

WEST LOTHIAN CHILD PROTECTION COMMITTEE

CHILD EXPLOITATION GUIDANCE



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Introduction

The criminal and sexual exploitation of children always requires a child protection response. This is reflected in the [Edinburgh and Lothians Multi-Agency Child Protection Procedures \(2023\)](#) and the [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 \(updated 2023\)](#).

Early intervention and protection of children, together with disruption and prosecution of perpetrators are the key features of an effective approach.

All references in this guidance to children mean those under the age of 18, irrespective of whether they are living at home, with family, with carers, in a residential setting or independently.

Purpose of Guidance

This guidance is designed to assist practitioners in recognising exploitation, protecting children who are at risk of abuse or are abused through exploitation, and disrupting and prosecuting those who perpetrate this form of abuse.

The guidance is supported by West Lothian CPC and APC's [Trafficking & Exploitation Procedure](#), the [Edinburgh and Lothians Child Protection Procedures](#) and West Lothian CPC's [Organised/large scale CSE procedure](#). Everyone must take responsibility for protecting children from abuse and that means not only knowing your role, but also understanding the roles of other agencies and individuals.

Sometimes the background and experiences of children who are exploited impact negatively on their behavior. It is important to look beyond the presenting behaviour ([Professional Curiosity](#)) and recognise that children who are exploited are the **victims of abuse**. The responsibility for their exploitation lies with the abuser. The focus of police investigations and of prosecutions should be on those who coerce, exploit and abuse children.

A key way that exploiters are able to control children is by giving them something they want or need - like money, food, or a sense of belonging. To prevent CCE, we need to be better at supporting children and making sure these needs are met. This could be through better education or employment opportunities; helping them build good relationships with family, friends, or workers; or through positive community activities like youth groups. It is also important that children are able to access the mental health supports they need.

Definitions

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE)

Criminal exploitation of children (under 18 years) is when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive the child into criminal activity, for the financial or other advantage of the exploiter. A victim may have been criminally exploited, even if the criminal activity they engage in appears consensual. The fact that someone is a child with vulnerabilities may make them more at risk of being exploited and drawn into criminal activity than others. A useful summary of what is meant by child criminal exploitation can be found in Part 4 of The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (2021).

Child Criminal Exploitation is a form of child abuse. The exploiter might give the child something the child wants or needs in exchange for committing the crimes, or they might use violence to get the child to do what they want. Sometimes, the child might not realise they are a victim of CCE. It is important to remember that even when a child appears to be willingly carrying out

crimes for the exploiter, they are still being exploited. CCE is often unrecognised and this can mean that children are regarded as offenders rather than the victims of exploitation.

CCE affects both male and female children and there are many different types of crimes that children can be exploited into carrying out. Some of the most common types are:

- Transporting and dealing drugs (including County Lines where children may be internally trafficked for the purpose of criminal exploitation.)
- Shoplifting or theft
- Cannabis growing
- Begging or busking
- Financial exploitation
- Holding weapons

Child criminal exploitation can involve bribery, intimidation, violence and/or threats. The child does not need to have met whoever is exploiting them - children can be exploited via the internet or using mobile phones. They can also be targeted via social media platforms and gaming forums.

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)

CSE is a form of child sexual abuse in which a person(s), of any age, takes advantage of a power imbalance to force or entice a child into engaging in sexual activity in return for something received by the child and/or those perpetrating or facilitating the abuse. As with other forms of child sexual abuse, the presence of perceived consent does not excuse or mitigate the abusive nature of the act.

Like other forms of sexual abuse, CSE:

- Is typified by some form of power imbalance in favour of those perpetrating the abuse;
- Can involve coercion and/or enticement-based methods of compliance;
- Can still be abuse even if it is claimed the child consented – where the age of the child means they cannot legally give consent or the circumstances mean that agreement is not freely given.

