INDEPENDENT INQUIRY
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Engagement Report June 2021

Engagement with children and young people

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IICSA Engagement Team

Disclaimer

This engagement report has been prepared at the request of the Inquiry's Chair and Panel. The views expressed are those of the authors alone. This report does not include formal recommendations by the Inquiry's Chair and Panel and is separate from formal evidence obtained in the Inquiry's investigations and public hearings, and also separate from the Inquiry's research strand.

This report contains descriptions of child sexual abuse. Reading the report can have an emotional impact. There are some support organisations that it may be helpful to contact if you have been affected by any of the content in the report: www.iicsa.org.uk/ help-and-support-0.

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Acknowledgements

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Leicester Rape Crisis at Jasmine House.

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)

New Pathways

Nottinghamshire Sexual Violence Support Services

One In Four

The Roots Foundation Wales

Safety Net (UK)

SERICC Rape and Sexual Abuse Specialist Service

Ynys Saff SARC

Young Women's Outreach Project

We are also grateful to the Inquiry's Victims and Survivors Consultative Panel (VSCP) for contributing their knowledge, expertise and perspective.

Executive summary

The Inquiry is considering how children should be better protected by listening to the present-day experiences of young victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. The engagement team heard from 56 victims and survivors of child sexual abuse between the ages of 11 and 21, and 77 specialist child sexual abuse support workers.

Six key points emerged from the groups we spoke to.

We heard that young victims and survivors face delays in accessing support. We also heard that the government should consider the long-term negative impacts for victims and survivors who have not received earlier support. Specialist child sexual abuse support services told us that early intervention and specialist support services require adequate funding.

Young victims and survivors told us that the introduction of mandatory reporting could discourage children from disclosing their experiences of child sexual abuse. We heard that young victims and survivors would be less likely to disclose sexual abuse if they knew it would be reported to statutory services such as the police. Many young victims and survivors told us that they were looking for psychological support, rather than action through the criminal justice system. We heard that, for them, the personal cost of going through the criminal justice system was too high.

Young victims and survivors and the specialist social workers who support them want to see improvements in how statutory bodies respond to child sexual abuse and exploitation. Many young victims and survivors said their experience of the statutory services was traumatising and disempowering. We heard that young victims and survivors want control and choice in the decisions that affect them. They also want to be kept informed and have their privacy respected wherever possible.

We heard that premature or intrusive questioning causes further trauma and, in some instances, young victims and survivors may entirely disengage with the process. We also heard that statutory service professionals could improve their engagement with young victims and survivors if they had better training in child sexual abuse, safeguarding and the impacts of trauma.

We heard that there needs to be a cultural shift so that talking about sexual abuse becomes as acceptable to discuss as other subjects. We heard that the media's tendency to sensationalise child sexual abuse and focus on the perpetrator detracts from the impacts on the child.

We heard that relationships and sex education (RSE) in schools does not reflect current challenges facing children, and is mostly inconsistent and inadequate. We heard that RSE should focus on appropriate touch and consent, and should start younger. Issues such as sexting, online safety and peer-on-peer abuse were also serious concerns. Some young victims and survivors told us that they would relate better to RSE if sessions were victim and survivor led.

Young victims and survivors told us that creators of social media apps and internet platforms must take greater responsibility. We heard that social media companies have a duty to better protect the children and young people using their apps. Young victims and survivors and support services explained to us that online services need to make their systems safer for children.

Introduction

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse ('the Inquiry') was set up by the government to consider the extent to which state and non-state institutions in England and Wales have failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, and to make meaningful recommendations for change.

Along with evidence taken through the Inquiry's programme of public hearings, **victims and survivors** of **child sexual abuse** have now shared over 5,500 experiences of child sexual abuse with the Inquiry through the Truth Project. The Truth Project offers adult victims and survivors the chance to share their experiences and to be heard with respect. Listening to victims and survivors' experiences and suggestions helps us recommend changes to protect children from abuse.

As of the close of 2020, 31% of victims and survivors coming forward to the Truth Project were aged 50–59 and over half were 50 years old and over. This means that much of the information we have gathered from the Truth Project is about child sexual abuse which took place over 30 years ago (see the Truth Project Dashboard for more details).

The engagement team has spoken to young victims and survivors who have recent experiences of institutional failure. We have also listened to the challenges that specialist support workers face when supporting young victims and survivors. By doing this, we hope to improve the Inquiry's knowledge about present-day experiences.

Engagement activities are not formal evidence-gathering sessions, and this publication is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of all the views we heard, nor does it make general conclusions about children who are victims of child sexual abuse in the wider population.

About the engagement project

The engagement team supports the ongoing work of the Inquiry. It engages with victims and survivors through the Victims and Survivors Forum, and with professionals who are responsible for keeping children safe.

Young victims and survivors and their support workers told us about concerns with social media, understanding consent and peer-on-peer sexual abuse. We recorded the experiences they shared, and their suggestions for change. This report summarises those discussions and highlights key themes. It is not within the scope of this project to follow up with any additional questions, nor to make findings or recommendations.

Safeguarding young victims and survivors and preventing re-traumatisation was essential. The Inquiry ensured that the wellbeing of young victims and survivors was considered throughout.

Each support service organisation agreed to a safeguarding and data protection review before organising and hosting an engagement event with the young victims and survivors that it supports. Although the topics for discussion were set by the Inquiry, Inquiry staff attended only as observers and note-takers.

This 'participation group model' means that all engagement events were run for young victims and survivors by people they trust in safe, familiar surroundings. Rather than engaging with people they did not know from the Inquiry, young victims and survivors could share their experiences in a place of safety and with familiar support and safeguarding policies in place.

Young victims and survivors

The engagement team heard from 56 young victims and survivors, in participation groups of between one and seven, from 11 organisations. Host organisations were aware that the Inquiry was interested in hearing from participants under the age of 18, and they made their best efforts to accommodate this request. However, the number of children under age 18 was limited by strict safeguarding and other participation criteria, and so young victims and survivors up to the age of 21 (who were abused as children) were encouraged to participate.

It is a significant personal journey for a child to move from disclosure, to reporting to police and court proceedings. Many younger victims and survivors are not ready to talk about child sexual abuse in a room with others. In addition, many support workers told us that it takes up to two years for a case to come to court, and so for these reasons as well we felt it was important to speak to young victims and survivors up to the age of 21.

The organisations ensured that the following criteria for participation set by the Inquiry were met:

- The children have been through or are engaging with therapeutic support services.
- Participants must provide consent, and there had to be parental consent for those under 18 – consent was gathered by the host organisations.
- The abuse must have been reported to the police.
- Any criminal proceedings that have arisen from the disclosures must have concluded, which can take years.
- The children who participated had been assessed by the host organisation as being psychologically in a safe place.

