Developing a framework for measuring success and impact of multi-agency working on child criminal exploitation cases.

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Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

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Signed ……A.Davies…………………………………….. Date 17.05.2025…………………….

Abstract

This thesis develops a framework for measuring the success and impact of multi-agency responses to child criminal exploitation (CCE), with a focus on activity in England and Wales, specifically Gloucestershire. It aims to address three core objectives: to establish the operational context in which CCE responses occur; to explore perceptions of success across stakeholders; and to design a new framework to assess impact and effectiveness in multi-agency working. Using a mixed methods case study approach, the research integrates ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and data analysis to generate a nuanced understanding of how CCE is confronted at the local level.

The study led to the development of two distinct but complementary frameworks: one capturing success from the child's perspective, and the other tailored to multi-agency practitioners. Analysis revealed a set of core themes essential for effective CCE response and evaluation: Prevention and Early Identification, Intelligence and Investigations, Prosecution and Convictions, Victim Support and Community Engagement, Adaptable Responses, Interagency Collaboration, Data and Evaluation, and Continuous Learning. These themes highlight the complexity of defining success in CCE work and the importance of flexible, trauma-informed, and evidence-based approaches.

This research contributes to existing knowledge by challenging narrow definitions of success in CCE interventions and advocating for a child-centered, systemic view of impact. It highlights that CCE is deeply rooted in broader social and structural issues, requiring a collective societal response. Addressing child criminal exploitation requires more than reactive enforcement by police or statutory agencies; it calls for a proactive, prevention-based model driven by coordinated action across all sectors of society to create change.

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Contents

Abbreviations

ACEs - Adverse Childhood Experiences

CCE – Child Criminal Exploitation

C-PTSD – Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

CJS - Criminal Justice System

CSE – Child Sexual Exploitation

DAT - Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947)

DSL - Designated Safeguarding Lead

HMICFRS – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies, Fire and Rescue Services

HSCS - Health and Social Care System

MASH - Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub

MASPs - Multi-Agency Safeguarding Partnerships

NCA - National Crime Agency

NICE - National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

NRM - National Referral Mechanism - the UK's framework for identifying and supporting victims of modern slavery.

OCGs - Organised Crime Groups

PTSD - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

SEND - Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SLT - Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977)

SPR - Safeguarding Practice Review

UNCRC - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

VCS - Voluntary and Community Sector including charities, youth outreach organisations, and grassroots collectives.

YJB - Youth Justice Board's (YJB) (2021) adoption of a Child First approach as the guiding principle for policy, strategy, and practice across the Youth Justice System (YJS).

YOTs - Youth Offending Teams

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces child criminal exploitation and sets the research in context, details the researcher's personal motivation for conducting the research and identifies the research question highlighting the intended original contribution to knowledge and practice. Lastly, it sets out the structure and focus of the subsequent 12 chapters of the thesis.

1.1   Background to the thesis

The exploitation of children for economic gain is not a new phenomenon. During industrialisation, child labour was commonplace and socially accepted as an economic necessity. Children as young as five years old were employed in factories, mines, and other hazardous environments to contribute to the economic wellbeing of their families and children made up 80% of workers in factories such as cotton mills (Muncie, 1984). It was not until the nineteenth century that legal reforms, such as The Health and Morals of Apprentices Act 1803, began to address the welfare of working children. But the basis of child labour use remained unquestioned. The Factory Act 1833 regulated the employment of children; under 9 year olds were prohibited from working and the working hours of 9–13-year-olds restricted to 12-hour days. But whilst economic exploitation of children was restricted by law, the exploitation of children, including criminal exploitation, persisted and evolved in response to changing economic and social conditions with novels such as Oliver Twist (Dickens, 1837) portraying child labour, gang exploitation and theft

The early twentieth century saw increased attention to child welfare and the establishment of more comprehensive child protection laws, marking a pivotal shift in societal attitudes toward safeguarding children. However, despite this progress, the issue of child criminal exploitation remained largely overshadowed by more prominently discussed concerns such as child

labour and sexual abuse. This relative neglect is reflective of broader societal patterns that have historically failed to recognise certain forms of harm inflicted on children, particularly those that challenge entrenched social norms or expose uncomfortable truths about power dynamics within families and communities.

One notable example of society's reluctance to fully acknowledge and address children's victimisation is the 1987 Cleveland child abuse case. This case highlights not only the societal denial of children's vulnerabilities but also the complexities and controversies surrounding child protection efforts. In Cleveland, two doctors conducted examinations for sexual and physical abuse, leading to the removal of 121 children from their homes under safeguarding measures. However, the public response was swift and intense, key figures in this, like MP Stuart Bell vocally criticised the removals, framing them as an overreach by the authorities. Bell's campaign emphasised the parents' rights, particularly those of fathers, and suggested that the safeguarding actions were driven by unfounded conspiracy theories. This framing resonated with a public already inclined to prioritise family unity and parental authority over the perspectives of children and professionals (Parton, 2006). The backlash, and associated media frenzy against the professionals involved led to 96 of the children being returned to their families (Butler & Drakeford, 2003).

Campbell (1988), critiques this public and political response, arguing that the Cleveland case was not a case of professional overreach, but rather a reflection of society's deep discomfort recognising the prevalence of male violence, particularly in the domestic sphere. Campbell suggests that the swift dismissal of the children's disclosures and the vilification of social workers and doctors were part of a broader cultural pattern a collective silencing that protects patriarchal norms and resists structural acknowledgment of child sexual abuse. In this

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context, the Cleveland case becomes emblematic not just of the tension between parental rights and child protection, but of a more entrenched societal denial: a refusal to confront the reality that abuse often occurs within the sanctity of the family home, frequently perpetrated by men. From Campbell's perspective, the case reveals not only institutional conflict but also the gendered and political underpinnings of child protection efforts. It challenges the notion that the public backlash was a measured response to professional excess, instead framing it as a symptom of a culture still grappling with how to prioritise children's safety and voices over the maintenance of traditional family authority (Campbell, 1988; Secrets and Silence, 2023).

This historical context is crucial to understanding the challenges that continue to undermine multi-agency responses to child criminal exploitation today. The reluctance to fully acknowledge children's vulnerabilities, as demonstrated in Cleveland, persists in contemporary discourses surrounding exploitation. It manifests in inadequate recognition of how systemic factors including economic deprivation, familial pressures, and community dynamics contribute to children's susceptibility to exploitation by criminal networks. Additionally, the prioritisation of adult narratives, often at the expense of a child's lived experiences, complicates efforts to establish trust and provide effective interventions. By revisiting cases such as Cleveland and others, we can better understand the historical roots of societal attitudes that hinder effective multi-agency collaboration. Cleveland underscores the importance of challenging ingrained biases and adopting a child-centric approach that foregrounds the voices and rights of young people. By addressing these deep-seated issues, multi-agency work can overcome the barriers that prevent a holistic and effective response to child criminal exploitation.