The key factor that distinguishes cases of CSE from other forms of sexual abuse is the additional requirement for some form of exchange; the fact that the child and/or someone else receive something in return for the sexual activity:

- Where the gain is on the part of the child, this can take the form of tangible or intangible rewards (for example: money, drugs, alcohol, status, protection or perceived receipt of love or affection). Fear of what might happen if they do not comply can also be a significant influencing factor; in such situations the 'gain' for the child could be prevention of something negative, for example a child who engages in sexual activity in order to avoid harm to friends or family. The child is manipulated or forced into taking part in a sexual act. This could be as part of a seemingly consensual relationship or in return for attention, affection, money, drugs, alcohol or somewhere to stay. The child may think that their abuser is their friend, or even their boyfriend or girlfriend, but they will put them into dangerous situations, forcing the young person to do things they do not want to do.
- Where the gain is solely on the part of the perpetrator/facilitator, it must be something more than sexual gratification to fall within the sub-category of CSE. This could be money, other financial advantage (reduced cost drugs/alcohol or clearing a debt for example), status or power.

CSE does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology such as phones, tablets, social media and gaming apps. The abuser may be male or female.

In all cases, those exploiting the child or young person will have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common.

Who does it affect?

Children of any sex, sexual orientation, colour, ethnicity, ability/disability, religion can be exploited.

While younger children also experience CSE, this form of abuse is most frequently documented amongst those of post-primary age, with the average age at which concerns are first identified being 12-15 years of age.

Black and minority ethnic children are over represented in CCE statistics. This may be because they are exploited more, or because racism and stereotypes mean police are more likely to identify and arrest them. There is less research about this in Scotland. Children of all ethnicities can be exploited.

Statistics suggest that boys are much more likely to be criminally exploited than girls. It is possible that girls are not identified as often or as quickly as boys because of assumptions that boys are more likely to be involved in crime. The most common age group of victims of CCE is 13 to 16 but younger children may also be exploited. The majority of children who are criminally exploited in the UK are from the UK, however migrant children are overrepresented in statistics. Some children might have been exploited during their journey to the UK, whilst others might be targeted once they are here.

Girls are more likely than boys to be identified as victims of CSE. However, children from certain groups are less likely to be identified as being at risk of or experiencing sexual exploitation. In particular, this applies to: boys, children who identify as transgender or non-binary, children with disabilities, and/or children from black and minority ethnic groups.

However, exploiters might target some groups of children more than others: children with special educational needs, mental health difficulties, low self-esteem or disabilities, children who go missing from home, care, school, live in poverty or are isolated from family.

Those exploiting children and young people also look for emotional vulnerability, such as children experiencing problems at home or living away from home, those with absent parents or who have suffered loss and bereavement, those who have experienced neglect, trauma and abuse.

Exploiters seek to fill that emotional gap for the child and become their 'family', 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend'. Criminal gangs or exploiters increasingly look to recruit 'clean skins' i.e. children with no previous criminal record who are unlikely to be stopped by the police.

Who are the Exploiters?

People who exploit children use the fact that they have power over children, because of an age difference or some other factor like gender, intelligence, strength, status or wealth. Children can be exploited by individuals or groups, men or women, adults or young people.

Those who exploit children come from any ethnic, cultural or religious background. They could be anyone, they are predominantly male, but females can and do engage in child exploitation. They may act as individuals, in groups and in gangs and may also be known to the child either as a family member or friend. They may also be a stranger. Children can also be involved in the exploitation of other children; this can sometimes be led by an adult but can sometimes be peer led.

CSE Grooming

Grooming is when someone builds a relationship, trust and emotional connection with a child or young person so they can manipulate, exploit and abuse them.

Anybody can be a groomer, no matter their age, gender or race. Grooming can take place over a short or long period of time – from weeks to years. Groomers may also build a relationship with the young person's family or friends to make them seem trustworthy or authoritative.

Children and young people can be groomed online, in person or both – by a stranger or someone they know. This could be a family member, a friend or someone who has targeted them – like a teacher, faith group leader or sports coach.