The Inquiry heard from one male young victim and survivor and one young victim and survivor who identified as transgender. All of the other young victims and survivors who chose to take part were female. The majority of host organisations supported both female and male clients, with two organisations (seven participants) supporting female victims and survivors only. Host organisations invited both male and female young victims and survivors to take part in the events, but many declined the offer or did not turn up on the day.

The loosely facilitated discussion topics for the young victims and survivors were:

- How society talks about child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation.
- How people, organisations and institutions respond to child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation.
- Being safe on the internet and social media.
- Thinking about the future.
- Golden thread throughout discussions: suggestions for change.

The full set of questions is reproduced in Annex 1.

All participants who agreed to take part were given the opportunity to review the topics beforehand.

Support workers were available for young victims and survivors if they wanted to leave the session at any time. With all experiences shared with us, the host organisation was available to provide support, advice and advocacy to young people where needed. Consent was provided for the publication of anonymised quotes.

Specialist support workers

The Inquiry developed separate participation events, led by Inquiry staff, for specialist child sexual abuse support workers. Host organisations identified and invited the child sexual abuse support workers who were willing to take part in an Inquiry participation event.

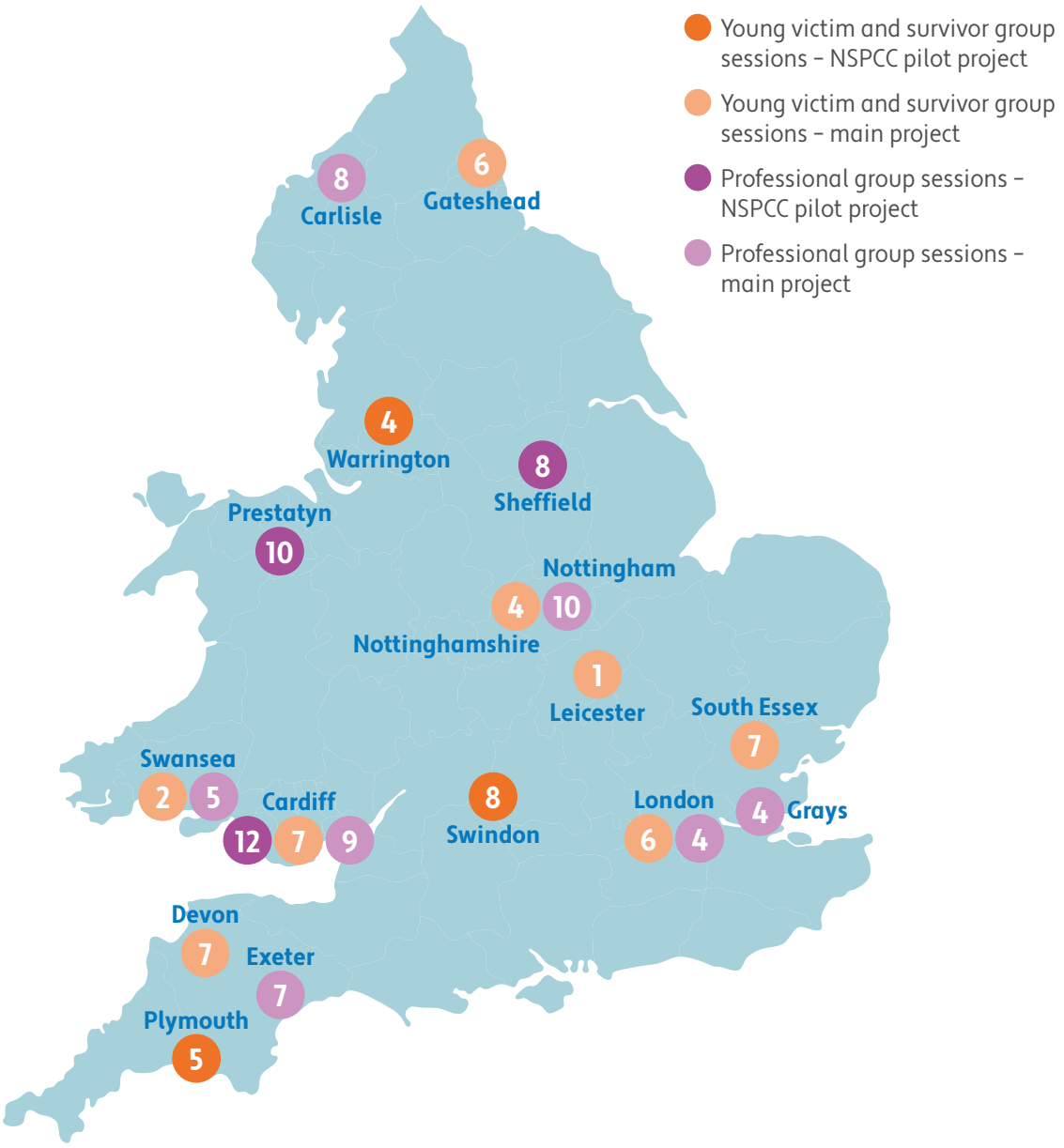
The Inquiry heard from 77 support workers, from eight statutory and non-statutory organisations. All participants were child sexual abuse support workers who provide direct psychological and practical support for children who have experienced child sexual abuse or **child sexual exploitation**.

We spoke to specialist child sexual abuse support workers from rural and urban settings across England and Wales. We heard from both frontline **statutory service** professionals, such as social workers, and **non-statutory service** professionals, who provide therapeutic support for young victims and survivors of sexual abuse.

The Inquiry developed a set of questions for professionals:

- Talking about child sexual abuse – changing the conversation.
- Responses to child sexual abuse/child sexual exploitation.
- Skills and understanding.
- The internet and social media.
- Golden threads throughout discussions: How to protect children in the future?

The full set of questions is reproduced in Annex 1.



Number of participants at each session

Delivering the project

In July and August 2018 the Inquiry held three events as part of a successful pilot project with the National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) Children's Services Division. The NSPCC worked with the Inquiry to develop and pilot this work with young victims and survivors and child sexual abuse support workers.

Between July 2019 and February 2020 the Inquiry embarked on a wider ranging second phase with seven more local and regional organisations across England and Wales. This report brings together what we heard from young victims and survivors, and specialist support workers, during our work from 2018 through 2020.

The impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic affected the final phase of planned engagement activities, which were due to take place in Wales. We agreed with the organisation hosting our activities that appropriate safeguarding measures could not be delivered in an online setting. Therefore, the project came to an end before we finished our final planned activities.