When serious allegations of sexual abuse against DJ and television presenter Jimmy Saville dating back to the 1960s gained attention in 2012 it led to greater discussion of child exploitation in the UK, not only due to the scale of offences, but the significance of the places in which the offences took place including on BBC premises. It highlighted the lack of recognition of exploitation and the widespread denial that these issues were occurring (Greer & McLaughlin, 2013). Subsequently, from 2018, reports into cases of child sexual exploitation led the government to expand the notion of localised grooming to any form of child criminal exploitation.

Thus, it is only in recent decades that CCE has begun to be recognised as a distinct and pressing issue. CCE encompasses all exploitation that preys on children's vulnerabilities and exploits their perceived innocence (National Crime Agency, 2023; Robinson et al., 2019). It is characterised by manipulation, coercion and outright deception of children into engaging in criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, theft, violence, and other forms of forced criminality for the benefit of individuals and often organised criminal networks (The Children's Society, 2021). Heightened media, policymaker and community focus has begun to change understandings of exploitation with new recognition of the impact and risk of harm to the child, forcing society to rethink the way we perceive CCE. Professionals are now encouraged to identify children and young people groomed into crime not simply as perpetrators of crime, but as victims of exploitation. The NRM, reported that in the year ending March 2024, 49% (1,225) of child referrals were primarily for criminal exploitation (UK Home Office, 2024). However, the Home Office does not provide data on the number of referrals where CCE was recorded as a secondary concern, making it difficult to determine the full extent to which children were affected by CCE beyond those identified as primary cases. The Children's Society estimates that approximately 46,000 children in England are involved in gangs (The

Children's Society, n.d.) and many subject to criminal exploitation. In London alone around 4,000 teenagers are believed to be criminally exploited (The Children's Society, n.d.).

In recent years, the CCE landscape has evolved, influenced by increasingly sophisticated criminal tactics, the economic context, and technological advancements. It is frequently associated with 'county lines' operations which has become the dominant model of drug trafficking in the UK. 'County lines' involves the exploitation of children as drugs (including cocaine and heroin), money and weapons couriers across regional borders allowing criminal groups to minimise their own risk while exploiting the legal status of minors who are less likely to be suspected or prosecuted for drug-related offences. Technological advancements, including social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps, facilitate perpetrators direct access to potential victims for grooming and recruitment. Criminal networks often present a glamorised image of gang life online, through posts that showcase money, luxury items and a sense of belonging which can particularly appeal to young people experiencing social isolation or economic hardship. The anonymity of digital communication further complicates efforts to detect and intervene in CCE as it allows groomers to operate whilst hiding their true identities.

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on CCE dynamics, exacerbating vulnerabilities and creating new opportunities for exploitation. Lockdowns and school closures left many children isolated from their usual support networks and thus more accessible to groomers online platforms to initiate contact. Economic pressures on families during the pandemic also increased the temptation for children of financial incentives to engage in criminal activities, either out of necessity or as a perceived way to support their families.

Despite growing recognition of CCE as a significant child protection issue, the legal framework in the UK remains inconsistent and too often insufficient to address the complexities of CCE and agencies like local councils, social services, the police and non-profit organisations have struggled to develop a coherent, integrated response. This is often hindered by a lack of specialised knowledge, limited inter-agency coordination and too little robust data on the dynamics of CCE. As a spokeswoman for the Human Trafficking Foundation noted, the increase in British cases involving children underscores the severity of CCE in the country but "sadly not enough is being done to tackle it" (Young, 2021 direct quotes need page numbers unless it's an online article).

The absence of a statutory definition of CCE has led to ambiguity in how cases are identified, prosecuted, and safeguarded. Currently, CCE is primarily addressed under the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which was designed to combat broader forms of exploitation, including forced labour and human trafficking. The Act introduced important provisions to protect victims of exploitation, including the NRM, which is underutilised as frontline professionals, such as police officers and social workers, struggle to identify the signs of CCE and the Act does not explicitly define CCE, resulting in inconsistent application and levels of protection for exploited children across regions and agencies and therefore the NRM. Additionally, the threshold for referrals can be high, requiring unambiguous evidence of coercion or control, which may not be immediately apparent in CCE where victims often exhibit behaviours mistaken for voluntary involvement in criminal activities. The Children's Act 1989, which focuses on safeguarding children from abuse and neglect, and the Serious Crime Act 2015 also provide some protections for children, particularly those at risk of sexual exploitation, but do not specifically address the nuances of CCE, such as grooming techniques and or manipulation of children by gangs. These laws have also been criticised for leaving significant

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gaps in protection by not fully encompassing the scope of criminal exploitation and, despite policy frameworks such as those for 'County Lines', flaws in how agencies identify, respond to and support victims of CCE exacerbated by inconsistent training, limited resources and a fragmented approach across different regions of the UK (Cockbain *et al.* 2020; Beckett *et al.* 2017).

Policy responses have similarly evolved, including establishing MASHs and promoting "Child First" approaches in youth justice systems which advocates for treating young offenders as primarily victims of exploitation rather than as criminals, recognising the coercive circumstances that often underpin their involvement in illegal activities (Smith, 2020). However, despite these, there remain significant gaps between the intended protection of children and the reality of their experiences within the criminal justice system including inconsistency in applying protective measures which often results in further criminalisation and exacerbated marginalisation of vulnerable children. Furthermore, there is a need to examine how agencies implement safeguarding measures and the extent to which children's voices are incorporated into service design and policymaking (Brown et al. 2019).

1.2   Personal motivation for the research

The researcher's journey to undertaking this study is rooted in their professional experiences, including a career shaped by roles that demand collaboration, empathy, and a dedication to supporting vulnerable populations, and personal thinking. The researcher began their professional life working within multi-agency teams addressing domestic violence, an area at the intersections of policing, social services, healthcare, and community organisations. In this role, they experienced first-hand the challenges and rewards of collaborative approaches to

complex social issues and observation of how inter-agency dynamics can either support or hinder efforts to protect victims and deliver justice. Supporting survivors of domestic violence requires navigating systemic barriers, balancing limited resources, and advocating for individuals who often feel overlooked or misunderstood by society. This exposure highlighted the essential role of communication and trust in developing effective partnerships and revealed significant gaps in the shared knowledge and coordination required for multi-agency work to succeed. These early experiences fuelled the researcher's interest in the practicalities of cross-sector collaboration and their impact on outcomes for vulnerable populations and laid the foundation for a commitment to improving the systems and protocols designed to protect individuals at risk.

A subsequent career shift brought the researcher into the field of neurodiversity diagnostics, working with children and families to identify and diagnose conditions such as autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, and other developmental differences. This role deepened their awareness of how societal structures have often failed to recognise and respond to individual's vulnerabilities. Too often, individuals with neurodiverse profiles are misunderstood, misdiagnosed, or inadequately supported, leading to challenges in their education, careers, mental health, and social integration. This professional shift also revealed parallels between the systemic shortcomings in neurodiversity support and those in child exploitation cases. In both fields, the researcher observed a tendency for institutions to operate in isolation, with little shared understanding of the broader context of a child's needs. The frustration of seeing instances of miscommunication, lack of shared understanding among professionals and where children's potential went unrealised due to systemic failures became a key motivator for pursuing research into improving collaborative frameworks.