When a child is groomed online, groomers may hide who they are by sending photos or videos of other people. Sometimes this will be of someone younger than them to gain the trust of a "peer". They might target one child online or contact lots of children very quickly and wait for them to respond.

The relationship a groomer builds can take different forms. This could be:

- a romantic relationship
- as a mentor
- an authority figure
- a dominant and persistent figure

A groomer can use the same sites, games and apps as young people, spending time learning about a young person's interests and use this to build a relationship with them. Children can be groomed online through:

- social media networks
- text messages and messaging apps, like WhatsApp
- email
- text, voice and video chats in forums, games and apps.

Whether online or in person, groomers use tactics like:

- pretending to be younger
- giving advice or showing understanding
- buying gifts
- giving attention
- taking children on trips, outings or holidays.

Groomers might also try and isolate children from their friends and family, making them feel dependent on them and giving the groomer power and control over them. They might use blackmail to make a child feel guilt and shame or introduce the idea of 'secrets' to control, frighten and intimidate. Children may not understand they've been groomed. They may have complicated feelings, like loyalty, admiration, love, as well as fear, distress and confusion.

Barnardo's identified four models of abuse:

Inappropriate relationships: usually involves one perpetrator who has inappropriate power or control over a child. There is often a significant age gap and the victim may believe they are in a loving relationship. Some perpetrators may be in positions of responsibility – such as teachers, religious leaders, sports coaches – and manipulate this in order to sexually exploit.

Boyfriend/girlfriend: A child is groomed by an adult to believe that they are in a loving relationship. The adult may entice, coerce or force the child to have sex with them and also with the adult's friends or associates. Peer exploitation is where children are forced or coerced

into sexual activity by peers. Sometimes this can be associated with gang activity, but not always. Peer-on-peer exploitation can take place without the involvement of adults, or can involve adults exploiting children to exploit other children.

Organised exploitation and trafficking: victims are trafficked through networks, often between towns and cities, and can be forced or coerced into sex with multiple people. They may also be used to recruit new victims. This serious and organised criminal activity can involve the buying and selling of young people. The targeting of children by organised networks can lead to the child being exposed to more than one type of harm and exposure to adult and illegal behaviour.

Technology: child sexual exploitation can happen online. Children who are exploited online may be targeted by adults who try to connect with them in a number of ways - via social media apps, dating apps, chat rooms, gaming platforms. Just like exploitation that occurs offline, the child may not know that the person they are talking with is seeking to exploit them. The child may be tricked into sharing images of themselves or may agree to meet the person offline. Online and offline exploitation often overlap.

CSE can and does take place within families, although the majority of CSE is extrafamilial. Sometimes parents or family members can benefit financially through allowing or facilitating the sexual exploitation of their child. In such cases, the parents usually receive money or goods in return for someone sexually abusing their child.

CCE Grooming

The first step may seem like a simple favour. The child may be given drugs, a new phone or some money for lunch. Then, they're told these weren't gifts – that they have a debt to pay off. Their exploiter may even set them up to lose the money, to trap them into accepting the debt. With time, repaying this debt can escalate from delivering a parcel, or looking after some money, to acts of serious violence.

Criminal exploitation often occurs without the child's immediate recognition, with the child believing that they are in control of the situation. The Children's Society identified 4 stages of grooming.

Targeting stage This is when an exploiter targets a young person who is vulnerable, reducing their chances of getting caught. Exploiters pick their targets based on things like age, strength or situation. Signs of this stage include an exploiter:

- Observing a young person.
- Finding out a young person's vulnerabilities, needs and wants.
- Selecting a young person as a target.
- Glamourising their lifestyle.
- Gaining and developing a young person's trust.
- Sharing information with other members of their gang.
- Recruiting a young person to their gang or friendship group.
- Marking a young person out as someone to watch

Experience stage This stage is where an exploiter might try to get a young person used to their lifestyle, or train them up in what they're doing. At this stage an exploiter might:

- Make a young person feel wanted.
- Give them gifts and rewards.
- Include them in their activities.
- Test out a young person's loyalty.
- Listen to a young person and remember what they say.
- Offer a young person protection.
- Relate to a young person and offer them advice.

