat stigma through open discussion of topics associated with bodies and sex. |
| <p>Cultural barriers such as victim blaming and shame or stigma around abuse prevent disclosure.</p> <p>Cultural barriers to disclosure for boys and young men, and LGBTQ+. Including not being seen as a victim and feeling that they would not be believed.</p> | The evidence base has been utilised to increase understanding of the nature of child sexual behaviour and harmful sexual behaviours in both children and young people, and the adults who respond to them. |
| <p>Shame and guilt act as a barrier to disclosure and seeking support.</p> <p>Concern for the wellbeing of the offender if they had disclosed, and concern as a preventative factor in disclosure.</p> <p>Disclosure delays due to children and young people not considering the abuse to be serious at the time the abuse took place.</p> | Children and young people are educated about child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours, including aspects such as the age of consent and legal definitions of harm and abuse. |
| Fear of stigma when accessing psychological and emotional support. | Society recognises the benefit of psychological support, and this is reinforced with children and young people by those around them. |
| <p>Low awareness of disclosure routes and mechanisms.</p> <p>Low awareness of support options and what happens after disclosure.</p> | Sexual education in schools includes details of where to disclose and what will happen afterwards, including support services, criminal justice and other relevant processes (e.g. medical) |
| Professionals receiving disclosure of online sexual abuse do not understand the nature of the crime/harm and how to respond | Professionals keep up to date with online forms of harm and abuse to respond effectively to disclosure. |

| Issue identified | Good looks like... |
|---|--|
| <p>Children and young people disclose and are not believed.</p> <p>Professionals do not know how to relate to children and young people who disclose child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours.</p> | Children and young people are believed by those they report to as they have the skills and knowledge to receive disclosure from young people. |
| <p>Concerns about confidentiality and anonymity following disclosure act as a barrier to reporting.</p> <p>Negative experiences of statutory service responses to disclosure discourage future disclosure.</p> | <p>Children and young people are assured of their rights and are confident in the measures in place to ensure them.</p> <p>Activities in relation to improving the response to child sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour are widely publicised, including to schools and practitioners specifically.</p> |
| <p>Long wait times for support to begin resulted in children and young people feeling that they were not important and increased worries around not being believed.</p> <p>Limited numbers of sessions prevented any meaningful therapeutic intervention, often serving only to retraumatise the young person.</p> <p>Inconsistent support provision where support ended without warning or the practitioner was changed without consultation.</p> <p>Difficulty in accessing support services due to rural locations and the need to travel long distances.</p> <p>Lack of choice in the type of support provided.</p> <p>Lack of choice in the practitioner delivering the support.</p> | <p>Support happens immediately, or where there are waiting lists for services the child is informed of this and kept updated. Other options for support are suggested for the interim period.</p> <p>Support is tailored to the individual's needs and there is a clear sense of the objectives and outcomes of the therapeutic intervention which the child has been supported to identify.</p> <p>Changes are communicated clearly and in good time.</p> <p>Children and young people living in rural and remote areas enjoy parity of access with those in urban and suburban areas.</p> <p>The type of support is determined by the individual and the needs they have been supported to identify.</p> <p>Services can take time to match practitioners and service users. Where effective therapeutic relationships do not develop the process for reallocation does not disadvantage the service user.</p> |

4.1

It has been the intention from the beginning of this work in 2023 to establish a children and young people's advisory group to work with policy, strategy and practice colleagues throughout the next decade to inform all parts of the strategy and shape actions in the delivery plans. This would be a group that would drive change as well as advise professionals on what would work well from their perspectives.

Key partners from third sector services that support children and young people will advise and assist in the development of the children and young people's advisory group.

The Rapid Review recommended that links should be made with other forums for children and young people to consult and engage as widely as possible on specific issues e.g. Youth Forums. This is reflected in the 2026–2029 Delivery Plan, will be detailed in the Communication and Engagement Plan being developed in the first year and will continue throughout the lifetime of the strategy.

4.2 Ensuring adult victim-survivors' voices are heard throughout the lifetime of the Strategy

The voices of adult victim-survivors have been central to the development of the strategy, and this will continue throughout the next decade. An advisory group for adult victim-survivors will form part of the delivery structure and will not be a passive recipient of professional ideas but play an active role in developing and implementing actions and hold the Welsh Government and key partners to account for progress being made.

Key third sector partners including victim-survivors' groups from across Wales are informing the development of the advisory group to ensure that the role of victim-survivors is demonstrably valued by providing payment and recognition and they are properly supported throughout the engagement process.

In recognition that there is no 'one size fits all' in terms of consulting and engagement with victim-survivors, other ways in which victim-survivors can contribute will be explored.

“The voices of adult victim-survivors have been central to the development of the strategy, and this will continue throughout the next decade.”

Section 5: Preventing, Protecting, Responding and Supporting

The strategy focuses on four key strategic objectives:

1 Preventing child sexual abuse

2 Protecting children when there are concerns about child sexual abuse

3 Supporting children, non-abusing parents/ caregivers, siblings and other family members

4 Supporting adult victim-survivors

A strong, coordinated multi agency response is essential to realising the vision for a Wales where all children and young people are safe from sexual abuse, where families receive timely and effective support, and where adult victim survivors can recover and thrive. Delivering this vision requires sustained collaboration across the whole safeguarding system, including the Welsh Government, the National Independent Safeguarding Board, Regional Safeguarding Boards and their constituent partners, statutory agencies, the third sector, and communities.

Key stakeholders believe strongly that implementing the following actions will create a strong foundation for all other activities being undertaken under the strategy.

These are:

1. Developing and embedding a national core data set

Developing and embedding a national core data set is critical to strengthening Wales's whole system response to child sexual abuse. At present, the absence of consistent, comparable data across agencies limits our ability to fully understand prevalence, patterns of harm, service demand, and outcomes for children, families, and adult victim-survivors.

A core data set will create a shared foundation of information that is collected in the same way across all regions and sectors, enabling a clearer picture of risk and need. This will support improved decision making at national and regional levels, enhance the ability of agencies to identify gaps in provision, and create a more accurate understanding of what works in prevention, protection, and recovery. Consistency in data collection also strengthens accountability by ensuring that the safeguarding system can measure progress against strategic objectives and identify areas requiring targeted improvement.