Through their experiences, the researcher recognised significant barriers to effective multi-agency collaboration in both domestic violence and child exploitation cases. A recurring challenge was the lack of understanding about what resources and expertise are needed and available across different agencies and counties. This knowledge gap often leads to inefficiency, duplication of effort, and most concerning, unmet children's and families' needs . These challenges resonated with the researcher's own frustrations as a practitioner trying to navigate the complex integration of services and feeling limited by systemic obstacles, even while attempting to act in the best interests of those they were supporting. It became clear that addressing these issues required not just compassion, but a strategic and evidence-based approach to collaboration among agencies. This underscores the essential need for a robust framework to measure and guide multi-agency approaches to child exploitation.

Further exploration of child exploitation, raised the researcher's awareness of the ease of exploitation from the perpetrator's perspective, and how often it goes unnoticed and the multitude of ways children can be manipulated, coerced, and harmed, often without effective intervention . The researcher thus realised they had underestimated how pervasive, complex, and ingrained exploitation is at both local and national levels, the extensive trauma faced by exploited children, and the often insufficient responses. This prompted a moral and professional motivating force for work beyond simply identifying problems to proposing solutions to contribute to meaningful change recognising that effective multi-agency collaboration is not only possible but essential. Developing a framework to measure the success of these approaches is a step towards providing professionals with the tools and guidance they need to work together effectively.

This research, thus, represents a mix of the researcher's personal values, professional experiences, and a desire to make a tangible impact. By addressing the barriers to collaboration and equipping agencies with a framework for success, the researcher aims to build on the knowledge of CCE and contribute to a future where vulnerable children receive the support needed to avoid criminal exploitation.

1.3 Research Development

This research project was initially proposed by Gloucestershire Constabulary, who sought academic support in developing and evaluating success measures for a newly formed team addressing Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). The project was situated within a broader ambition to improve practice, assess effectiveness, and develop a coherent framework for understanding success in a complex and evolving area of policing. The brief provided for the PhD project was limited in both scope and detail. While it was clear that an evaluative element was expected, the specific aims, research questions, and deliverables were left largely undefined. This lack of clarity shaped the early development of the research and necessitated a degree of flexibility and responsiveness as the work progressed.

Upon commencement of the research project, it became evident that a full evaluation of the CCE team's effectiveness, as initially proposed was beyond the practical and methodological scope of a single PhD project. Designing, implementing, and evaluating a comprehensive success framework would have required access to substantial operational data, longer-term engagement, and institutional support beyond what was available. As such, the original research focus was refined. Rather than pursuing an evaluation, the project moved towards an exploratory study that aimed to understand the context, challenges, and operational dynamics of the CCE team including developing a framework. This approach enabled the

research to provide a foundational account of practice while still aligning with the Constabulary's broader goals.

Throughout the research project, significant challenges emerged in the working relationship with Gloucestershire Constabulary. One of the earliest issues encountered was a general lack of awareness among operational staff regarding the nature and purpose of the research or that research was being conducted. Although the collaboration had been agreed at a strategic level within the organisation, this information did not appear to have been disseminated effectively. As a result, initial efforts to engage with the CCE team were marked by confusion and uncertainty regarding my role, limiting early access and requiring repeated efforts to establish legitimacy and rapport.

Time spent observing the team and building relationships was further complicated. Coordinating visits, arranging interviews, and negotiating access to meetings and other operational settings proved challenging typically when trying to access availability of officers. These difficulties were exacerbated when, partway through the research period, the CCE team underwent a restructure. This change disrupted previously established channels of communication, introduced new personnel unfamiliar with the research, and necessitated further renegotiation of access and scope.

A particularly significant limitation was the Constabulary's reluctance to grant access to internal documentation. Despite submitting multiple requests for policy documents, operational guidance, and relevant case files, access to these materials was consistently denied or delayed. The absence of such documents restricted the depth of contextual analysis and impacted on the triangulation of data both of which are critical to qualitative research.

Despite these challenges, the research evolved to capture valuable insights into the everyday realities of CCE-related policing work, the organisational culture surrounding multi-agency safeguarding, and the broader structural factors shaping responses to exploitation. In this sense, the difficulties encountered in the research partnership became data, highlighting the complexity of conducting embedded research in multi-agency settings.

This experience demonstrates the importance of clear expectations, sustained communication, and meaningful institutional engagement when conducting collaborative research. It also reflects the necessity of methodological flexibility and reflexivity when navigating the unpredictable nature of fieldwork in complex systems. While the research evolved from its original evaluative aim, it nonetheless generated knowledge of practical and theoretical relevance, contributing to both academic understanding and future practice in the field of child criminal exploitation.

1.4 Current responses

The understanding of CCE remains inconsistent; whilst the CJS and the HSCS share the common objective of addressing child abuse including criminal exploitation their approaches and interpretations often differ. For the CJS, such incidents are primarily identified as criminal events, with a focus on legality, evidence, and accountability. In contrast, the safeguarding community, including the HSCS, views these incidents as harm inflicted upon a child, prioritising welfare, and protective measures (Moore, 1995). Whilst such specialisation has value, it often results in a narrow view of the issues and siloed practice where organisations and professionals concentrate only on areas aligned with their specific priorities and remits. When CCE is conceptualised primarily as a criminal phenomenon, emphasis on the legal implications of the actions of perpetrators risks distorting understandings of the event(s) and

prioritising prosecutorial responses over protection with less attention given to the child's victimhood and trauma. Conversely, viewing the issue solely through the lens of the child's vulnerability and harm risks oversimplifying the dynamics of exploitation neglecting key aspects including the child's relationship with perpetrators, the mechanisms of coercion and manipulation and the wider systemic factors that enable exploitation.

Addressing CCE is crucial not only because it is a severe form of child abuse with long-term impacts on mental health, education, and social integration, but also because it perpetuates cycles of criminality and social harm that affect communities across the UK. Given the complex, multifaceted nature of CCE, no single agency possesses all the expertise needed to fully address the issue. The exploitation of children by individuals and criminal networks is clandestine and involves manipulation, grooming and coercive control that makes detection and intervention challenging. Effectively addressing CCE requires a strategically coordinated, holistic, multi-agency approach which brings together the CJS, HSCS, educational institutions and community organisations for early identification of at-risk children, provision of comprehensive support and disruption of the operations of exploitative criminal networks. Only by synthesising the legal and welfare considerations can the fragmentation of provisions to address the needs of children affected by criminal exploitation be tackled and meaningful consistency of practice emerge.