- Give them a sense of belonging.
- Praise a young person.
- Give them a weapon.
- Introduce a young person to more established members of their gang.
- Ask to see and test a young person's skills

Hooked stage This is the stage where an exploiter will make a young person feel like they're a member of their gang, even though they're just exploiting them. Signs that a young person is in the hooked stage of being exploited can include them:

- Having an identity in the group.
- Being given a bigger role in the group (e.g. people running for them).
- Getting more responsibilities within the group e.g. more money.
- Engaging in thrill seeking behaviour/ committing low level crimes.
- Feeling more powerful (although this may not be the reality).
- Feeling they've made a progression in the group (although this may not be the reality).
- Others may know their name, helping them feel more powerful (but this can result in rivalry).
- Having a dependency created by their exploiter.
- Being exposed to possible consequences to their actions.
- Being given access to information.
- Engaging in activities such as drugs, alcohol and sexual behaviour.
- Being asked for favours/to keep secrets/to recruit others to the gang.
- Becoming involved with trap houses.

Trapped stage Now a young feels dependent on the group, their relationship with their exploiter may start to become unpleasant, as their exploiter's true intents or character is revealed. At this stage a young person may experience:

- Threatening behaviour.
- Attempts to reinforcing their dependency/make them indebted to their exploiter.
- Blackmail – include 'fake' mugging organised to create a debt.
- Physical violence and sexual assaults including strip searches, drugs being inserted for running (plugging).
- People playing on their guilt, shame and fear and attempting to isolate them from their family, friends and society.
- People forcing them to abuse others, assault or even shoot people.
- People humiliating them, either sexually or by exposing their mistakes to others
- Being made to feel trapped.
- Involvement in Class A drugs (cooking or running).
- Running a trap house.
- Drug addiction (encouraged by others) or dependency on their exploiter (resulting in them having less money)

Adult Protection

It is important to remember that people over the age of 18 can be exploited financially, criminally, sexually and emotionally. Concerns about the exploitation of vulnerable adults should be considered in terms of Adult Support and Protection and appropriate referrals made/advice sought.

Why don't children tell?

Disclosure of any form of abuse is often difficult for children. The sophisticated process of grooming by abusing adults and the exchange element of exploitation can act as additional barriers, which increase denial and make disclosure especially difficult.



Children at risk of exploitation may find themselves in high risk situations, isolated from protective, nurturing adults. Children may be under pressure, intimidated, afraid or dependent on those who have exploited them, especially where substance misuse is a factor. Children may reject offers of help and support.

Warning Signs & Vulnerabilities Checklist

Practitioners who have regular contact with children have a key role in understanding the connections between behaviour and the wider context of the child's life. Practitioners need to be [professionally curious](#), look beyond presenting behaviour, avoid making assumptions and remain open minded.

All children are vulnerable to abuse by nature of their age, power and status. It is the responsibility of those around children to protect them – any child can be vulnerable to abuse and exploitation if not protected and safeguarded by adults. However, some children's experiences mean that they might be targeted by abusers. Exploring factors that focus on children must not detract from the fact that responsibility for abuse lies with those who harm them.

The following list is not exhaustive but highlights warning signs and vulnerabilities potentially associated with exploitation and other forms of abuse. Information known about any of these issues should be shared when a referral is made or inform assessments.