Talking about child sexual abuse: changing the conversation

> **Make it normal, talk about sex more … Normalise it from a very young age.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Young victims and survivors and the professionals who work with them told us that people generally do not want to talk about child sexual abuse and exploitation, although this has improved over time. We heard that this conversation needs to be held in public so that society knows that child sexual abuse happens a lot, and so that young victims and survivors know that they will be listened to and believed.

How the media represents child sexual abuse

Television programmes

Many of the young victims and survivors we heard from thought that good progress had been made in recent years, with some television programmes having dealt with child sexual abuse in a sensitive and compelling way.

> **It really helped, and it put a sharp vibe out … to know what to look out for in the future.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

However, we heard that the children assumed that television producers are often more comfortable dealing with the sexual abuse of adults, and less so with the sexual abuse of children. We heard that more storylines about child sexual abuse could help children who have been sexually abused to feel less alone and possibly more confident to disclose.

We also heard that child sexual abuse is sometimes glamourised in dramas aimed at young people. Some of the young victims and survivors we heard from told us that this had triggered and re-traumatised them.

There was overwhelming agreement that storylines often fail to show the impacts of child sexual abuse and exploitation. The young victims and survivors we spoke to told us that too often the storyline builds to an explosive revelation of sexual abuse and then the story dies away. We heard that more needs to be done to demonstrate the long-term impacts that child sexual abuse has on the individual, their friends and families.

> **[We should see] acknowledgement of what happened – you never really see anything about how that child felt or how it impacted that child. Sometimes they don't show the perpetrator as evil, rather, 'oh it's a mistake, it happens', they don't make it as serious as it is. The reporting is either, 'oh this poor child', or 'the man only did it as an accident' – it trivialises it.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Many young victims and survivors and support workers told us that television programmes should sensitively portray the reality of child sexual abuse. Positively, some of the young victims and survivors we heard from had been consulted by script writers asking for their input into making realistic storylines.

News reports

Everyone we spoke to agreed that child sexual abuse is increasingly being reported in the news, which can help encourage victims and survivors report or disclose their experiences.

However, many were concerned that child sexual abuse is sensationalised in the media, and how it also tends to focus on the **perpetrator**. Most often, we heard that the focus was on a perpetrator's position in society or on high-profile cases involving celebrities.

> **Perps are portrayed as evil, dirty villains and in reality they look like everyone else.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Most of the young victims and survivors we spoke to told us that the media focus on these types of reports because child sexual abuse has a 'shock factor'. They told us that they thought it would increase audience figures, and that people view it as entertainment.

We also heard that the media's failure to report on sexual abuse that takes place within the family makes people think that child sexual abuse mostly happens outside of the family. The support workers we heard from felt this kept the problem hidden, and children who may be experiencing sexual abuse within their home were harder to reach.

The young victims and survivors we heard from acknowledged that anonymity is important but felt that children's real-life experiences of sexual abuse need to be brought to the public's attention. We also heard that they are frustrated because society is often unaware of the complex issues a child has to deal with following a disclosure.

The young victims and survivors we heard from agreed that child sexual abuse should not be described in too much detail to the public because they recognised that some people could gain pleasure from the descriptions. However, the overall view was that the abuse itself and the impacts should not be diluted simply to spare discomfort among the general public.

> **If they want to make a change, they have to tell it like it is, that's the only way people will start taking notice of it.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

We heard that hearing about the poor handling of disclosure of sexual abuse in the media may deter a child or young person reporting or disclosing. Reference was made to the Harvey Weinstein case, for example, where some victims and survivors were criticised for not having spoken sooner and others were accused of lying. We heard that this 'blame culture' is made worse when the media use unhelpful language such as 'snowflake' to describe people who come forward. Young victims and survivors were concerned that children experiencing sexual abuse are afraid of being associated with labels like this.

Talking about child sexual abuse with parents

Some young victims and survivors told us that they were able to have open discussions about sex and sexual abuse with their parents, but the majority said that talking about sex and sexual abuse would make them, and their parents, uncomfortable. Many young victims and survivors said that they tended to learn about sex from discussions with their peers or from what they read online.

We heard that parents can be reluctant to talk about sex with their children, and that talking about child sexual abuse is even more difficult. The young victims and survivors we spoke to told us that because parents are not able to talk openly about child sexual abuse, this can make feelings of guilt and shame worse. We heard that this prevents some young people from seeking support from parents and carers.

> **People say to talk about it, but in reality they don't actually mean it.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Young victims and survivors and support workers told us that parents have a responsibility to teach children about consent while they are still young. We heard about how parents often encourage or even force children into giving or receiving affection from family and friends. We heard that this sends children conflicting messages about their right to say 'no'.

We also heard that young victims and survivors are frustrated about the language parents and carers use when discussing body parts. We heard that when nicknames are taught, rather than anatomical names, this is confusing for children. We also heard that using nicknames for body parts can shame children from a young age into thinking some body parts are 'dirty' and too sexual to use the correct word. We heard that parents avoid the subject because of their own discomfort, rather than placing children first.

> **They think they're protecting the children, but they're not; the adults are protecting themselves.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

School relationships and sex education

Please note: The Inquiry's engagement work was undertaken prior to the implementation of the new, compulsory relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education curriculum in England, which replaced the previous sex and relationships education guidance (2000).

We heard that the RSE provided to the young people we spoke to was largely inadequate. In some cases, we were told that some children are not receiving any RSE lessons. For others, the scope and quality of material covered was poor, with only the very basics being taught and little or no information about child sexual abuse.

We heard of instances where children had been opted out of RSE by their parents. Young victims and survivors told us that this was a problem, and that RSE should be mandatory. From others, particularly those who attended faith schools, we heard that puberty and menstruation were not covered and that education about sexual abuse was out of the question.

We heard from young victims and survivors who felt strongly that better education could have helped them recognise abuse.

> **If we had the education, we would notice the abuse a lot sooner, and we would know the signs.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Consent was a significant issue for the young victims and survivors we heard from. For those who had received sessions on this, we heard that it was often not delivered until Year 8 (age 12–13), which they suggested is far too late. We heard that for many young victims and survivors, the sexual abuse or grooming had started long before.

Young victims and survivors told us that education helps children to understand their bodies and their rights, and there was general agreement that this should begin from a much younger age, with many young victims and survivors telling us that RSE should start as young as nursery age (3–4 years old).

We heard that young victims and survivors are frustrated that school RSE is outdated. They suggested that the curriculum should be reviewed every year to reflect new risks and changes in societal behaviours. Young victims and survivors told us that education needs to include information about healthy and appropriate relationships, and grooming and peer-on-peer abuse, along with issues affecting young people such as sexting and meet-ups via social media apps.