The establishment of MASHs aimed to foster such collaborative responses to all childhood abuse including CCE. MASHs typically involve co-located representatives from the CJS, HCSC and education to facilitate quick and effective information sharing enable a more complete picture of a child's circumstances and potential signs of abuse and exploitation to be built, allowing for prompt and coordinated responses to emerging risks. But despite the

promise of better multi-agency collaboration, there are challenges in implementation including inconsistency of operational practice across the UK, some areas have robust, resourced, collaborative systems and others struggle, lack of standardised protocols and incompatible priorities among agencies (particularly the CJS and HSCS as noted above) which can lead to different levels of sensitisation to CCE across multiple domains, conflicts over confident identification, decision-making, what constitute legitimate areas for investigation moving beyond simply uncovering evidence to interpreting and contextualising it within a framework that reflects the complexities of CCE, and delays in intervention.

1.5 The Research Project

While CCE is a global issue, this study limits its attention to the UK to ensure focus on the national legal, social, and policy responses. Understanding of CCE in the UK remains inconsistent, reflecting the siloed nature of professional and organisational practice focus aligns with specific remits and priorities and while such specialisation has value, it often results in a limited and narrow view of issues. Only by synthesising these differing perspectives can meaningful consistencies emerge to inform more comprehensive responses.

A further challenge is that current responses to CCE have not created the necessary conditions for research to flourish. Existing research tends to be focused on the consequences of exploitation, consistently highlighting the need for improved post-abuse responses (Barnardo's, 2020), rather than prioritising critical examination of proactive and multidisciplinary (Houghton, 2019) preventative and diversionary interventions to protect vulnerable children before they are exploited (McGhee, 2009). This involves focusing not

only on identifying at-risk groups but understanding the multi-dimensional structural drivers that increase vulnerability (Melrose, 2013). More empirical research is needed to evaluate effectiveness of current practices and recommend actionable improvements to ensure CCE responses is both compassionate and effective in the face of the intersecting complex vulnerabilities of socioeconomic deprivation, previous exposure to trauma, lack of support systems and legal frameworks which often fail to recognise exploited children as victims rather than offenders and thus subject them to criminalisation instead of protection and rehabilitation. This means data collection, analysis and dissemination are often fragmented, lack coordination, hinder the development of theoretical frameworks that can guide effective intervention strategies and have limited opportunities for practitioners and policymakers to access a robust evidence-base. An approach that scrutinises and improves multi-agency functioning is vital to develop effective strategies to disrupt CCE networks, safeguard at-risk youth, and deliver justice.

While CCE is a global issue, the study limits its analysis to the UK to provide a focused examination of the national legal, social and policy responses to exploited minors. Recent high-profile cases such as the Telford grooming scandal (2017-2018) and the murder of Shawn Seeshai (2023), and the increasing number of referrals to the NRM indicate current identification and safeguarding approaches towards vulnerable children are insufficient. The current response to CCE in the UK underscores the urgent need for greater collaboration between the CJS and HSCS underpinned by shared frameworks that prioritise both justice and safeguarding.

This research explores the historical context of CCE and examines the current theoretical and legal frameworks to understand the dynamics of exploitation. It combines criminological

theories, Critical Feminist and Marxist perspectives, and Socioecological models to provide a multi-faceted and holistic understanding. Integrating psychological perspectives, particularly trauma theories, develops this understanding to encompass how exploited children internalise and respond to their experiences of CCE. Combined, this thesis provides a nuanced understanding of CCE, its contributing factors, and bridges practice and policy to advocate for better legislative, protective and social measures and enhanced multi-agency collaboration to combat CCE. It had the following objectives.

Objective 1: To establish the context in which child criminal exploitation response work happens

Objective 2: To understand what constitutes perceived success

Objective 3: To develop a new framework for assessing impact and success in multi-agency CCE working

This research adopts the Serious Violence Strategy definition of CCE which states:

[CCE] occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology (Home Office, 2018).

This encompasses drug trafficking, forced criminality (e.g., theft, robbery), involvement in gang-related activities and other, broader forms of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation (CSE), where they are directly linked to criminal activities.

The study's findings are both grounded in real-world experiences and informed by broader theoretical and policy considerations. A key component involved the collection and analysis of new empirical data created through interviews with professionals from across different sectors and detailed examination of multi-agency working practices. Semi-structured interviews with

frontline practitioners and strategic decision-makers were conducted to gather insight into the lived experiences of those involved in frontline collaboration, key challenges in multi-agency collaboration and systemic strengths and barriers to effective practice. This research thus amplifies the perspectives of professionals who work directly with children and young people to advance both practical and theoretical understandings to contribute to the limited body of work on CCE. Drawing on prior research and adding primary research on how professionals across various sectors conceptualised success in CCE, it explored systemic and structural factors contributing to children's vulnerabilities (such as socioeconomic deprivation, family dysfunction and community disorganisation (Ellis, 2018; Turner et al., 2020)), examined the dynamics of key stakeholder collaboration and explores opportunities for further action. In doing so, it sheds light on both the strengths and limitations of current practices, while emphasising the importance of trauma-informed and child-centred approaches in safeguarding responses (Firmin, 2020). Through critical insights into CCE professionals' multifaceted concepts of success, it moves beyond surface-level measures such as agency objectives such as case closures or disruptions to criminal networks, to a more nuanced approach that considers both systemic and individual outcomes using the lens of a child's journey toward safety, stability, and rehabilitation. It aims, therefore, to stimulate meaningful dialogue among CJS, HCSC and other key organisations, policymakers and academics to renewed focus on practice and policy to reducing CCE.

Through iterative triangulation of empirical data and synthesis of theoretical, academic literature and policy documents the thesis develops a practical, robust and adaptable framework for measuring impact of and success in multi-agency responses to CCE. It is divided into two sections, one for evaluating current practices of professionals and organisations and one for assessing children's journeys, and offers actionable

recommendations for improving coordination and achieving better outcomes for children at risk of exploitation. The framework acknowledges the complex interplay between achieving organisational goals, such as effective intervention strategies and inter-agency collaboration, and centring the child's perspective and unique needs. As such, it moves beyond traditional metrics, such as case closures or referral rates which often fail to capture the complexity of exploitation, and instead incorporates both quantitative and qualitative dimensions in a practical tool which balances accountability with compassion and fosters more holistic and sustainable outcomes in CCE cases.

The study, thus advocates for a systemic approach to tackling CCE, recognising that effective interventions must address the interplay of individual, relational, and environmental factors that underpin exploitation. Overall, the findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of what constitutes success in multi-agency working, moving beyond simplistic metrics such as case outcomes or referral rates to incorporate more qualitative dimensions, such as trust-building, communication efficacy, and the integration of trauma-informed and child-centred approaches

1.6 Structure of this thesis

Chapter 2

This thesis begins by examining multidisciplinary theoretical approaches to CCE, integrating theories of social context, Marxist and Feminist critiques, and socioecological models of vulnerability. Central to this analysis is the application of criminological models including Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, Merton's (1938) Strain Theory and Hirschi's (1969) Control Theory; Marxist perspectives which highlight the role of structural inequalities in

perpetuating CCE; Feminist perspectives on the gendered dimensions of CCE and Socioecological models of vulnerability.

Chapter 3

This progresses through into Chapter 3's critical analysis of existing CCE academic literature which overviews both historical and contemporary understandings of CCE including definitions, characteristics, and key components, including the role of organised crime, peer pressure, and socio-economic factors.