Vulnerabilities:

- Poor mental health
- Low self-image, self-esteem
- Learning disability/neurodiversity
- History of physical/sexual/emotional abuse/neglect
- Witness to domestic abuse
- Young carer
- Confusion over sexual identity
- Living in poverty/areas of multiple deprivation
- Looked after away from home
- Multiple placement breakdowns
- Frequently missing (with others or alone)
- Parental difficulties: drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems, physical or learning difficulty, domestic abuse.
- Bereavement/loss
- Conflict at home
- Lack of positive relationship with a nurturing adult
- Trafficked child

Relationships/friendships:

- Not in control of their own movement/medical treatment / finances / formal documents / environment (including accommodation).
- Fearful/emotional about their family particularly their safety.
- Hostility in relationship with parents / carers and other family members
- Act as if they were instructed by someone else
- Others talking/acting for them when the child is addressed directly.
- Detachment from age-appropriate activities/support networks/family/friends
- Friends with or linked to a person/people and there are concerns about the imbalance of power, exploitation and/or offending.
- Distrustful of authorities
- Secrecy about relationships/friendships.
- Other children raise concerns
- Older "boyfriend"
- Numerous sexual "partners"
- Unknown adults loitering outside child's home or school

- New contacts outside the local area
- Gang association either through relatives, peers or intimate relationships
- Abuse by boyfriend or controlling adult

Finances/Material goods:

- Perceives they are bonded by debt (has been led to believe that they must carry out actions or work for little or no benefit to pay back a debt)
- Sending/giving money to new friends/partners who they see are in "immediate need"
- Spending/borrowing large amounts of money for goods and services for themselves/others
- Receiving "gifts" of money/clothes/material items that they can't afford themselves.
- Excessive number of condoms
- Keys to unknown properties
- Increased mobile phone/gaming credits

Use of technology/online activity:

- Sharing extreme/criminal/sexual/violent views on social media.
- Regular changes of/multiple mobile phones/sim cards/computers.
- Secrecy about who they're talking to/what they are looking at online/on their phone.
- Concerns about the number of unknown connections/friends online.
- Spending increasing/excessive amount of time on their phone/online

Communication/Behaviour:

- Expressing views that they wish to cause harm to others or displaying violence/aggressive behaviour (including serious violence)
- Comes to the attention of Police: (e.g. drugs supply/production, financial fraud (including benefit fraud), begging/shoplifting/street robbery)
- Transported around or facilitated to travel in taxis, private cars or on public transport to areas in which they have no obvious connection/reason to travel (possible trafficking).
- Has a weapon in their home or carries one.
- New use of language (in conversation/online) associated with organised crime/extremism
- Misses appointments
- Significant decline in school engagement, results/performance
- Absent/detached from education, training, or employment.
- Missing from home, care, or education and/or being found outwith the area
- Aggressive or violent behavior towards parents, carers, siblings, teachers, peers, pets/animals
- Accounts of social activities with no plausible explanation of how they have been paid for.
- Harmful sexual behaviour
- Unusual volatile behaviour/mood swings
- Seen getting into/out of unknown vehicles
- Seen in areas known for sexual exploitation or adult prostitution
- Being taken to flats, houses or hotels for sexual activity
- Seen at public toilets known for cottaging or adult venues (pubs and clubs)

Physical/Health and wellbeing:

- Physical injuries with unclear explanations or that have not been appropriately treated.
- Medically unexplained and recurring symptoms which may indicate trauma.
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Pregnancy/ abortion/miscarriage
- Drug and alcohol misuse/particularly if increasing levels of dependency, debt to others (such as dealers/loan sharks).

- Physical/medical concerns arising from potential captivity, neglect, or poor environmental conditions.
- Attachment or identity difficulties
- Presenting as distressed/anxious/fearful.
- Becomes withdrawn or seem troubled and unwilling to talk about it.
- Indicators of psychological trauma: difficulty regulating emotions, memory/attention difficulties, self-harm, suicidal ideation/attempts, disassociation, flashbacks.
- Returning from being missing looking well cared or dishevelled/dirty/hungry

Employment conditions (for post school-aged children who say they are working):

- Works in a sector where there is higher prevalence of exploitation (agriculture, food processing and packaging, construction, warehousing and logistics, hotels, catering, cleaning, and other service industries including sex work, manufacturing).
- Not clear about where they work or live or who they work for.
- Lack of understanding/information about their rights as a worker.
- Work related injuries sustained through poor health and safety measures.
- Wages are withheld/managed by someone else (including deductions for food / accommodation)
- Excessive overtime
- "Working away" for long periods of time.
- Person is transported/accompanied to and from "work" (possible trafficking)