5.0

Going forward, the core data set will function as a central tool for planning, oversight, and continuous improvement. It will support the Welsh Government and key partners to monitor trends, allocate resources more effectively, and commission services based on robust evidence. Over time, the data set will enable richer analysis of children’s journeys through the safeguarding system, highlight disparities in access or experience, and inform improvements in multi agency pathways and training needs.

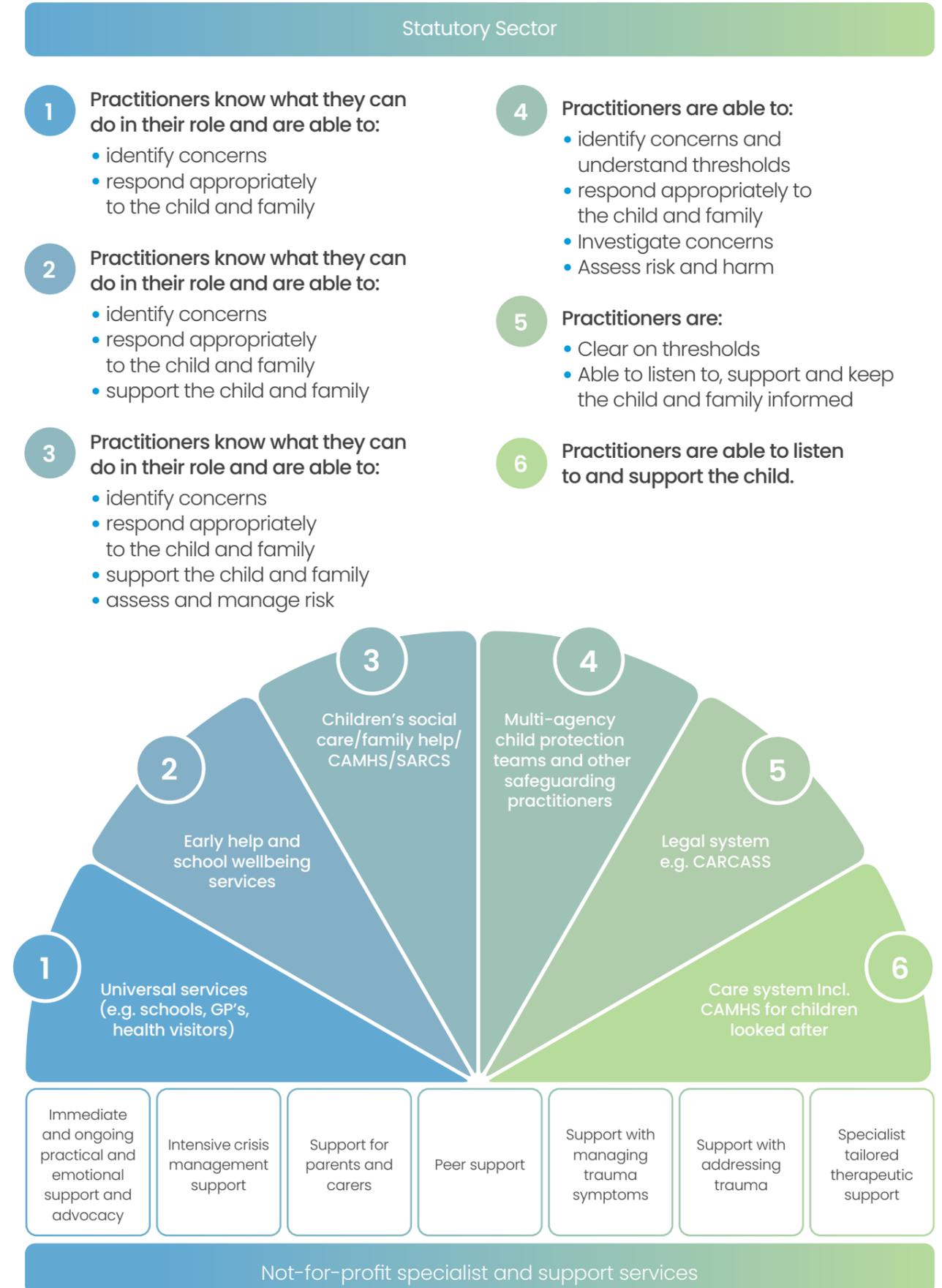
Importantly, it will also help to ensure that the voices and experiences of children, families, and adult survivors are better reflected in our understanding of system performance. By embedding the core data set within routine practice, Wales will strengthen its capacity to deliver a coordinated, evidence led approach to preventing child sexual abuse and supporting all those affected.

2. Embedding a National Training Framework for Child Sexual Abuse

A skilled and confident workforce is central to effective multi agency practice. The strategy commits to embedding a national training framework that supports all professionals to:

- recognise concerns at an early stage,
- respond confidently and appropriately,
- apply trauma informed approaches, and
- share information safely and effectively.

This shared foundation will help ensure that multi agency decisions are timely, child centred, and informed by best practice. The below diagram explains the roles of the statutory sector and third sector services.



5.0

3. Embedding National Pathways to Improve Co-ordination

Clear national pathways support consistent multi agency responses and reduce regional variation. Priority will be placed on embedding the national multi agency pathway for child sexual abuse, ensuring it is fully understood and routinely applied across all relevant sectors.

The national pathway for responding to Harmful Sexual Behaviour will continue to be embedded and reviewed, with learning from practice feeding into ongoing improvement work. Effective use of these pathways will strengthen coordination, improve professional confidence and provide clearer routes for children and families seeking help.

Additionally, the strategy and actions in the delivery plan aim to:

Reduce Barriers to Raising Concerns

Effective multi agency responses depend on concerns being raised early. However, professionals, families, and communities may face emotional, cultural or practical barriers that make this difficult. The strategy commits to understanding these barriers and addressing them through improved information, strengthened public awareness, and accessible guidance on what to do when concerns arise.

Increasing public confidence in recognising and reporting concerns will support earlier intervention and better outcomes for children and adult victim-survivors.

Enhance Support Pathways for Children, Families and Adult Victim-Survivors

Better coordinated support is essential for recovery. This includes mapping current provision, improving commissioning structures, and embedding trauma informed approaches in frontline services. The multi agency system must respond not only to the needs of children and young people, but also to non abusing parents, caregivers, siblings, and adult victim survivors.