> **I think at school you should be taught about inappropriate relationships and grooming.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

A significant number of young victims and survivors said that they did not have enough information or had inaccurate information about grooming. We heard that they found it hard to identify the signs of grooming. We also heard that children should be taught the warning signs of grooming, where a child is manipulated into thinking that they are in a 'relationship' with an adult.

> **I didn't know what grooming was, so how was I supposed to know what was happening, and tell people what was happening?**
>
> Young victim and survivor

We heard that schools often fail to engage young people because they do not understand the issues they are attempting to teach. Young victims and survivors told us that teachers can be uncomfortable and unqualified, and often use the wrong language. This was repeated by the support workers we heard from, who said that children would be able to relate better to sexual abuse awareness sessions if they were victim-led.

Additionally, support workers told us that online safety should feature more strongly because it is essential to modern life.

> **We are teaching kids to pass exams and not helping them live life safely. This is going to be how we live our lives going forward. We do safety training for crossing a road and we should be doing safety training before we put them on the internet.**
>
> Child sexual abuse support worker

What people believe about child sexual abuse

> **It's such a stigmatised issue, you only have to say it once and it lingers around.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

The overwhelming message we heard is that society is reluctant to talk about child sexual abuse. We were told that society is "very British", that most people do not want to talk about sex, and certainly not about child sexual abuse. We heard that shame and guilt are too frequently ingrained from a young age.

We heard that society does not understand child sexual abuse. Young victims and survivors and support organisations told us that myths like 'stranger danger' make people afraid or cautious of 'strangers', when in fact sexual abusers are usually known to their victims.

Furthermore, we heard from support workers that blame and guilt can make it difficult for families who worry about what people might think of them. We heard that families worry about being judged for not knowing that a child was being sexually abused in their own home. We also heard that some families refuse to think that sexual abuse could happen to people they know or love.

Support workers agreed that more needs to be done to tackle the prejudices of child sexual abuse. For example, we heard that people often think child sexual abuse mostly happens to people from poorer backgrounds. We heard that many people do not realise that child sexual abuse also happens in wealthy families and high status people in the community can also be perpetrators.

We heard that stereotyping perpetrators and victims is a significant barrier to society gaining a real understanding of abuse. The young victims and survivors we heard from told us it was unacceptable that jokes about "paedophiles" and child sexual abuse were not challenged by most people.

Similarly, some of the support services we heard from were concerned about the sexualisation of children. They told us that society fails to recognise the link between sexual violence and the objectification of women. For example, we heard concerns that women in school uniforms are shown as a 'normal' sexual fantasy.

We heard that language such as "she/he put himself at risk" made people think that child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse is about risk-taking behaviour. We heard that this sort of victim-blaming made it risky for young people to come forward and talk about their experiences of abuse because some people think they were "asking for it".

Positively, we heard from support workers that language has changed for the better. We heard that people are switching from saying “that dirty old man” to using terms such as “paedophile” and “rapist”, which is an encouraging shift in recognising abuse.

We heard that many young victims and survivors think they will not be believed if they speak out about their experiences. We were told that this is because people do not really understand child sexual abuse, and young victims and survivors are afraid that they will be judged.

We heard from young victims and survivors who felt that education is the key to changing the conversation. There were repeated suggestions that a national awareness-raising campaign could help do this and tackle the stigma head on. Comparisons were made with mental health and domestic violence campaigns, which have allowed important conversations to open up.

Responding to child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation: creating a trusting and supportive relationship

> **A lot has happened to me in the outside world. I've got [support worker] working with me, taught me how to cope, speak.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

We heard that society responds to child sexual abuse and exploitation in different ways. Although most young victims and survivors told us they had poor experiences with statutory bodies, we heard that victims and survivors benefited from timely, high quality support services.

What we heard about how professionals respond to child sexual abuse

Support services for young victims and survivors

Most of the young victims and survivors we heard from were positive about the response they had received from the services that supported them. We heard that support services that accepted and believed in the child's disclosure had helped young victims and survivors feel less isolated in their trauma.

> **Maintaining the same adults in the young people's lives ... enables us to effectively support them.**
>
> Child sexual abuse support worker

However, we also heard that the availability and quality of support varies across England and Wales. There are fewer support services available in rural areas, and the provision and quality of services were described as being subject to a "postcode lottery".

For example, we heard about one young person who had to travel a very long way for counselling sessions, which increased her distress and placed a lot of pressure on the family. We heard from others who were on very long waiting lists before receiving support.

Some support workers said that, due to cuts in funding, they are often overstretched. We heard that this has led to a reliance on volunteers who sometimes lack the fundamental skills and experience in trauma, which can mean that children are not well supported. Support workers told us that better resourcing and funding would improve their responses.

We also heard that when young victims and survivors receive support in time, this can reduce long-term impacts. We heard that delayed or inadequate support can have serious consequences, and that some young victims and survivors can develop physical or mental health issues, dependency issues, or antisocial or criminal behaviours. Support workers told us that, for this reason, it was economically beneficial for the government to support early intervention.

Coordination and communication between agencies

The support workers we heard from said that a key challenge is the lack of coordination and communication between agencies involved in supporting young victims and survivors. Young victims and survivors can find this lack of structure confusing. We heard that partnership working would be more effective if there was a clearer, unified strategy in place.

> **There has to be consistency in the way support is delivered. Agencies should try to keep the same person to support the client throughout the process.**
>
> Child sexual abuse support worker

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

The overwhelming majority of young victims and survivors we heard from shared negative experiences of their involvement with CAMHS. They told us that most CAMHS services did not understand the impact of child sexual abuse on a child's emotional and mental health.

We heard that CAMHS services are severely underfunded. Several young victims and survivors told us that CAMHS will only see children if they are suicidal. In fact, one young victim and survivor told us that they had thought about seriously harming themselves in the hope they would then meet the criteria for support.

> **I was thinking about cutting myself or jumping out of a window to get any help.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

> **It depends on the agency ... [when] you refer a child for mental health support but it is not offered because of high thresholds for eligibility.**
>
> Child sexual abuse support worker

We also heard from one CAMHS service which is aware of these practices and criticisms and has made an effort to operate in a different way. This organisation supports a number of victims and survivors who are no longer being treated by other CAMHS services.

Social workers

Most of the young victims and survivors we heard from were afraid that involving or disclosing to social workers would mean they would be removed from their home. The support workers we heard from told us that parents and carers often share this fear. We heard that parents and young victims and survivors will therefore often choose not to seek support when concerned about child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation.