Chapter 4

Building on the theoretical foundations and critical literature review, Chapter 4 shifts focus to the legal and policy landscape surrounding Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). It examines legislation in the UK and compares it with international approaches through detailed case studies. This comparative analysis enriches the reader's understanding of how different legal frameworks shape operational responses, highlighting both strengths and gaps that influence practice domestically and abroad.

Chapter 5

With this contextual backdrop, Chapter 5 outlines the research methodology employed to investigate CCE in depth. It explains the qualitative design chosen for its ability to capture the nuanced realities faced by children and professionals. The chapter details participant selection, data collection methods, and ethical safeguards, ensuring the study is both rigorous and sensitive to vulnerable populations. This methodological clarity helps the reader appreciate how the subsequent findings are grounded in lived experience and ethical research practice.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 presents the rich insights generated through this methodology, revealing complex interconnections between individual, social, and institutional factors in CCE. The thematic analysis uncovers key influences such as family, peer groups, criminal networks, and systemic failures. Integrating case studies and international comparisons, the chapter situates these findings within a broader context, enabling readers to see both universal challenges and unique jurisdictional responses that deepen understanding of exploitation dynamics.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 presents one of the central contributions of this study: the development of two robust, evidence-based frameworks designed to evaluate the effectiveness of multi-agency responses to Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). These frameworks draw on insights from literature, policy analysis, observational data, and interviews, offering a comprehensive, practice-informed model. Incorporating both quantitative and qualitative measures, the frameworks reflect the complexity of inter-agency dynamics and the need for context-sensitive evaluation. By providing structured tools for assessing collaborative efforts, this chapter bridges empirical findings with practical application, supporting professionals in improving outcomes for children and young people at risk. It sets the foundation for the more detailed guidance explored in the chapters that follow

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 expands on this by providing a detailed guide to the child-focused framework. This chapter explores the key themes identified in the thematic analysis which informed the structure and content of this framework. It presents a detailed guide to applying and scoring

the child-focused framework developed in this study. This chapter outlines the scoring criteria and practical indicators, enabling practitioners to evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions in a consistent and child-centred manner.

Chapter 9

Recognising that CCE responses require coordinated efforts, Chapter 9 introduces the multi-agency framework guide. It emphasises collaboration across sectors to ensure holistic safeguarding and intervention. Much like chapter 8 this chapter explores the key themes following the analysis and how they structure the framework for measuring multi agency success for CCE. This chapter explores how to score the framework to get an outcome of how successful multi agency operations have been.

Chapter 10

Moving from framework development to practical application, Chapter 10 explores the realities of implementing these models. It identifies common barriers, such as resource constraints and inter-agency challenges, and discusses strategies to overcome them. Through illustrative
scenarios, the chapter offers a perspective on the complexities of practice and the adaptability required for effective intervention.

Chapter 11

Finally, the conclusion synthesises the research journey and its contributions, reflecting on the implications for policy, practice, and future study. It reinforces the importance of integrated, child-centred approaches and the value of the frameworks developed. The chapter

encourages ongoing collaboration and research, leaving a clear sense of how this work advances both understanding and practical efforts to combat Child Criminal Exploitation.

Through its integration of theory, evidence, and practice, the thesis contributes both to scholarly understanding and to the development of effective, child-focused responses to exploitation. It offers a foundation upon which further innovation and action can be built.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Frameworks

Varied theoretical frameworks have previously been applied to CCE and the broader dynamics of child exploitation to illuminate underlying drivers of CCE, the power relations involved, and the structural conditions that facilitate the exploitation of children by criminal individuals and organisations. Among these, the feminist approaches are particularly significant for their focus on how gendered power relations, patriarchal structures, and intersectional inequalities shape the experiences of exploited children and the responses of institutions, feminist approaches largely guided this thesis especially around the researcher's positionality. Alongside feminist theory, other influential frameworks include theories of social context, Marxist theories of exploitation, socioecological models of vulnerability, and Circles of Analysis these were also explored and contributed to how the researcher developed this research.

2.1 Theories of Social Context

Theories of social context provide insight into how children might become involved in criminal activity, including through gangs and organised crime groups. Merton's (1938) Strain Theory suggests that individuals may engage in criminal behaviour as a response to experiencing a disconnect between (normative) societal goals (such as wealth and success) and the legitimate means to achieve them, particularly for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. This creates pressure (or strain) which may lead individuals to seek alternative, often illegitimate, pathways to achieve these goals. So, for children in impoverished or otherwise marginalised communities, involvement in criminal enterprises may be seen as one of the few viable means to attain financial stability or status. Densley (2013) illustrates this by highlighting how economic deprivation and social marginalisation are exploited by gangs offering not only material rewards but also a sense of identity, belonging and protection that

might otherwise be absent in children's lives. Densley (2013) refers to this as the "gang as a social actor," whereby participation provides a structure for children facing systemic exclusion (p. 130).

This aligns with early insights from Social Disorganisation Theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942), which posits that communities characterised by poverty, residential instability, and ethnic heterogeneity often lack the informal social controls needed to regulate behaviour and foster conventional norms. In such environments, traditional institutions like schools, families, and community organisations may be too fragmented or under-resourced to provide consistent guidance or supervision. As a result, children may turn to gangs or criminal groups as alternative sources of structure, identity, and authority.

Differential Association Theory (DAT) (Sutherland, 1947) challenged earlier notions of individual pathology or simple response to poverty or social disorganisation to emphasise that crime is not an inheritable trait, the result of biological predisposition or just a reaction to social factors. Sutherland maintained that whilst these create opportunities or environments where criminal associations are more likely, learning processes and meaningful interactions with criminal others mediate the relationship between environment and behaviour. Central to Sutherland's theory is the idea that learning occurs through communication within intimate personal groups thus it is not sufficient to merely be exposed to individuals who commit crimes; rather, the interaction must convey specific definitions, attitudes, and techniques favourable to criminal behaviour. These include justifications, motives and rationalisations that frame particular criminal activities as acceptable or necessary. When individuals are exposed to pro-criminal sentiments at a younger age (priority), more frequently, for a longer duration, or within closer relationships (intensity), they are more likely to adopt criminal definitions and engage in criminal activity themselves (Sutherland, 1947). The focus on the mechanisms of learning makes DAT applicable across a wide range of social contexts and challenges

deterministic views of crime. In the context of CCE, DAT and social learning may occur through grooming or being pressurised into criminal networks, often under the guise of friendship, protection, or material gain. Recruitment to criminal organisations may offer vulnerable children a sense of belonging or promise financial reward, appealing to those experiencing deprivation or social marginalisation. As the child becomes more entrenched in criminal activity, the behaviour is normalised, making disengagement increasingly difficult.

Social Disorganisation Theory provides the broader ecological context for these interpersonal processes, helping to explain why some neighbourhoods produce higher rates of delinquency. It emphasises how the breakdown of communal institutions and the absence of social cohesion can create 'criminogenic' environments where criminal behaviours are more likely to be learned, shared, and sustained.