Understanding the lived experiences of those affected by child sexual abuse will guide the development of services that are responsive, accessible, and sustainable.

5.0

The contribution of other policy areas in the Welsh Government

In addition to what will be delivered under this Strategy, a range of policy areas in the Welsh Government contribute to achieving the strategy's vision, both directly and indirectly.

For example, addressing tackling child poverty plays a critical role in reducing risk. Children living in poverty are more likely to experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which increase vulnerability to harm and raises the likelihood of poor outcomes such as depression, anxiety, or substance misuse. Reducing poverty helps create safer environments, supports healthy development, and builds resilience thus reducing the risk of experiencing child sexual abuse.

Other policy areas, such as Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV), have a direct impact on preventing and responding to child sexual abuse and supporting recovery. These policies challenge harmful attitudes, promote healthy relationships, and provide support for victim-survivors of sexual abuse/violence. Evidence shows that individuals who have experienced child sexual abuse are at greater risk of sexual violence in later relationships, highlighting the importance of integrated approaches.

Appendix 1 outlines the interconnections between this strategy and other Welsh Government strategies and action plans demonstrating how collective action across the Welsh Government will strengthen our ability to prevent, protect, respond and support those affected by child sexual abuse.

Section 6: Delivery structure

The delivery structure will be developed in partnership with key stakeholders to ensure the right representation on each group and to reduce the risk of duplicating the work of existing structures like Regional Safeguarding Boards.

The purpose of the national structure will not be to prevent local/regional initiatives and improvements – there is a lot of excellent work already happening in Wales. Its purpose will be to:

- ensure key stakeholders are brought together to consider information at a national level that will inform commissioning and shape service provision going forward
- to provide Ministers with oversight of the implementation and effectiveness of the strategy
- to engage levers at a national level that may not be available at a local or regional level
- to ensure all relevant policy areas in the Welsh Government have a cohesive response to child sexual abuse
- to identify and scale up good practice.

Safeguarding and Advocacy team, Welsh Government

This team:

- will Chair the **Strategic Implementation and Oversight Board**
- holds responsibility for the delivery of the strategy and policy around child sexual abuse
- will provide secretariat functions for all groups established under the strategy
- will chair the task and finish groups for developing a data set, embedding a national pathway for child sexual abuse and implementing a training framework for child sexual abuse
- will participate in workstream groups
- will develop and maintain the delivery structure.

Strategic Implementation and Oversight Board

The purpose of the Board will be:

- to provide direction to workstream and any task and finish groups and oversee the effectiveness of their work
- to ensure that all key partners are engaged and held accountable for the work they do that contributes to achieving the strategic objectives
- to receive and consider reports from workstream and any task and finish groups

6.0

- to report to the Minister biannually on progress made, outputs, outcomes and impact (over time), challenges experienced and any recommendations for how to address these
- to develop and deliver a triennial report on progress made towards the strategic objectives and vision to the Minister and publish the final version

Membership will comprise:

- Senior leaders from local authorities, police, NHS Wales including the Safeguarding Service and Performance and Improvement, probation, youth justice
- Senior leaders from third sector organisations that provide services for people affected by child sexual abuse
- Chairs of Regional Safeguarding Boards
- Chair of the National Independent Safeguarding Board
- Children's Commissioner for Wales
- Older People's Commissioner for Wales
- Care Inspectorate Wales
- Healthcare Inspectorate Wales

- Estyn – Inspectorate for Education settings
- His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation
- His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

Workstream groups

Four workstream groups will be established to represent the strategic objectives:

- Preventing child sexual abuse
- Protecting and responding effectively to children when there are concerns about child sexual abuse
- Supporting children, non-abusing parents/ caregivers, siblings and other family members
- Supporting adult victim-survivors

Work plans for each of these groups are contained within the delivery plan 2026–2029 and based on the priorities identified through engagement and consultation. The groups will be chaired by representatives from the statutory or third sector and Welsh Government policy officials will be represented on each.

6.0

Membership of these groups will include (dependent on the respective work plans):

- Police, health, local authorities, probation, youth justice
- Operational managers from third sector organisations that provide support for people who have been affected by child sexual abuse
- Business Managers of Regional Safeguarding Boards
- Members of the National Independent Safeguarding Board
- Office of the Children's Commissioner
- Office of the Older People's Commissioner
- Relevant inspectorates
- Policy leads from the Welsh Government for intersecting issues like VAWDASV.

Children and Young People's Advisory group

Establishing a group of children and young people who have had experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation must be done sensitively and ethically. It is critical that members of this group have the support they need to be able to participate fully and safely, before, during and following engagement.

The Lundy model of participation²⁷ will underpin our approach. It provides a conceptual framework with four sequential dimensions:

- 1. Space:** A safe and inclusive place for children to express their views
- 2. Voice:** Providing information and support to children to express their views
- 3. Audience:** Ensuring children and young people's views are communicated to the right people
- 4. Influence:** Ensuring children and young people's views are taken seriously and acted upon.

It is crucial that the right support is in place and the group is appropriately resourced before members are engaged.

²⁷ The Lundy Model: Article 12 in Practice – Rights Respecting Schools Award

6.0

Therefore, following the launch of the strategy and the delivery plan for 2026–2029 third sector providers of services to children and relevant policy leads in the Welsh Government and victim-survivor groups will develop a route map to establishment. It is more important to set up the group correctly than to rush and risk causing potential re-traumatisation for children and young people.

There will be multiple ways for children and young people to engage outside of the group setting recognising that not everyone will want to share their views in front of peers.

Adult Victim-survivors Advisory group

Engagement with individuals and groups of victim-survivors has been central to the development of this strategy. It is equally important that the establishment of such a group is undertaken ethically and sensitively as it is for the Children and Young People's Advisory Group.

Though the Lundy model was developed for children's participation, the principles underpinning this are important for adults too. Adult victim-survivors need a safe and inclusive space to share their views; they need information and support to share their views; they need their views communicated to the right people; and they

need their views to be heard and acted upon.

To achieve a safe space, we need to ensure members are supported throughout engagement in a way that meets their needs.