Accommodation and/or places where the child stays/visits:

- The child is not clear/vague about where they are living.
- Staying at multiple addresses/regular change of address that cannot be visited.
- Unknown people frequently staying at/moving into their accommodation; often described by the child or other household members as "friends"
- The child or other household members have moved out or are regularly staying away from the property while unknown individuals remain
- Pattern of street homelessness or sofa surfing
- Living in hostel or B&B accommodation
- Increase in the number of comings and goings throughout the day and/or night, including people or vehicles that have not been seen before
- An increase in anti-social behaviour (e.g. property damage, littering, regular loud music or 'parties' evidence of verbal or physical aggression) in and around the property
- The child/other members of the household refusing entry to/restricting access to certain parts of the property to neighbours, friends, or professionals (particularly if previously allowed)

Perceived benefits (The Pull Factor)

- Being liked/fancied by older person
- Feeling special (on line or in person); sense of belonging
- Receiving alcohol/drugs/presents/money
- Given lifts/taken places
- Excitement of risk taking/forbidden behaviour
- Parties
- Gang acceptance/initiation
- Sense of belonging
- Sense of independence
- Somewhere to stay where there are no rules/boundaries
- Acceptance
- Taken to adult entertainment venues (pubs/clubs)

The Importance of Language

The language we use to describe children and their experiences should:

- Inspire children.
- Evoke hope in a child.
- Help a child make sense of their identity.
- Empower children.
- Reflect their identity.

However, it can also:

- Silence a child who had something to tell.
- Blame a child for something they had no control over.
- Oppress a child who expresses themselves for who they are.
- Shame a child who was seeking help.
- Influence the level and quality of interventions offered to children

It is of paramount importance that children are viewed, protected and supported as victims of exploitation and not as culpable, deserving, or in any way responsible for their own abuse or exploitation

Use language that:

- Adopts a children's rights approach.
- Encourages abuse and exploitation to be viewed through a safeguarding lens.
- Encourages a child protection response.
- Avoids victim blaming.
- Is trauma informed.

It is essential that we communicate clearly and appropriately about child abuse and exploitation. We have a responsibility to actively challenge inappropriate language used by others

Victim blaming

Examples of victim blaming vary widely, from what a child was doing or saying, or not doing/saying, through to their family circumstances.

Some examples are:

- Using where a child was, what they were doing, or who they were with to make them feel responsible.
- How a child looks or behaves.
- Whether a child was under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- Whether a child was sexually active.
- Whether a child reported their abuse or exploitation to police.

Parent/carer blaming

The conventional social care model sees abuse as occurring within the family setting and looks inwards towards the family for the causes and risks. The abuse or exploitation of children by people outside the home challenges these conventions. Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to support understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of harm beyond their families.

Some examples are:

- "Beyond parental control" rather than "under the control of a person who harmed them".

- “Did not keep the child at home” or “They were not supervised on the internet” - Unrealistic expectations are placed upon parents. Exploitation and harm outside the home often occurs despite parents doing all they can to protect their children.

Parents should be seen by professionals as partners in safeguarding their children, recognising that professionals and parents / carers want the child to be safe from harm.

No child consents to their own exploitation. Children subject to exploitation or abuse have limited choice due to the power dynamics of exploitative and abusive contexts.

Place responsibility for the abuse on those causing harm, not the child. Focus on the behaviour of the person/people who has/have harmed the child – use terms such as forced, manipulated, coerced, exploited, groomed rather than language that implies that the child was somehow complicit in their abuse e.g. “in a relationship with”, “involved in”, “risky behaviour/choices”, “street-wise”, “promiscuous”, “rent boy”, “child prostitution”, “disengaged/hard to reach”. Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) should be used rather than child pornography

The Children’s Society has produced a useful resource - **Child exploitation and abuse: an appropriate language guide** which can be downloaded [here](#)

Responding to Concerns

Preventing the exploitation of children in the first place requires practitioners to recognise the needs of children and address their vulnerabilities. [GIRFEC](#) ensures that agencies work together to ensure that children get the support they need, when they need it.