Empirical research has tested Sutherland's premises: association with delinquent peers has been found to be a significant predictor of criminal activity (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber 1986) and neighbourhood environments and peer groups with elevated levels of delinquency foster an atmosphere which reinforces criminal behaviours (Bursik and Grasmick 1993). Critics of Differential Association Theory (DAT) argue that it lacks specificity in explaining how "definitions favourable to crime" are internalised by individuals. It also overlooks the nuanced role of social interactions in the formation of criminal identities, as highlighted by early sociologists such as Thrasher (1927). Furthermore, DAT has been criticised for underestimating the role of individual agency in the decision-making process regarding criminal behaviour. In response to such critiques, Akers and Burgess (1966) expanded upon Sutherland's framework by integrating elements of Social Learning Theory (SLT), particularly operant conditioning. Drawing on Bandura's (1977) work, SLT posits that behaviours are

learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement, particularly from influential figures such as older peers or family members. From this perspective, children and young people may come to adopt criminal behaviours through repeated exposure to, and interaction with, role models who legitimise or reward such conduct. More recently, Akers' (1998) and Matsueda's (2006) interpretations of SLT, have built on Bandura's framework to incorporate the role of reinforcement in social learning processes. For instance, children in gang environments might witness and internalise delinquent behaviour because they observe the rewards (e.g., social status, financial gain, protection) associated with criminal actions and they may then model these behaviours in an effort to gain acceptance or for as a means of survival, reinforcing and normalising a cycle of criminal involvement.

Despite these strengths, Matsueda (1982) and Cullen (1994) point out that while DAT accounts for the social contexts in which criminal behaviour is learned, it overlooks personal motivations and the personal cognitive processes through which individuals evaluate and adopt deviant or criminal behaviours. Thus, DAT downplays the individual's capacity for moral reasoning and independent choice. Rational Choice Theory (Cornish & Clarke, 1986) provides a lens through which to understand these issues. It posits that individuals make decisions based on perceived costs and benefits; this illuminating how children may weigh the perceived rewards of criminal involvement against potential consequences and how perpetrators assess the likelihood of success, risks and danger of apprehension of exploiting particular children. However, even these inclusions overlook that these calculations are made within constrained circumstances, such as limited economic and social opportunities, and shaped by intersectional factors such as girls facing gendered coercion or violence and racialised boys being systemically excluded from legitimate economic opportunities.

Contrastingly, Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), focuses on the factors that prevent or deter individuals from engaging in crime, positing that strong social bonds (e.g. family, school, or community) act as deterrents to criminal behaviours. However, in CCE, targeted children often have disengaged from school, lack stable family support or have fallen through the cracks of Social Services and therefore have weakened or absent bonds making them more susceptible to the influence of criminal groups to fill the void left by social isolation or neglect.

These theories offer important insights into the social, psychological, and structural factors that contribute to children's involvement in criminal exploitation. While theories such as Strain Theory and Control Theory help explain the broader systemic and relational vulnerabilities that create openings for exploitation, learning-based theories like Differential Association and Social Learning Theory shed light on the processes through which criminal behaviours are transmitted and reinforced. Social Disorganisation Theory complements these perspectives by explaining how breakdowns in community structures and collective efficacy help create the environments where such processes can flourish. It adds a critical layer by shifting focus to the spatial and communal level, illustrating how disorganised social settings enable, rather than constrain, cycles of youth exploitation. However, no single theory provides a comprehensive explanation on its own. A multi-theoretical approach is therefore essential to fully understand the pathways into child criminal exploitation (CCE), accounting for both the environmental constraints and the agency of young people navigating marginalised and high-risk social contexts.

2.2 Marxist Theories of Exploitation

Marxist theorists focus on how conditions for exploitation are created by capitalist societies' structural inequalities and power imbalances. Within this framework, gangs and organised crime groups operate within the wider capitalist system and as an extension of the capitalist mode of production wherein the profit motive underpins the treatment of children as tools for economic gain. International dimensions of CCE further illustrate its alignment with central Marxist analysis of capitalist structures including the demand for increasingly cheap, commodification of vulnerable and exploitable, minoritised and precarious labour on a global scale seen in West African children trafficked to work in hazardous conditions on cocoa plantations that supply multinational corporations, (Fortune, 2021), migrant children exploited in sweatshops or on illegal fishing boats. These examples show that CCE (Child Commercial Exploitation) is not an anomaly in the capitalist system but another form of economic exploitation. The rise of digital platforms has introduced new ways of exploiting young people. Capitalist alienation already distances children from meaningful relationships and community, and the digital world amplifies this alienation. While young people are often described as "digital natives" due to their familiarity with technology, this doesn't mean they are immune to the dangers online. Their comfort with digital spaces makes them vulnerable to grooming and recruitment by criminal groups via social media such as instagram, tiktok and whatsapp. These platforms can exploit children's online presence and digital naivety, replacing genuine social connections with superficial interactions and opening the door to exploitation. In this way, digital platforms contribute to a new form of social and economic exploitation, where children's vulnerabilities are leveraged.

HM Inspectorate of Probation (2022) highlighted how platforms like Snapchat or Instagram are used to lure children into criminal activities by offering money, gifts, other commodities they lack in their everyday lives or simple a sense of belonging.

In the context of child criminal exploitation (CCE), neoliberalism plays a key role by framing individuals especially marginalised children as responsible for their own circumstances. Neoliberalism emphasises minimal state intervention, market-driven outcomes, and individual responsibility, often ignoring broader structural issues like poverty and inequality. This concept of individuated responsibilisation shifts blame onto individuals, rather than addressing systemic factors that contribute to exploitation.

In the case of CCE, criminal networks exploit children as cheap, expendable labor. Neoliberalism allows this exploitation by promoting the idea that individuals should be accountable for their own fate, even when faced with systemic barriers. As public support systems shrink, vulnerable children are left without resources, making them more susceptible to being targeted by criminal organizations. Neoliberal capitalism, with its focus on competition and deregulation, thus creates an environment where criminal exploitation can thrive. Hall and Winlow (2015) argue that the prevalence of zero-hour contracts, wage stagnation, and cuts to social services in the post-industrial economy exacerbate socioeconomic inequality and create a "surplus population" of young people excluded from formal labour markets and particularly vulnerable to the predatory practices of criminal enterprises which offer an illusion of economic opportunity while masking the inherent exploitation. Socioeconomic deprivation is implicated in all parts of CCE. In identifying potential child targets for CCE grooming, criminal networks target children whose lack of material resources and social capital makes them easier to manipulate. In deployment, in a way which echoes the Marxist concept of "primitive accumulation" (where coercion is used to extract labour under exploitative conditions), exploited young people are used to maximise profits and minimise risk for higher-level organisation members, often through coercive debt bondage or threats of violence, particularly in high-risk, county lines drug or weapons couriering (Barnardo's, 2021). In post-offending circumstances, organised crime groups focus

only on the child's utility, not their well-being, and, in some cases, CCE victims are criminalised (rather than protected) by the state as evidenced by the increasing number of exploited, coerced or manipulated young people prosecuted for drug-related offenses (Children's Society, 2022).