For both Advisory groups a clear feedback process will be established – "You said, we did" – to show how their views have been shared, who they were shared with, and what actions have been taken in response.

Victim-survivors will be remunerated for their time as a signal of the value they add and in acknowledgment that they are experts by lived experience.

Monitoring and evaluation workstream group

At the end of year one of the strategy, a Monitoring and Evaluation workstream group will be established that will take forward work already completed to establish a core data set for child sexual abuse, develop a framework for monitoring outputs, outcomes and impact and make annual progress updates to the Strategic Implementation and Oversight Board.

This group will also be responsible for developing and implementing qualitative methods for measuring impact that will complement the quantitative data provided by a data set.

6.0

Qualitative methods include surveys, focus groups and interviews and will capture the lived experiences of children, young people and adult victim-survivors. The group will map how and when these methods will be employed through the lifetime of the strategy and will be informed by the work on the data set which will identify areas in which there is insufficient data or where mechanisms need to be built/changed to enable data reporting of new information.

Qualitative methods help to accurately represent the views of everyone involved with the strategy including the Welsh Government officials that are responsible for actions, stakeholders involved in its delivery, and most importantly, the children, young people and adult victim-survivors at the heart of the strategy.

This group will review and distil key messages from a range of sources:

- Core data set which will expand to include data from providers of services to children, family members and victim-survivors.
- Single Unified Safeguarding Review (SUSR) in which child sexual abuse has been identified as a factor

- Other reviews/inquiries that are pertinent e.g. national inquiry into group-based child sexual exploitation
- National and international surveys e.g. ONS Survey
- Messages for practice arising locally and regionally
- National and international research

This group will ensure that the information being received by the Strategic Implementation and Oversight Board is live to developing practice and emerging themes/issues and informs iterations of the strategy and delivery plans.

Task and finish groups

Three task and finish groups will be established in the first year to:

- develop a core data set;
- implement a training framework for child sexual abuse; and
- implement a national pathway for child sexual abuse.

6.0

During engagement and consultation these three actions were identified as critical to building a solid foundation for the strategy's ongoing work. Each of the groups will be chaired by the Safeguarding and Advocacy team to affirm the Welsh Government's commitment to ensure these important building blocks are in place as soon as possible. All three task and finish groups will report directly to the Strategic Implementation and Oversight Board. Establishing these groups is a key priority post publication.

Other task and finish groups may be established with clear terms of reference to undertake specific pieces of work. The need for these will be driven by various parts of the structure and bear in mind other work that is taking place across Wales.

“To achieve a safe space, we need to ensure members are supported throughout engagement in a way that meets their needs.”

Section 7: Monitoring and Evaluation

Robust systems for monitoring and evaluation are critical to ensure the strategy remains responsive to emerging evidence and issues. The strategy is supported by three-year delivery plans that maintain momentum in implementing actions and a framework that enables both internal and external scrutiny. This section sets out how these mechanisms will operate to drive accountability and continuous improvement.

7.1 Measuring outputs, outcomes and impact

To assess the strategy's impact, we will consider progress at five levels:

- Inputs – Resources needed to deliver the strategy, such as funding and specialist expertise.
- Actions – The activities and steps taken to implement the strategy.
- Outputs – Immediate products or deliverables from these actions, for example, awareness-raising materials.
- Outcomes – Higher-level changes measured through indicators that show progress toward strategic goals, such as child protection registration rates for sexual abuse.
- Long-term Impact – The overall effect of the strategy over time, reflecting the combined influence of all actions rather than any single measure.

Each of these will help to demonstrate progress made and provide evidence of whether the strategy is effectively impacting positively on the daily lives of the people in Wales who are affected by child sexual abuse.

In the short to medium term, monitoring and evaluation arrangements will focus on providing evidence of inputs, outputs and outcomes through a measurement framework and evaluation. This is reflective of the time required for changes to be made, embedded and have impact on individuals or groups. These methods will be matured to ensure we can measure impact across the decade of the strategy.

A priority of the strategy is to develop a core data set for child sexual abuse. This is one of the recommendations from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA).

7.1

Data available currently does not provide a holistic view of what is happening to children and young people in Wales.

There are several issues to consider:

- Child sexual abuse data is collected and reported across reserved areas like police and criminal courts and by devolved areas like social services.
- Each organisation has different data collection systems and reporting pathways and timescales for making this data available does not always align.
- Through the process of developing a core data set we are likely to identify more gaps in information.
- Data available is not always of a sufficiently robust quality.
- There is a lack of collective multi-agency analysis of the available data and data is not routinely shared across partners.

For these reasons data collection and reporting will need to be matured through the lifespan of this strategy. Improved data, data collection and multi-agency analysis would enable identification of themes, patterns and intelligence quickly and accurately.

A collaborative system for sharing and analysing this data would ensure that all agencies and organisations supporting children, young people, family members and adult victim-survivors have the fullest picture possible, and this supports the best use of limited resources.

7.2 Governance

All task and finish groups and workstream groups within the delivery structure will provide biannual highlight reports to the **Strategic Implementation and Oversight Board**. These highlight reports will:

- Inform the development of the **annual summary of progress**, which may lead to updates or amendments to the delivery plan.
- **Annual summaries of progress** will be provided to Ministers and published on the website pages of the Strategy and Delivery Plan.
- Contribute to a **comprehensive progress review every three years**, assessing:
 - Progress made
 - Challenges and barriers encountered
 - Recommendations for changes to the delivery plan

Subsequent Delivery Plans will be published for the periods **2029–2032** and **2032–2035**. In 2035–2036 the strategy will be revised in readiness for publication of a new iteration.

Additional actions to support transparency and accountability:

- **Develop a dedicated website to:**
 - Centralise child sexual abuse resources for all audiences
 - Provide real-time updates on achievements under the strategy
 - Enable stakeholders and the public to track effectiveness

Appendix 1:

The interrelationships between this strategy and other Government strategies and action plans

Appendix 1

Modern slavery

Child sexual exploitation is a form of modern slavery, as well as a form of child sexual abuse. Whilst modern slavery is a non-devolved area, the Welsh Government works with the UK Government, the other Devolved Governments, and multi-agency partners on responding to this crime. This includes through organising the Anti-Slavery Wales Forum and its four thematic working groups and delivering its work programme, as well as working with partner agencies to hold annual conferences.