We heard that young victims and survivors had mostly negative experiences with social work intervention following disclosure of sexual abuse. We heard that young victims and survivors are often excluded from important discussions and decisions, with some social workers engaging with the parent or carer more than with the child. Others had felt interrogated following a disclosure.

> **It [the room] was full of social workers and other people I didn't know, I felt ambushed and was asked if what I said was true or not, I didn't like the way it was done.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

We heard that some young victims and survivors were able to develop a trusting relationship with their social workers. However, we heard that this takes time and that social workers need to be completely honest. Many young victims and survivors told us that social workers are often not clear or honest about what they are doing. We heard several examples where decisions were not clearly explained to the young victim and survivor, and where the child had no idea where or with whom their information was being shared.

The young victims and survivors we heard from told us that some social workers sometimes lack sensitivity and are unskilled in dealing with child sexual abuse and exploitation. We also heard this from some of the support services, who told us that specialised child sexual abuse social workers would help make sure that a child's trauma is approached more carefully.

Police

Experience of the police varied dramatically. A small number of the young victims and survivors were impressed by how well informed they had been throughout the process, and the sensitivity that was shown by the investigating officers.

> **She held me, she looked after me and she looked after my Mam, she put her arm around me, she wasn't harsh, she understood.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

On the other hand, many young victims and survivors told us about being accused of lying and where one young person was referred to as a "little bitch" by a police officer.

Some young victims and survivors told us that the police had not managed their privacy and confidentiality concerns correctly. We heard that this could lead to reprisals from people associated with the abuser.

We heard examples of police officers in uniform visiting children at their primary school and family home with no prior warning. Several experiences were shared where communication had been poor. Some young people and their families were not kept up to date, while others told us that the police would only communicate with parents and did not share any information with the young victims and survivors in case it upset them.

We heard how important it was for young victims and survivors to be kept well informed throughout the process, though we were also told that this is a personal choice and that some children may prefer not to know about every development. The right to have a choice was expressed across the board.

This extended to a choice in what the child wants to happen following disclosure. Many young victims and survivors told us that "the system" takes over after disclosure and this can make a child feel disempowered and deter them from sharing information again.

> **Don't say you have a choice when you don't have a choice. I told the police everything and they said we need to take this further. I said I am not ready, but they said it was too serious. After that I was just waiting and waiting. It took months. I didn't know what was going on.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Young victims and survivors told us that the right to choose how they wanted to share information about their disclosure, and with whom, is essential. We also heard that being able to choose to speak to a male or female police officer made young victims and survivors more comfortable in sharing their experience. Similarly, we heard that young victims and survivors want to be able to choose where to speak to an officer, and whether they want police officers to visit in their uniform or not.

> **Sometimes the first responder doesn't even know what they are going to. For instance sometimes two men are being sent to speak to a young girl.**
>
> Child sexual abuse support worker

Police interviews had been particularly traumatic for the young people we heard from. Some had not been at all prepared about what would happen in the video suite, and many found the speed and number of questions to be overwhelming. The key message we heard was that police need to understand that victims and survivors often suppress their thoughts and memories and may not be able to remember everything accurately. We heard that the constant questioning from different police officers makes young victims and survivors feel disbelieved from the outset.

We also heard that it was important for police and other professionals to understand trauma and how people are affected in different ways. Some of the young victims and survivors told us that the police do not believe a child if they do not get upset. Another young victim and survivor explained that she used laughter as a way of dissociating from the sexual abuse, but that this had led the police to question her sincerity.

The majority of young victims and survivors informed us that there had been no conviction or prosecution in their case, which left them wondering why they had gone through such a traumatic process when there were no consequences for the perpetrator.

> **Now I regret having gone to the police. If I had to give advice to someone, I would say, 'get help but don't report'.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Specialist child sexual abuse support workers told us that victims and survivors sometimes blamed police for delays and non-convictions on the part of the Crown Prosecution Service. Many support workers told us they thought this was not the fault of the police and that the police do a very good job with the resources they have.

Support service organisations also told us that the Crown Prosecution Service is often not sensitive to the unique circumstances of young victims and survivors. We heard that CPS delays in progressing cases and low conviction rates are particularly difficult for young victims and survivors.

> **I don't think the CPS understands the consequence it has on a child when they say nothing will happen.**
>
> Child sexual abuse support worker

Schools

We heard of some positive responses from teachers towards young victims and survivors.

> **She supported me, told me that it is going to be okay and hugged me.**
> Young victim and survivor

However, many young victims and survivors we spoke to had experienced insensitive responses. We heard of an incident where a teacher had stopped a pupil midway through a disclosure, saying "don't tell me because I will have to repeat this". Another had signposted the child to Childline rather than facing the conversation.

Support service organisations told us that teachers are often scared of "inviting disclosures" and are afraid because they do not know how to handle it. We heard that even trained and appointed safeguarding officers in schools sometimes do not have the confidence to deal with child sexual abuse disclosures or would prefer an external organisation to deal with the fallout from child sexual abuse disclosures.

Some of the young victims and survivors we heard from criticised schools for focusing on the children who display challenging behaviours, as they felt that young victims and survivors are often "hidden" and not necessarily on the school's radar.

We heard that many schools appear to maintain a narrative that child sexual exploitation is about risk-taking behaviour, and that some young victims and survivors felt judged and that they were partly to blame for their sexual abuse. We also heard that many schools dealt poorly with the issue of peer-on-peer sexual abuse. We were told about several cases that had been handled very badly.

One young victim and survivor reported an experience of peer-on-peer abuse to the headteacher, who shared the information with the perpetrator's parents before a police report had been made. We heard that this had serious consequences for the investigation. We also heard that the perpetrator continued to attend the same classes as the young victim and survivor, which was "very traumatic". The young victim and survivor found herself having to explain to the school why this was inappropriate.

> **At that time, I needed adults in my life to behave like adults, instead of me having to educate them in order for them to understand, as I was going through enough already.**
> Young victim and survivor

Confidentiality was very important to all of the young victims and survivors we heard from. Many told us that they felt that their confidentiality had been breached. For example we heard about teachers being told about a child's experience of sexual abuse when they did not need to know.

Generally, the young victims and survivors we heard from felt that there was not enough being done within schools to recognise and respond to child sexual abuse and exploitation. Some schools had better resourced pastoral care than others, and we heard that this was mainly due to funding.

We heard that accessing support needs to be as easy and discreet as possible. One young victim and survivor gave an example of how children are sometimes required to stand outside a room that other pupils know is used for emotional support, and so they do not have enough privacy.

We heard various other suggestions that would improve schools' responses to child sexual abuse. These included a system that would allow teachers to identify 'red flags' for a child at potential risk of abuse, a 'worry box' for children to post concerns, and a specific school intranet page where children can easily access information about relationships, sex and abuse.