While Marxist theories highlight the role of structural inequalities in perpetuating CCE, they do not fully capture the ways in which individual agency and social bonds mediate structural pressures. A combined theoretical approach allows for a more nuanced analysis of CCE, acknowledging both macroeconomic forces and micro-level social processes that contribute to exploitation. Integrating Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) offers ways to understand how exploited children internalise criminal behaviours through observed interactions with gang members and feminist analyses emphasise patriarchal gendered and sexual commodification and violence within gang hierarchies often become instruments of perpetrator control used to assert dominance or maintain status within gang structures. This commodification reflects broader patriarchal mechanisms that dehumanise and objectify girls, reducing them to tools within exploitative systems. Intersectional feminist perspectives provide a lens to analyse how gendered, raced, classed (etc.) vulnerabilities shape recruitment and exploitation dynamics.

2.3   Socioecological Models of Vulnerability

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model provides a framework for understanding the multifaceted layers of influence that contribute to child vulnerability and exploitation underscoring how children's behaviour and experiences are shaped by dynamic interactions across various environmental systems.
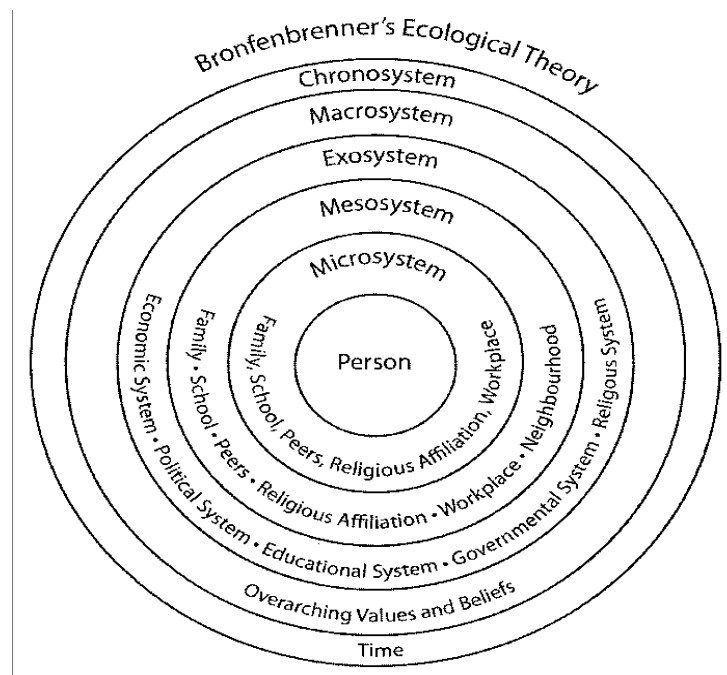
Figure 1 Bronfenbrenner's (Socio)Ecological Framework Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979)

In the context of CCE, socioecological models emphasise the interplay between individual, familial, community and societal factors in creating vulnerabilities to exploitation (Haines & Case, 2015; Firmin, 2020). At the macrosystem level, structural disparities, such as poverty, social inequality, or inadequate housing, result in communities with limited access to resources and services creating environments where exploitation can flourish (Bywaters *et al*., 2016) and exacerbating risks for children. At the mesosystem level, ineffective communication and coordination between schools, social services and the criminal justice system, failures in information-sharing protocols or insufficiently integrated services result in critical warning signs of exploitation being overlooked (Bovarnick et al., 2018) and exacerbate the risks of children "fall[ing] through the cracks" of protection frameworks (Firmin, 2017). Finally, at the microsystem level, family breakdown, neglect, or abuse render children more susceptible to the manipulations of criminal groups. A lack of protective relationships within the family or community can be exploited by criminal groups to recruit and control vulnerable

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children (Jay, 2014), and Bellis et al. (2014) highlight how high ACEs significantly increase the likelihood of children engaging in or being coerced into exploitative behaviours. Socioecological frameworks, in contrast to previous models, make it possible to analyse these factors separately and integrate them, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how various layers of influence interact. These frameworks recognise that CCE is not the result of any single factor but rather a constellation of interrelated influences at various levels of a child's life.

This recognition is valuable in helping design better multi-agency responses because effective interventions must therefore address not only the immediate perpetrators and victims of exploitation but also the structural and systemic issues that perpetuate vulnerabilities (Firmin et al., 2016). Multi-agency strategies that acknowledge all levels of the socioecological model, for example integrating poverty alleviation programs, trauma-informed family support services and integrated safeguarding frameworks, offer the most promising pathways for reducing risks and protecting children from exploitation. Integrating intersectionality would enable practitioners to move beyond one-dimensional understandings of exploitation and develop more nuanced, child-centred approaches that address the diverse and interconnected factors placing children at risk. This requires not only policy reforms but also targeted training for frontline professionals to recognise and respond effectively to the specific needs of marginalised children.

2.4 Intersectional Feminist Perspectives

Although CCE affects both boys and girls, their experiences are not the same. This research adopts an intersectional feminist stance, recognising that experiences of child criminal

exploitation are shaped by overlapping systems of oppression, including gender, race, class, neurodiversity, and immigration status. This approach is particularly suited to analysing CCE as it centres the power dynamics and structural inequalities that create differential risks and responses for exploited children.

Intersectionality, as conceptualised by Crenshaw (1989), challenges the notion of single-axis oppression by demonstrating how multiple forms of discrimination operate simultaneously, often creating a unique and compounded risk of harm. An intersectional feminist framework provides critical gendered insights that are attuned to the ways that experience is also mediated by overlapping systems of oppression

Firmin's (2017) contextual safeguarding framework highlights the importance of recognising the social and environmental factors that contribute to exploitation, emphasising the need for safeguarding systems to extend beyond the home and consider peer relationships, schools, and community spaces (Firmin, 2017). This aligns with an intersectional approach by acknowledging that structural inequalities shape children's experiences of harm and protection.

Gender shapes experiences of exploitation, yet much of the literature and discourse around CCE remains male-focused. Boys involved in CCE, commonly associated with county lines drug trafficking, are perceived as active participants or aggressors whereas girls may simultaneously experience coercion, victimisation, and being perceived as active agents. The male-focused lens obscures the nuanced realities of CCE-involved girls who are often subjected to a dual forms of exploitation (Smith & Taylor, 2020) both as facilitators of criminal activity and victims of sexual abuse within gang hierarchies (Bridges Whaley, 2024). Girls may be coerced into criminal activities such as drug trafficking under the guise of romantic

relationships, with perpetrators leveraging emotional and financial dependence to maintain control (Beckett & Warrington, 2015), or threat of or actual emotional, physical, sexual or familial violence. Yet their acquiescence is often interpreted as voluntary or complicit (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2019), denying their victimhood and diminishing the capacity to be seen as agents resisting exploitation within the confines of limited choices.