Exploitation of children causes significant harm and is a child protection issue. Where children are known to be exploited or earlier intervention has not reduced the risk of significant harm then Child Protection procedures must be followed. IRD participants must always consider whether the child has been trafficked and whether a referral to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is required if this has not already been done.

As with all forms of abuse, one agency can’t tackle the issue alone and a multi-agency response is required. Traditional child protection responses predominantly focus on the child and parents’ capacity to manage risks posed to them, which may not always be the most effective way to address the full range of risks associated with harm outside the home. Responses should always consider the role of the exploiter and the contexts where this exploitation takes place (Contextual Safeguarding). Other sources of information, beyond the usual should be considered e.g. youth workers employed by voluntary organisations e.g. West Lothian Youth Action Project, taxi drivers, hotels or B&Bs. Where parents/carers/family members are not involved in the exploitation professionals must work in partnership with them to help them support their child.

Police responses should focus on the disruption of exploiters’ activities using all appropriate legal measures available. Where there is thought to be large scale/organised sexual exploitation of children then the [Organised/large scale CSE procedure](#) should be followed as well as child protection procedures

What children who have experienced exploitation say

"Put yourself in other people's shoes"

"Talk naturally and listen, establish trust. Discuss with the young person the changes in their behaviour, being supportive and not judging."

"Don't tell me I've been exploited"

"Do build a trusting relationship."

"Don't make the young person feel guilty."

"Don't get angry (my parents would get angry and blame me for everything and make me feel guilty)"

"Don't have 6 people pestering me, just a few people would have been better."

"Do listen to us, isn't much point asking questions if you don't want to listen & help make things better."

"Don't give too many different support people – it's hard to remember what you're doing with who & would be better if one or a couple of people did it all. Seeing lots of people takes up lots of time & makes you feel different from other kids, sometimes having to see people stressed me out or made me angry"

"Take time and answer the phone"

Appendix 1 Policy and legislative context

[Edinburgh and Lothians Multi-Agency Child Protection Procedures \(2023\)](#) reflect a collective commitment to multi-agency collaboration and joint responsibility, and will be followed by all services dealing with child protection concerns. For children and their families, these procedures set out what can be expected from the professionals who have a responsibility for their protection.

[The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(1989\)](#) is an international agreement, which protects the human rights of children under the age of 18. UNCRC is clear in articles 19 "States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child". and in Articles 35 and 36 that the state shall protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse, including 'prostitution', trafficking for sexual purposes and involvement in the production of child sexual abuse images.

[Getting it right for every child](#) provides a framework for all those who work with children and young people. The framework puts children and young people at the heart of service provision, as well as encouraging inter-agency working to ensure children and young people have the best start in life. The 'Lead Professional' is the person within the network of practitioners supporting the child and family who will make sure that all agencies act as a team and the help they offer fits together seamlessly to provide appropriate support. West Lothian has [Multi-agency GIRFEC Practice Guidance](#)

[Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#) makes grooming children for the purpose of sexual abuse a criminal offence.

[The National Risk Framework to support the Assessment of Children and Young People \(2012\)](#) is a national risk assessment toolkit for child protection to support practitioners in identifying and acting on child protection risks for children and young people. Based on the GIRFEC approach to well-being and on the National Practice Model, it sets out a process for assessing risk to enable practitioners to consider key factors in the child or young person's life. The factors include risk as well as resilience and protective factors. It can be used alongside any other assessment frameworks specifically designed to assess particular circumstances where children may be at risk of harm or abuse at home or in the community.

[Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act \(Scotland\) 2015](#) is the law in Scotland which protects the rights of potential victims of human trafficking and exploitation. Human trafficking is a serious crime and a violation of human rights. In Scotland, perpetrators can face punishment of imprisonment for life.