We also heard that children and young people find speaking to someone relatable to be very important and that it is easier to talk to a younger person. One young victim and survivor spoke about how their school has adopted a mentor scheme where Year 10 and 11 pupils mentor the younger children, and that it would be great if this was further strengthened with them having their own private office, and if they could be trained in dealing with potential child sexual abuse disclosures.

What we heard about how the general public responds to child sexual abuse

There was strong agreement that society as a whole is responsible for how it responds to child sexual abuse.

We heard that people did not understand the scale of the issue, and some of the young victims and survivors and support services we heard from felt that people often turn a blind eye. One support service professional told us that some fast-food chains are encouraging young people to access free Wi-Fi at their location. We heard that these places are increasingly becoming meeting points for children and potential perpetrators, but it is unlikely that staff would recognise or respond to this risk.

Some young victims and survivors told us that their experience of child sexual abuse and exploitation had been seen by others as "experimentation" on their part, and that they were partly to blame for the abuse. Other young victims and survivors talked about people "dancing around the subject" and believing that someone who has experienced child sexual abuse is in some way "damaged goods".

The overwhelming message we heard was that a fear of not being believed prevents young victims and survivors from reporting child sexual abuse. We heard from both victims and survivors and from social workers that males who have been abused by females experience particular anxiety about not being believed.

We heard from a minority of young people who felt accepted and supported following disclosure, and that this supportive response had helped them manage their trauma more effectively.

What we heard about mandatory reporting

Mandatory reporting is a legal requirement to report knowledge or suspicions of a crime to a designated authority. The Inquiry has examined existing obligations to report child sexual abuse, and the pros, cons and practical considerations of mandatory reporting, in a number of seminars, consultation with the Victims and Survivors Forum and through its public hearings.

We asked young victims and survivors if knowing that a police officer or a social worker would need to act on a report of child sexual abuse would affect their decision to tell someone.

> **I didn't say anything because I knew the school would call the police and the police would contact social services.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

The majority of young victims and survivors we heard from told us that this may prevent young people from disclosing.

> **I wouldn't tell if I knew that it would be reported to the police.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Young victims and survivors told us that they were concerned about the loss of confidentiality, losing control of the situation, and of fear they would be rejected by family and friends who found out that they told someone.

We heard that often young victims and survivors just want to share their experience.

> **It may be they just want support not action, they don't want to be just be a number.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Many said their experience of the police after disclosure was traumatising and disempowering, and that many cases did not result in a conviction or prosecution. We heard that when there were no consequences for the perpetrator in the end, many young victims and survivors would prefer help and support to legal action.

Some young victims and survivors told us that it is difficult to disclose to just one person, because organisations supporting children are obliged to report disclosures to local authority social care teams. Even when this is explained before a disclosure is made, young victims and survivors told us they still feel betrayed when a disclosure is shared with statutory services.

Some young victims and survivors told us that they had felt rushed into providing detail once they had disclosed, despite not being in immediate danger. We heard that they worried that mandatory reporting could encourage professionals to approach things from a process perspective as opposed to a child-centred approach.

We heard from young victims and survivors and support services that children will only disclose sexual abuse as part of a trusting relationship. They told us that children will often only consider speaking out when they feel safe to do so.

Some of the support services we heard from suggested that supporting the child should be the first priority. They felt that mandatory reporting to statutory services could mean that young victims and survivors do not receive the support they need if the investigation takes priority in the overall response.

Other support service professionals recognised that there were risks if reporting is not made mandatory. They told us that this may keep a child in an unsafe situation or make them feel that they may not be believed. It also places professionals in situations where they need to make difficult decisions.

Contemporary challenges: social media, consent and peer-on-peer child sexual abuse

> **“They know about nudity, swearing, blaspheming – those will be the normal parental controls. But then if you go onto Tumblr and Instagram, there are loads of things that promote unhealthy habits and mental health issues, and I don’t think my parents have any idea of that. Because I wouldn’t go out of my way and say hey did you know this is what’s on Instagram?**
>
> Young victim and survivor

We heard that social media and the internet can be a threatening challenge for children and young people, and that it is an evolving risk.

We also heard that sexual content and threats via social media and the internet are linked to peer-on-peer abuse. We heard that these risks are made worse by children's access to both online adult pornographic material and shared images of child sexual abuse.

Social media and online harms

Young victims and survivors told us that they generally feel less safe using social media and other apps than they do when accessing the internet. However, we also heard that social media is essential to young people's lives and, for most young people, social media is the only way they feel connected to the world.

> **"No one wants to start social media when you're 16. You want to start earlier. That's when you grow your following.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Young victims and survivors told us that the heavy promotion of filtered and airbrushed images drives young people to compare themselves to others. Many young victims and survivors told us that they were frustrated because celebrities and social media influencers share provocative images. We heard that young people copy these unhealthy behaviours, and that many people judge their self-worth in terms of 'likes' and followers. Many young victims and survivors told us that perpetrators will seek out insecure and vulnerable children.

We heard that children who were labelled and exposed as having been sexually abused are sometimes re-stigmatised through social media. Young victims and survivors and support organisations told us that people on social media can be extremely judgemental, and this can be hard to escape when posts are uploaded constantly.

Some of the most difficult experiences shared with us were online comments from people who knew that the child had been sexually abused and encouraged them online to self-harm. We heard about a troubling trend on social media called '#selfharm', which many of the young people had encountered.

> **"There are two really negative effects; far more young people are exposed to porn and grooming. Knowledge of your status that you are a survivor is massively amplified by social media.**
>
> Child sexual abuse support worker

We heard that sexting and sending 'nudes' are common for young people and we were told that services often have to advise and educate young people on safer ways to 'fit in'. Support service organisations also told us they were concerned that few young people understand the legal implications of sending and sharing explicit photographs.

> **The abuse has not ended and the impact continues because everyone at school has seen it. Also, the news has spread across the community. It brings new PTSD and other psychological issues.**
>
> Child sexual abuse support worker

We also heard that when children have reported images that they want removed, technology companies do not always do this.

> **You can report things on Facebook. It doesn't do much. I reported an image of me, and it just sends a message to the other person, and just says, this person would like you to remove it … so maybe implement something that deletes [pictures] for a period – make it more effective.**
>
> Young victim and survivor

The support workers we heard from felt strongly that the online companies and authorities should do more to track the people who share sexually explicit pictures of children. They told us that the government should also do more to close down websites that host child sexual abuse content.