In October 2025, the Welsh Government launched free online learning on modern slavery. This online learning includes content relating to child sexual exploitation.

Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV)

Our evidence base points strongly to the association between violence against women, domestic abuse, sexual violence and child sexual abuse.

The Welsh Government has clearly set out our ambition to tackle gender-based violence as evidenced through our groundbreaking **Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 ("the Act")**. The purpose of the Act is to improve: -

- (a) arrangements for the prevention of gender-based violence, domestic abuse and sexual violence
- (b) arrangements for the protection of victims of gender-based violence, domestic abuse and sexual violence
- (c) support for people affected by gender-based violence, domestic abuse and sexual violence.

The Act sets out in Section 3, the legal requirement for the Welsh Government to prepare, publish and review a national strategy. The national strategy must specify its objectives, the period of time in which Welsh Ministers expect to achieve the objectives and to identify the actions the Welsh Ministers propose to achieve the specified objectives.

The Act also requires that Local Authorities and Local Health Boards jointly develop local strategies which set out their objectives, timescales, and actions to meet the needs of people at a local level. The commissioning arrangements with other bodies such as Non-Government Organisation (NGO) delivery partners and specialist services are also accountable for their contribution.

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The Welsh Government published its second VAWDASV National Strategy for 2022 – 2026 in May 2022, which set out the vision to end violence against women and girls, domestic abuse and sexual violence in Wales.

The objectives and aspirations of the Act and the National Strategy contribute to the objectives and aspiration of this strategy. The Safeguarding and Advocacy team authoring this strategy are represented on the Children and Young People's workstream group and the Older People's workstream group of the VAWDASV Blueprint.

The VAWDASV strategy will need to be reviewed within six months of the Senedd elections. We will ensure there is alignment between this strategy and the development of a new VAWDASV strategy.

Digital Resilience and Safety

Enhancing digital resilience in education: An action plan to protect children and young people online - Hwb (gov. wales) aims to equip our children and young people with excellent knowledge, skills and strategies in these areas and to recognise when to access help and support and where to find it. It explains that the Welsh Government will continue to focus on three key areas: online safety, cyber resilience and data protection.

The team are raising awareness of emerging issues, which includes the rapid increase in AI-generated Child Sexual Abuse Materials (CSAM) through new Generative AI: Keeping learners safe online safeguarding guidance for schools. The Welsh Government and UKCIS '**Responding to incidents of sharing nudes: safeguarding and supporting children and young people**' guidance has been updated in 2024 to reflect an increase in sextortion cases and AI-generated images targeting children under 18. Developing professional learning and sharing resources to support education practitioners with digital safeguarding issues is an ongoing priority.

The team have also developed a range of online safety resources for children and young people, parents and carers and professionals which are bilingual and can be accessed free of charge on the Hwb website **Keeping safe online - Hwb**. One of the main challenges faced by those adults who support and keep children safe is their understanding of technology, how it can be used to abuse children sexually and how up to date their understanding is.

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The team have developed a suite of teaching materials for delivery in schools and work with schools to ensure they have robust online safety mechanisms in place.

The team are liaising with UK Government in respect of the Online Safety Act. We will be working closely with this team to deliver elements of this strategy.

The Online Safety Act 2023 addresses the challenges posed by digital technologies in the context of sexual offences. It makes it an offence to 'cyberflash', send unsolicited sexual images electronically, thereby expanding the scope of offences that can lead to registration and monitoring. There are several other pieces of legislation regarding the taking, making, distribution, and possession of indecent images of children/ pseudo-photographs, extreme pornographic images, "revenge porn" including Protection of Children Act 1978; Criminal Justice Act 1988; Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008; Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015; Coroners and Justice Act 2009.

Education

School and other educational settings play a critical role in building resilience in children and young people that reduces vulnerability, thereby reducing the risk of sexual abuse taking place. There are several plans and strategies that set out the expectations the Welsh Government has that schools and other settings will support families and promote the welfare of children and young people.

In November 2022, the Welsh Government published **Community Focused Schools (CFS) Guidance** advising schools how they can engage with families, communities and multi-agencies to support the needs of their learners and families and benefit the wider community. This enables children and families to access support to prevent issues from escalating. Most schools now have a Family Engagement Officer or similar and this role provides considerable support and assists families to access resources to address poverty, provide parenting support and signpost to other community services such as the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Our evidence base demonstrates that wider public health approaches to misogyny can have a significant impact on behaviours that are or could become harmful sexually. The **Peer-on-peer sexual harassment in education settings: action plan [HTML] | GOV.WALES** published in January 2024, outlines the actions the Welsh Government, working with partners, will undertake to prevent and respond to the issue of peer-on-peer sexual harassment and **harmful sexual behaviour (HSB)**

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(www.safeguarding.wales) in education settings.

Evidence shows that girls and young women are the primary target of peer-on-peer sexual harassment, with LGBTQ+ learners and learners with ALN also at high risk. The action plan aims to reflect the nature of sexual harassment as an intersectional issue and, in doing so, meet the needs of different groups of learners such as Black and minority ethnic, LGBTQ+, neurodiverse and disabled learners. The voice of young people is at the core of designing the response to peer-on-peer sexual harassment.

Relationships and Sexuality education (RSE) is a mandatory requirement in the new Curriculum for Wales. It plays an important role in supporting learners in recognising healthy, safe relationships and understanding, and developing respect for differences between people. It enables learners to manage risks, express ideas and emotions, develop and maintain healthy relationships, and take on different roles and responsibilities, the learning and experience in this area can support learners to become healthy, confident individuals.

One strand of the RSE Code is focussed on 'Empowerment, safety and respect' including:

- learners' rights to safety and protection and freedom from harm and discrimination
- how and where to seek information, help and support
- how to support and advocate for the rights, fair treatment and respect of all.

The **Enhancing digital resilience in education: An action plan to protect children and young people online – Hwb** sets out the work that the Welsh Government are undertaking to increase safety online for children, young people, parents and carers and professionals. Our evidence base demonstrates that online sexual abuse is the largest growing type of child sexual abuse.