The crimes involve the illegal practice of recruiting, transporting, receiving, controlling, or exchanging people to exploit them, mostly for profit.

Victims can be exploited for labour, criminal and sexual purposes as well as for domestic work or organ harvesting.

The National Referral Mechanism is the UK wide framework for identifying and referring potential victims of human trafficking and exploitation. The system ensures potential victims receive appropriate support.

Appendix 2 Common Terms

Bando	Abandoned building where drugs are sold or manufactured.
Branding	A tattoo or physical mark placed on a victim to indicate ownership by a trafficker or gang.
Burner Phone	A cheap, prepaid mobile phone that can be destroyed or discarded when no longer required, therefore they are often used to evade detection by authorities.
Burner SIM	Refers to a cheap, prepaid SIM card that can be inserted into another phone. The SIM card may be used for a limited period and not linked to a person's true identity.
County lines (External lines)	A term used to describe gangs/organised criminal networks exporting illegal drugs into one or more areas [in the UK], using dedicated mobile phone lines/other "deal line", exploiting children and vulnerable adults to move [and store] the drugs and money using coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual) & weapons.
Internal lines	Lines operating exclusively within one county (i.e. local drugs supply)
Social Media lines	Online accounts advertising drugs for sale
Cooking	Manufacturing illegal drugs, e.g. methamphetamine, in an illicit lab.
Cuckooing	Someone moves into the home of a vulnerable person in order to use it for themselves, sometimes for drug dealing or drinking. They will purposefully choose someone they can scare, bully or control and may physically, sexually or financially abuse them.
Daddy / Lover Boy / Romeo	Terms an exploiter might force a victim to call him to create a false sense of a loving relationship or family dynamic.
Deal line	A dedicated mobile phone line used to take orders from drug customers.
Debt bondage	A common tactic used in County Lines operations, where children are deliberately robbed and subsequently coerced into continued involvement to repay the perceived debt.
Elders	Young people higher up in the dealing hierarchy who generate sales and exploit others.
Joey/Clean skin	A person unknown to the police or social services, making them a target for recruitment as they are less likely to be suspected.
Money Mules	Financial exploitation using a child to move illicit funds or commit fraud, often through bank or cryptocurrency accounts.
Pimp/Trafficker	Person who controls & profits from the sexual exploitation of others.
Party House	Refers to a property—often a short-term rental e.g. an Airbnb or private flat—used to groom and abuse groups of children
Plugging, banking, bottling, or stuffing	The act of concealing drugs internally within body cavities (rectum or vagina) for transportation, often under coercion.
Runner	A person at the bottom of the dealing hierarchy, exploited into transporting and selling drugs.
Sextortion (Sexual Extortion)	Online blackmail where exploiters obtain child sexual abuse material and then use this to blackmail/extort the child depicted.
Trap House	A base from where drugs are sold (or sometimes made). These buildings may be cuckooed addresses or abandoned buildings.
Trapping	The act of selling drugs. Trapping can refer to the act of moving drugs from one town to another or selling drugs in one town.

Appendix 3 Further reading/Resources

[Shattered Lives, Stolen Futures](#) The Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children, Action for Children March 2024

[Practitioner Guidance on Criminal Exploitation](#) Scottish Government June 2023

[CSE: Learning from case reviews](#) NSPCC August 2023

[CSE](#) CELCIS Website

[CSE Definition and Practitioner Briefing Paper](#) Scottish Government October 2016

[Online Sexual Harm Reduction Guide](#) Marie Collins Foundation/NWG

[Helping parents and carers understand the sexual behaviour of teenagers](#) Lucy Faithfull Foundation

[Gender and exploitation](#) #LookCloser updated 2023

[The Criminal Exploitation of children. Scotland's Framework for Practice](#) CYCJ & Action for Children 2025

[County Lines Strategic Threat Risk Assessment 2024 - 2025](#) National County Lines Coordination Centre & National Police Chiefs' Council