We heard that some apps and websites host communities of adults who are open about their sexual attraction and interest in children. We heard that adults with a sexual interest in children often use these platforms to say that they are misunderstood, and it is just a sexual preference. The young victims and survivors we spoke to were upset that such groups are able to openly exist.

We heard about social media apps targeted at young people, which are similar to dating apps. For example, the 'Yubo' app was mentioned several times and described as being "like Tinder for kids". We also heard about the Omegle app, which promotes conversations between strangers, without the need to register. The young victims and survivors we heard from were concerned that these apps could be harmful and match young people with potentially dangerous people.

We heard how easily sexually explicit material is shared on social media and the internet, and that this can pop up even when a child does not wish to access it. We heard that such online imagery could continue to traumatise victims and survivors regardless of the support they have received.

The support service organisations we spoke to were generally confident in how they currently manage online risks but were concerned that new platforms are emerging all the time. This was a worry for services who indicated that a perpetrator dedicates a lot of time to groom and abuse a child online, and that it is difficult to keep up with the technology they use to do this. Support service organisations told us that they would find it useful to be trained on social media and new online threats by young people with relevant experience.

This was supported by the majority of young victims and survivors we heard from, who told us that young people are not always given credit for recognising risks. Many young victims and survivors told us that adults are often quite naive about online content, and do not fully understand either the positives or the risks of the sites young people use. We heard that parents and carers are often less digitally literate than young people. We also heard that parental controls could be easily overcome by many young people.

Responsibilities of social media platforms

The vast majority of young victims and survivors we heard from told us that they had accessed social media apps before the minimum age requirement and said that there are few restrictions in place to prevent this. Many of the young victims and survivors we heard from were surprised that technology is not being used to strengthen identity verification controls. The young victims and survivors we spoke to compared how easy it is for children to access online sites with how difficult it can be for an adult to get into their own banking app.

The clear message was that social media companies, who generate a significant income, are responsible for keeping the people who use their apps safe.

> **"The problems that the children have with the internet are those created by adults, so it is adults' responsibility to make it safe rather than telling children not to go online**
>
> Young victim and survivor

Some young victims and survivors suggested that social media platforms should set stricter privacy settings by default and tighten identity verification. Additionally, we heard that more needs to be done when inappropriate content is reported. We heard about several incidents of sexually explicit pictures of young people that had been shared widely before being removed.

The support workers we heard from agreed with the above. Additional suggestions were that social media platforms should provide safety advice for children through compulsory videos, such as information from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection command (CEOP) or Childline, which young people are not able to skip.

Sexual consent and peer-on-peer abuse

Young victims and survivors and support service organisations told us that online pornography had particularly normalised and promoted violent sex and rape fantasies.

> **Young boys back in the day used to have dirty magazines under their pillows. Now you can go online to find those. ... Their interest in sexual abuse is heightened. Where is the line between sexual abuse and curiosity?**
>
> Child sexual abuse support worker

We heard that many young people are struggling with unrealistic expectations placed on them from their peer groups. They told us that beliefs such as 'ideal' body types and how to behave in a sexual relationship places extreme pressure upon children and young people. We also heard that healthy relationships are not always well modelled.

The issue of consent was repeatedly raised by the groups of young people we heard from. This is an important issue for young people. Sexual consent in relationships is a particular issue, with the overwhelming majority of young victims and survivors telling us that the police and other professionals are often dismissive of peer-on-peer abuse. They told us that there is a tendency to either label the abuse as a 'domestic' or to blame the victim.

However, we were also told that progress has been made. Most of the young victims and survivors we heard from were familiar with the Thames Valley Police 'Tea and consent' (#consentiseverything) campaign and many recognised that this was a good start in challenging the problem. Other young victims and survivors told us that the analogy glosses over the issue and that sexual abuse should be called out more clearly for what it is. We were also told that something more relatable is needed for younger children because there is a gap between the NSPCC's 'Talk PANTS' (Pantosaurus) campaign for small children, and the 'Tea and consent' campaign for teenagers.

Final comments and reflections

The young victims and survivors we spoke to all shared the same simple, yet very powerful requests:

- believe us
- give us choices
- listen to us
- respect us
- support us.

Both the young victims and survivors and the support service professionals we heard from were eager for society to understand and reflect on the significant problems that affect children and young people.

> **The abuse is not historical, but ongoing.**
> Child sexual abuse support worker

Future work

This engagement project has provided helpful information from young victims and survivors as well as specialist social workers' experiences of supporting them.

In addition, it has given valuable insight into the barriers that victims and survivors may currently face when sharing their experience of child sexual abuse.

The Inquiry is gathering evidence and information on all the topics covered in this report through its research and investigation workstreams. The Inquiry will also consider the experiences of victims and survivors through the Truth Project and the Victims and Survivors Forum.

ANNEX 1

Questions prepared for participation groups

Questions prepared for young victim and survivor group discussions

The Inquiry worked with external organisations, who delivered the events with young victims and survivors they already support. A member of the Inquiry team with experience of working with children took notes at each event.

The facilitator explained to all of the young victims and survivors who chose to take part that the purpose of the event was to have general conversations about the issues and not to share personal accounts. The Inquiry provided open questions as prompts for the facilitator, so the discussions remained general. The organisation running the session ensured that children could leave the room and not participate in topics if they did not wish to.

SESSION 1

How society talks about child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation: Changing the conversation

Aim: To explore children's views on how child sexual abuse is seen in society and whether they think this portrayal is accurate; how they would want it to change; any suggestions to create change; and what this change would mean to them.

Prompt questions:

1. Can you name a film/television show or book where sexual abuse has occurred as a theme? What were your thoughts?
2. Where do young people first hear about appropriate and inappropriate relationships?
3. Depending on the above answers, what could be changed to enable all young people to speak out if this was happening to them?
4. What do you think about the media's portrayals of child sexual abuse? Do they need to change?

SESSION 2

How people and institutions respond to child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

Aim: To explore children's views on how institutions prevent, identify and respond to child sexual abuse; identify what aspects of the response they see as positive and what they see as negative; what would they like to change.

How people respond to child sexual abuse

1. What is the best thing a person could do when responding to a disclosure of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation?
2. What is the worst thing a person could do when responding to a disclosure of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation?
3. If asked for your advice on how to respond to and support someone who had been sexually abused, what would you say to them?
4. What makes someone a better or a worse person to talk to about child sexual abuse?
5. What are young people's views on how the police respond to young people who have experienced sexual abuse?
6. Knowing the police or a social worker would need to know about the sexual abuse, how would this impact on a young person telling someone?