The Digital Resilience in Education (DRiE) team have developed a substantial suite of supporting materials for children, parents and carers and professionals (not just professionals in education settings).

They are raising awareness of emerging issues, including the rapid increase in AI-generated child sexual abuse through new Generative AI. They have recently published updated guidance for schools '**Keeping safe online – Hwb**' that reflects an increase in sextortion cases and AI-generated images targeting children under 18. Developing professional learning and sharing resources to support practitioners with

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digital safeguarding issues is an ongoing priority.

School age children spend a considerable portion of their lives in educational settings therefore the Education policy areas within the Welsh Government, schools and other educational settings have a significant role to play in safeguarding children from all forms of abuse.

Local authorities and key partners have a legal duty to report any concerns they have that a child may be experiencing or are at risk of experiencing, abuse, neglect or harm.

Welsh Government guidance **Keeping learners safe | GOV. WALES** is intended for all those working with children and young people in an education setting or related agency who would benefit from understanding the process for safeguarding in schools, and the wider system.

The guidance sets out the robust safeguarding measures schools and other educational settings engaged with the provision of education services to children and young people must put in place. For example, having a Designated Safeguarding Lead, safe recruitment practices and safeguarding training. It also includes guidance about how to respond to concerns about a professional.

Schools and education settings also provide support to children and young people around their mental health and wellbeing, mitigating adverse childhood experiences and supporting their recovery from trauma.

The Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being **Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing | GOV.WALES** published in 2021 sets out how schools and local authorities are required to have regard to the Framework when developing action plans, strategies and other policies that impact on the well-being of learners, staff and others working within the school environment.

The Welsh Government has provided additional funding in the current year to support implementation of the Framework, which includes funding to support those children and young people requiring more specialist interventions to ensure they receive an appropriate response in a timely manner (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service in-reach); and funding to support improvements in and an expansion of the school and community based counselling service, which sees around 12,500 children and young people each year.

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Childcare and Play

Children benefit hugely from engaging in high quality childcare and play activities, this can promote equality of opportunity, a child’s cognitive development, their social skills and wellbeing, build resilience and reduce/mitigate adverse childhood experiences.

The childcare and play workforce are critical partners in keeping children safe from abuse. They spend considerable periods of time with children and young people and are therefore well placed to build trusting relationships and safe spaces for children to disclose harm.

The National Minimum Standards for Childcare have been reviewed and the safeguarding information strengthened. We have been contributing to the review of the Exceptions Order – circumstances where providers are exempt from registering as child minders or day care providers. This has been subject to recent public consultation.

The Ministerial Review of Play recommends that Welsh Government ensure there are adequate safeguarding arrangements in place in play work settings. We have worked with the play sector to review the Code of Safeguarding Practice, non-statutory guidance for individuals, groups or organisations who provide activities across Wales that do not fall within the remit of inspection by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) and fall outside of the organisational duty to report placed on local authorities and key partners

Children and young people who are care experienced

Children and young people living in alternative care arrangements are among the most vulnerable in our society. Their circumstances can make them targets for sexual offenders, who often exploit the emotional needs of these children—needs such as belonging, comfort, and care. These vulnerabilities can increase the risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Moreover, some children enter care precisely because they have already experienced sexual harm. This prior trauma compounds their vulnerability and can have lasting effects on their wellbeing and development.

High-profile national inquiries, such as the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), have consistently highlighted the unique risks faced by care-experienced children and young people. These children are significantly more likely to experience sexual abuse than their peers who are not in care. Their experiences often include abuse, neglect, and other adverse childhood experiences, which further increase their susceptibility to harm.

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In 2019, the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse published a report titled Key Messages from Research on Looked-After Children and Child Sexual Abuse. The report reinforced many of these concerns and emphasized the importance of tailored education:

“Sex and relationship education should be carefully delivered to looked-after children, emphasising mutuality and consent, and openly discussing grooming (including online, exploitation, and control and coercion) in relationships as well as covering gender dynamics and LGBTI issues.”

This highlights the critical need for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) to be responsive to the specific needs of care-experienced children.

In December 2024, the Children, Young People and Education Committee published Children on the Margins, a report focusing on children who go missing and/or are criminally exploited. It also shed light on the experiences of care-experienced young people:

“Children in care may be overrepresented in statistics about missing children. It is clear that they are disproportionately likely to go missing compared to children who are not in care. Going missing places them at risk of further harm, including exploitation and abuse. And because of the trauma that many care-experienced children have experienced, and because they may not have consistent and loving support structures around them, they are particularly vulnerable to exploitative behaviour.”

These findings align with the Centre of Expertise’s research, which underscores the ongoing risks faced by children in care.

Furthermore, care-experienced individuals who have suffered sexual abuse may face additional challenges in parenting their own children. Targeted support is essential to help them navigate these difficulties and break cycles of trauma.

It is a common but dangerous misconception that children in care are automatically safe from abuse, neglect, and harm. While many professionals and carers provide exemplary care, it is vital that all those working with care-experienced children remain vigilant. Being in care does not guarantee safety, and professionals must be alert to the signs of sexual abuse and exploitation.

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The Welsh Government have produced **National Practice Guidance** for Therapeutic support for Care Experienced Children and Young People to support equity of access and person centred, trauma informed care for care experienced children and young people to support their mental health and wellbeing.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Hub and Traumatic Stress Wales

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic experiences which occur during childhood but can continue to impact someone's wellbeing for the rest of their life. They include experiences which directly harm a child, e.g. sexual or physical abuse or neglect, or affect the environment in which they live, e.g. growing up in a household with domestic violence, parental mental illness issues, or substance use.

In 2015 Public Health Wales undertook the first study of ACEs in Wales **Adverse Childhood Experiences and their Impact on Health-harming Behaviours in the Welsh Adult Population - World Health Organization Collaborating Centre On Investment for Health and Well-being**. It, and subsequent studies, found around half of all adults in Wales had experience at least one ACE, and 14% four or more. It also found 10% of adults in Wales reported having experienced child sexual abuse, which is consistent with other studies across Europe.

The more ACEs experienced the greater the likelihood of experiencing poorer outcomes across the life course. These include poorer mental health and wellbeing and physical health.

The Welsh ACEs study found those who had experienced four or more ACEs were five times more likely to experience low mental well-being and six time more likely to receive treatment for mental illness during their lives **Adverse Childhood Experiences and their Association with Mental Well-being in the Welsh Adult Population - World Health Organization Collaborating Centre On Investment for Health and Well-being**

ACEs are associated with the adoption of health-harming behaviours during adolescence like smoking and substance misuse and early sex and unplanned teenage pregnancies, which can contribute towards a greater likelihood of developing, and the early development, of chronic physical health conditions, such as cancer, heart disease, and diabetes.

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Mental Health

Childhood sexual abuse can have long term negative consequences for victim-survivors including a significant impact on their mental health and emotional wellbeing. Attempted suicide and self-harm can be some of the ways in which the trauma and distress of the individual are exhibited. Victim-survivors sometimes require ongoing trauma informed, therapeutic support across their lifespan.

The Welsh Government Ten Year Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Suicide Prevention and Self-harm Strategy were both published in 2025 following extensive consultation and engagement. The strategies work together to set out the future provision for support in Wales. Within the Mental Health and Wellbeing strategy there are several vision statements that relate directly to the achievement of this strategy including:

- Vision statement 3: There is a connected system where all people will receive the appropriate level of support wherever they reach out for help
- Vision statement 4: There are seamless mental health services – person-centred, needs led and guided to the right support first time, without delay.

The Suicide Prevention and Self-harm Strategy has several objectives which look to improve support for all, including children and adult victim-survivors of sexual abuse, who evidence shows us could be at an increased risk of suicide and self-harm. These objectives include:

- Objective 2: Preventing – which commits us to exploring long term prevention through tackling risk factors and access to means of suicide and self-harm
- Objective 4: Supporting – we will be improving core services for people with self-harm and suicidal thoughts
- Objective 5: Equipping – exploring ways to ensure wider services which support people at higher risk across Wales identify people in need and provide support

Both strategies relate to establishing a 'no wrong door approach' to mental health and wellbeing support in Wales in accordance with the NYTH/NEST framework for creating a whole system approach to mental health and wellbeing for babies, children and young people. The NEST framework applies the key principles of trusted adults having easy access to expertise to support babies, children and young people's mental health and wellbeing needs at the right time, in the right way. The framework is being implemented

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through Regional Partnership Boards who bring partners together to create a joined-up system of support.

Child Poverty

Our evidence base demonstrates that there are strong links between living in poverty and an increased risk of abuse, neglect and other forms of harm like criminal and sexual exploitation.

UNICEF states²⁸, “One reason that poverty in childhood can have life-long impacts is because of the stress that it causes for vulnerable, developing brains and bodies”. They add that, “children also can absorb their parents’ stress: studies have shown that, as early as infancy, babies experience physiological stress in response to their mothers’ own stress response”.

Living with chronic stress can increase the risks of a child having developmental delays, mental health and poorer cognitive development. Children in poverty can be at greater risk of experiencing adverse childhood experiences like interfamily violence, for example, experiences that in and of themselves increase the chance of developing depression, anxiety, or drug dependence greater. We know that the more adverse childhood experiences that children experience, the higher the risk of them being abused, neglected or harmed in some other way.

The Resolution Foundation, a living standards think tank, predicted in August 2024 that if there was no change to economic forecasts or policies from the 2024 election, an extra 1.5 million people including 400,000 children would be in relative poverty after housing costs in 2029/30, from a rate for all individuals of 22% in 2024/25 to 23% in 2029/30²⁹.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s most recent report³⁰ highlights the following key issues:

- Poverty in Wales is deepening
- The impact of poverty is uneven among different groups of people
- There are lasting consequences for health and education – limiting long-term prospects for Wales
- Children have consistently had the highest poverty rates, while pensioners along with working-age adults without children now have the lowest.

The Welsh Government Child Poverty Strategy 2024 seeks

²⁸ How does poverty affect children differently? | UNICEF Europe and Central Asia ²⁹ Poverty in the UK: statistics - House of Commons Library ³⁰ UK Poverty 2025: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK | Joseph Rowntree Foundation

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to ensure stronger integration across our national policies, programmes and action plans and to support collaboration at the regional and local levels. The activities being undertaken underneath this strategy will lift children and families out of poverty thereby reducing the vulnerabilities associated with poverty.

The Child Poverty Strategy for Wales represents a comprehensive approach to addressing the complex issue of child poverty. By focusing on integration, collaboration, and the well-being of families, the Welsh Government aims to create a more equitable future for all children in Wales. Continuous engagement with stakeholders and monitoring of progress will be essential to ensure the strategy’s effectiveness and accountability.

Youth Justice

Youth Justice is reserved to the UK Government. The Youth Justice Blueprint takes a ‘child-first, criminal-second’ approach. Preventing children from entering the criminal justice system, minimising their contact with it and maximising opportunities for diversion is essential in supporting them to lead crime free lives.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can have a significant effect on mental well-being throughout life leading to negative outcomes such as involvement in crime. Those with four or more ACEs are 15 times more likely to commit violence and 20 times more likely to be imprisoned. Policy is therefore focused on preventing and minimising the impact of ACEs, of stopping inter-generational problems and developing resilience to improve life chances.

This policy area will be particularly important in terms of the actions this strategy will take to develop a whole family approach to sibling sexual harm and a whole family, child-first approach to harmful sexual behaviour.

Community Safety

Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs), established by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, are made up of representatives from the police, local authorities, and the fire, health and probation services (known as responsible authorities). Half of the required partners are devolved in Wales, reflected in amendments to the Act, giving Welsh Ministers powers to set certain requirements either alone or jointly with the Secretary of State for Wales.

Police and Local Government hold joint leadership for

Appendix 1

community safety, and designated staff within local authorities have oversight administration for the CSPs.

Each responsible authority contributes their own local knowledge, professional expertise, and resources to ensure that the issues of most concern to local people are prioritised and addressed.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 enshrined the concept of statutory partnership working to reduce crime and disorder in the local community. Subsequent Home Office regulations and Acts, including the Police and Justice Act 2006, have broadened the requirements to deliver outcomes which relate to the prevention and reduction of crime and reoffending, fear of crime, anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse, and harm caused by substance misuse.