How institutions/organisations respond to child sexual abuse

1. What is the best thing an institution could do when responding to a disclosure of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation?
2. What is the worst thing an institution could do when responding to a disclosure of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation?
3. What things could schools or other services, such as sports or youth clubs, do to make a young person feel more safe?
4. What current sex education and sexual abuse education takes place at schools and how do young people feel about the impact and quality of the education?
5. In what ways do young people feel supported to identify and know what to do when they or a friend may be in an unhealthy relationship? How do adults, professionals and organisations like schools do the right thing in these kinds of circumstances (e.g. unhealthy relationships, 'sexting')? Is there anything that they think should be done differently?

SESSION 3
Being safe on the internet and social media

Aim: To explore children's views on the apps and websites they use online and their reasons for using them. To find out whether they have received any advice on internet safety. To understand whether they feel safe when using different online platforms and their suggestions for making these platforms safer.

Prompt questions:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, do you feel safe when you go online? (10 being you feel very safe, 0 being you don't feel safe at all.)
2. What would make you feel safer?
3. Has your school spoken to you about staying safe online? If yes, what have they done? If no, do you think they have a responsibility to?
4. Do you think your parent/carer knows what you do online and understands the positives and risks of the apps/games/sites you use?
5. What are the risks that the online world poses to children in 2020?
6. What do participants think is parents' role in keeping children safe online?
7. Do they think parents should talk to children about this and what would they suggest is the best way for parents to do this?
8. Do they think parents should monitor children's screen time and set up parental controls on their devices/accounts and why?
9. Is this different for children of different ages and why?

SESSION 4
Thinking about the future

Aim: To understand what children think success looks like for the Inquiry; to give them the opportunity to express their views on recommendations directly to the Inquiry; to give them the opportunity to identify any other areas which they see as important for the Inquiry to cover.

Prompt questions:

1. Is there anything that we haven't talked about today that you would like to share?
2. What would make a real difference to you?
3. What is the most important message you would like the Inquiry to take away from today's event?

Questions prepared for specialist child sexual abuse support worker group discussions

The Inquiry developed separate participation events for child sexual abuse support workers. The external organisations we worked with identified staff that were specialist child sexual abuse support workers and asked them whether they were willing to take part in a participation event. These events were led by Inquiry staff and were based on group question and answer sessions. All participants had the opportunity to review the topics beforehand.

DISCUSSION 1

Talking about child sexual abuse – changing the conversation

Aim: To explore views on how child sexual abuse is seen in society; what problems this might create; and any suggestions to create change.

Prompt questions:

1. How open do you think society is to discussing child sexual abuse? How do you think this impacts your role?
2. What do you think would make it easier for children to speak about sexual abuse, including grooming and peer-on-peer abuse?
3. What do you think would make it easier for adults to identify sexual abuse?
4. What do you think would make it easier for adults to speak about child sexual abuse?
5. The Inquiry wants to understand the culture within organisations (as well as society more generally) that has allowed child sexual abuse to happen and not be reported. Are there any narratives you have come across that create obstacles and problems for the protection of children?
6. What do you think are the narratives in society about victims of child sexual abuse, and what has this meant for the children you work with? What has this meant for how you work with them?

DISCUSSION 2

Responses to child sexual abuse (CSA)/child sexual exploitation (CSE)

Aim: To explore the challenges specialist support workers face when working with children; their experience of how organisations and institutions respond to child sexual abuse; views on what aspects of the response are good and what could be improved; and what needs to change in the future.

Prompt questions:

1. What enables you to effectively support the children you are working with?
2. What challenges have you faced when trying to ensure that children receive the right support?
3. In your experience, how could institutions improve their response to signs or reports of child sexual abuse?
4. What are your views on how the police treat and respond to young people who have experienced sexual abuse?
5. What are your key considerations in managing the privacy and confidentiality concerns of a victim and survivor?
6. If you have concerns that a child is being sexually abused or is at risk of abuse, would you feel confident in knowing how to report these concerns?
7. From your perspective and experience, what are some of the barriers (whether they be psychological, personal, cultural or organisational) that staff have to reporting their concerns and suspicions about child sexual abuse? Do you have any views on factors such as denial, anxiety or power?
8. In responding to a child who has suffered child sexual abuse, what are the most helpful things that can be done?
9. What needs to change in the future?
10. Do you feel you have enough time to dedicate to the children, particularly within the context of those at risk of child sexual abuse/child sexual exploitation?

DISCUSSION 3
Skills and understanding

Aim: To explore to what extent the workforce has the relevant skills and understanding around child sexual abuse and how well the sector is supported in relation to their skills and understanding around child sexual abuse.

Prompt questions:

1. Did you feel prepared for your role in terms of knowledge and understanding?
2. Has there been anything you have found particularly helpful in how your organisation deals with child sexual abuse? Has there been anything particularly unhelpful?
3. What sort of support can you access? Has there been anything particularly helpful or unhelpful in terms of the support you receive in your role?
4. How available has training on subject matters such as child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and online safety been?
5. Where do you feel the gaps in training are (if any)?

DISCUSSION 4
The internet and social media

Aim: To explore views and understanding around how the developing and increasing use of the internet and social media might affect our work, in particular, the risks and the opportunities it creates.

Prompt questions:

1. How has the increasing use of the internet and social media affected your work?
2. What would help keep children safe online?
3. How well equipped do you feel to support or advise children on using these safely, as well as being able to effectively advise parents/carers?
4. Do you feel confident in identifying possible online grooming and abuse?

Golden threads throughout discussions: How to protect children in the future?

Aim: To understand views from specialist workers on what they think would better protect children in the future.

Prompt questions:

1. What would make the biggest positive difference to protecting children from child sexual abuse in the future?
2. What would make the biggest positive difference to supporting children who have experienced child sexual abuse?
3. What is the most important thing you want us to communicate to the Inquiry's Chair and Panel on this subject?

ANNEX 2
Glossary

Child The Inquiry defines a child as a person under the age of 18.

Child sexual abuse Sexual abuse of children involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities. The activities may involve physical contact, and non-contact activities such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse including via the internet. Child sexual abuse includes child sexual exploitation.

Child sexual exploitation Sexual exploitation of children is a form of child sexual abuse. It involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where a child receives something, as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology.

Non-statutory services Non-statutory services include governmental and non-profit organisations which provide social benefit, including charities.

Perpetrator A perpetrator is a person who has committed a harmful, illegal or immoral act.

Statutory services Statutory services are set up by law to carry out public activities, for example the police and children's social care services.

Victims and survivors In this report, we use the term to describe individuals who have been sexually abused as children. The words 'victim' and 'survivor' have different personal meanings. Some people identify as victims and some as survivors, we therefore use the words 'victims and survivors' together when referring to people who have been sexually abused.