The statutory responsibilities of CSPs include:

- Providing a framework for sharing information to support local problem solving Strategic assessments of need which inform the cycle of CSPs planning
- Reducing re-offending
- Commissioning domestic homicide reviews (established under s9 Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004)

Community safety and CSPs have been shaped by additional policy and legislation, including the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners within the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011, who have responsibility for joining up the work of community safety and criminal justice. Notably, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which introduced Public Service Boards (PSBs), whose work provides 'significant overlap with the Community Safety Partnerships' according to The Commission on Justice in Wales. PSBs undertake local well-being assessments and plans, which according to the Act, must take account of strategic assessments prepared by CSPs.

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Community safety intersects with multiple policy areas and relies on effective multi-agency working at local, regional, and national levels. CSPs have oversight and responsibility for several areas under a community safety umbrella. Some support specific duties, including tackling:

- Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) and Disorder
- Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV)
- Terrorism and Extremism
- Substance Misuse
- Crime and Crime Prevention activity more broadly

Whereas involvement in other areas will depend on the priorities set:

- Serious Violence and Organised Crime
- Public Safety
- Modern Slavery and Exploitation of children and adults

There are other areas that interweave with the work of community safety, such as Safeguarding and Early Intervention, Youth Justice, Integrated Offender Management (IOM), and Equalities, Inclusion and Community Cohesion.

Community Safety Partnerships are key partners in safeguarding children and young people from sexual abuse and will play a significant role in the delivery of this strategy.

Appendix 2:

Terminology

Appendix 2

We use the term **'child sexual abuse'** to refer to all forms of abuse, as set out in the Welsh Government's definition of child sexual abuse:

"...forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening, including; physical contact, including penetrative or nonpenetrative acts; non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activities or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways." (Welsh Government, 2019:4)

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse involving some form of exchange. The exchange can include the giving or withdrawal of something, such as the withdrawal of violence or threats to abuse another person. The exchange can include the giving or withdrawal of something, such as the withdrawal of violence or threats to abuse another person. There may be a facilitator who receives something in addition to or instead of the child who is exploited. Children may not recognise the exploitative nature of the relationship or exchanges and may feel that they have given consent. (Welsh Government, 2019:4, **Safeguarding children from child sexual exploitation | GOV.WALES**)

Harmful sexual behaviour is defined as "... sexual behaviours expressed by children under the age of 18 years that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards themselves or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult. This definition of harmful sexual behaviour includes both contact and non-contact behaviours (including grooming, exhibitionism, voyeurism and sexting or recording images of sexual acts via smart phones or social media applications." (Welsh Government, 2019:4)

In referring to people who were sexually abused as children, we use the term **'victim-survivors'**, in recognition that individuals may regard themselves as a victim, a survivor or a combination of both.

We use the term **'parent/caregiver'** to encompass any parent or carer in a parental or principal caregiving role to a child; this may be, for example, the child's biological parent, stepparent, adoptive parent, foster parent or other relative in that role.

We have used the term **'Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation'** to describe all forms of sexual harm that are facilitated by technology regardless of whether the harm is perpetrated by adults or children

Appendix 3:

Resources to support professional practice

Appendix 3

Adverse childhood experiences

- › Public Health Wales World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre on Investment for Health and Well-being - ACEs - a repository of ACEs reports and studies
- › Home - ACE Hub Wales - Information, resources and training courses and materials on ACEs

Barnardos Cymru

- › Resources to help identify and engage young people at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation | Barnardo's
- › Child sexual abuse and exploitation: support for parents and carers | Barnardo's
- › WG - Harmful Sexual Behaviour - PROFESSIONAL GUIDE.pdf
- › Harmful Sexual Behaviour - Parent_s guide.pdf
- › 2696 Bs Guidance for education settings on peer sexual abuse E.pdf

Centre of Expertise for Child Sexual Abuse

- › What you need to know about child sexual abuse | CSA Centre
- › Communicating with children | CSA Centre
- › Signs and indicators of child sexual abuse | CSA Centre
- › Supporting parents and carers | CSA Centre
- › Key messages from research | CSA Centre
- › Research & evidence | CSA Centre
- › Practice resources | CSA Centre
- › Publications & Resources | CSA Centre
- › Learning about data collection from practice | CSA Centre

Appendix 3

Lucy Faithfull Foundation

- › Resources – Lucy Faithfull Foundation

NHS Wales

- › Home – All Wales Traumatic Stress Quality Improvement Ini
- › Trauma-Informed Wales

NSPCC

- › Sexual abuse | NSPCC
- › Comprehensive child safety guide | NSPCC
- › Types of Child Abuse & How to Prevent Them | NSPCC
- › Spotting the signs of child abuse | NSPCC
- › Effects of child abuse | NSPCC
- › Child Sexual Exploitation & How to Keep Your Child Safe | NSPCC
- › Online abuse | NSPCC
- › Understanding Sexual Behaviour in Children | NSPCC

Welsh Government guidance and related strategies and action plans

- › Working together to safeguard people: code of safeguarding practice | GOV.WALES
- › Safeguarding children from child sexual exploitation | GOV.WALES
- › Violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: strategy 2022 to 2026 [HTML] | GOV.WALES
- › Social services performance measures for local authorities | GOV.WALES
- › Child Poverty Strategy for Wales: progress report 2025 [HTML] | GOV.WALES
- › Working together to safeguard people: code of safeguarding practice | GOV.WALES

Appendix 3

- › Safeguarding children at risk of abuse or neglect | GOV.WALES
- › Safeguarding adults at risk of abuse or neglect | GOV.WALES
- › Peer-on-peer sexual harassment in education settings: action plan [HTML] | GOV.WALES
- › Keeping safe online – Hwb

Welsh Government resources

- › Check Your Thinking – Resources to support safeguarding practice with young people, for use by all those working with and caring for young people.
- › Materials for Young People – Check Your Thinking
- › Keeping safe online – Hwb
- › Resources – Stop It Now
- › Getting Help To Keep Safe (u12) | Childline
- › Getting help to keep safe | Childline
- › Live fear free: here for you leaflet | GOV.WALES



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Strategy for Preventing
and Responding to Child
Sexual Abuse in Wales
2026-2036

[gov.uk/wales](https://www.gov.uk/wales)