Bridges Whaley (2024) and Hiller (2023) argue girls' exploitation experiences are often overlooked and underreported due to persistent assumptions about gender and crime which frame girls as peripheral actors in criminal activities and ignore the complex, intersecting forms of exploitation they endure, leading to lower rates of referral for safeguarding support. Furthermore, girls involved in crime or gang affiliation are stigmatised meaning they may be less likely to disclose abuse and fear judgment or retribution from both exploiters and law enforcement agencies (Jones & Roberts, 2019). This gendered invisibility within safeguarding frameworks highlights the need for policies that acknowledge the intersecting vulnerabilities of girls in CCE cases rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach based on male-dominated narratives.

Integrating a gender-sensitive approach, CCE policies may more accurately acknowledge the duality of victimhood and agency, address the complexities of girls' and boys' experiences, and intersecting systems of oppression (Bridges Whaley, 2024; Hiller 2023) such as race, gender, class, disability, and immigration status which compound vulnerabilities and shape both victimisation and institutional responses. Davis & Marsh (2020) explore how racialised assumptions impact safeguarding responses, particularly in cases where Black and minoritised children are perceived as 'adultified', more resilient, less vulnerable, and thus less deserving of protection. This adultification bias means that Black children, especially boys,

are often criminalised rather than recognised as victims of exploitation, reinforcing systemic disparities in child protection and youth justice interventions. In the context of CCE, systemic inequalities and inequities are embedded within legal, educational, healthcare and welfare institutions which increases their risk of being targeted for exploitation, as exploiters target children who are more easily manipulated or less likely to receive adequate protection from statutory institutions (Gill et al., 2017). Racial disparities in the CJS mean that ethnically minoritised children are overrepresented in stop-and-search practices (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019), with Black boys nine times more likely to be stopped and searched than their white peers (Home Office, 2023) ethnically minoritised children face racial profiling and are significantly more likely to be perceived as offenders rather than victims of exploitation when safeguarding professionals unconsciously reinforce stereotypes that associate Black youth with gang involvement rather than coercion and victimisation (Densley, 2013). Children from racial or ethnic minorities who exhibit behaviours that deviate from the norm are more likely seen as "troublemakers" or "undesirable" by authority figures, resulting in harsher treatment or exclusion from supportive interventions. This racial bias may explain why Black males recruited into county lines operations are more frequently prosecuted under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 rather than identified as victims under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (The Children's Society, 2022). Failure to apply available protective measures under Modern Slavery legislation perpetuates a cycle of criminalisation and marginalisation and limits equitable access to safeguarding interventions.

An intersectional feminist approach makes visible how these racialised and gendered criminal justice practices reinforce cycles of harm, and calls for safeguarding interventions that actively challenge institutional bias and systemic discrimination.

Neurodiversity exacerbates the risk of CCE among children with special educational needs (SEN), with autistic children, children with ADHD, and those with learning difficulties particularly vulnerable. The UK education system too often fails to provide adequate support for neurodivergent students leading to disproportionately high rates of school exclusion for neurodivergent children (both Autistic and those with ADHD). Exclusion from school environments often leaves these children more isolated and open to be targeted by exploiters operating outside of educational settings. The risk is particularly acute for children from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, as they may be more likely to face exclusion or disciplinary action due to systemic racial biases in school systems (Pirrie & Macleod, 2010). Neurodivergent children are disproportionately targeted by criminal networks due to a heightened need for social belonging; increased likelihood of trusting individuals who offer them friendship, financial incentives, or protection; struggle to navigate complex social situations and understand social cues; struggles to understand the potential risks (Baird et al., 2021); to assert their boundaries and increased compliance with authority figures (O'Driscoll et al., 2018). These are further compounded by gender and race. Neurodivergent girls may face different forms of exploitation amplifying the risks of gendered socialisation where girls are told to be nurturing and compliant making them particularly vulnerable to the illusion of protection or friendship. Furthermore, neurodivergent girls are less likely to be identified or supported by educational or safeguarding systems (Baird et al., 2021).

Without adequate support, these children are left with fewer opportunities for positive engagement and are at greater risk of being drawn into criminal networks. Statutory responses to neurodivergent children often fail to account for the complex interplay of neurodiversity, gender, and race, leading to misinterpretations of behaviour and inadequate safeguarding interventions. For example, children with autism may exhibit rigid thinking

patterns, repetitive speech, or difficulties in adapting to change when questioned by police or other authority figures which can be misread as deception or non-cooperation and lead to criminalisation rather than protection (Tanner & Turney, 2020). Thus, the intersection of neurodivergence, gender, and race means marginalised children are at a heightened risk of exploitation, and safeguarding frameworks that fail to consider these intersecting impacts risk perpetuating these children's alienation from adequate protection or appropriate intervention. Adopting intersectional feminist and inclusive safeguarding practices that account for diverse experiences of children at the intersection of neurodiversity, gender, and race are needed in order to provide the needed protection and support.

Immigration status also shapes the likelihood and experiences of CCE of migrant children, particularly for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Children with insecure immigration status are at heightened risk of exploitation due to their lack of access to social support, financial stability, and legal protections. ECPAT UK (2021) found that traffickers specifically target migrant children because of their increased dependency on informal networks for housing, employment, and community belonging, which creates an entry point for coercion into criminal activity. Furthermore, fears around the consequences of engaging with authorities or deportation prevent many vulnerable migrant children from reporting exploitation (Gower, 2023). Policies such as the Illegal Migration Act (2023), which restricts access to modern slavery protections for individuals arriving in the UK through irregular routes, have further weakened the legal safeguards available to exploited migrant children, exposing them to heightened risks of abuse and exploitation. Addressing these barriers requires a fundamental shift in safeguarding policies to ensure that all children, regardless of immigration status, are afforded the same legal protections and support services.

This further supports the researcher's intersectional feminist approach, which foregrounds how immigration policies intersect with structural inequality to produce distinct vulnerabilities for migrant children.

Failure to adopt an intersectional lens in CCE policy and practice results in fragmented and ineffective responses that do not account for the full complexity of children's lived experiences. Current safeguarding frameworks often operate within rigid categories that fail to consider how race, gender, disability, and immigration status intersect to shape vulnerability, risk perception, and access to support. Without addressing structural inequalities, interventions will continue to fail to provide meaningful pathways to protection and recovery and reinforce cycles of marginalisation and exploitation. Only through adopting an intersectional safeguarding framework can responses to CCE be improved to be not only legally sound but also socially just and prioritise the protection and empowerment of all exploited children. This requires a shift from reactive, one-size-fits-all responses toward proactive, equity-driven interventions that recognise the full spectrum of children lived realities and develop models that prioritise protection, challenge structural discrimination, and ensure that no exploited child is left unidentified.

2.5 Contextual Safeguarding and Circles of Analysis

Firmin (2020)'s 'contextual safeguarding' demonstrates how gangs and drug operations manipulate unmet needs, including poverty, insecurity, or familial instability, to coerce children into participating in illicit economies and how these systemic factors, rather than focusing solely on individual behaviours, need to be addressed to disrupt cycles of exploitation. Thus she highlights how environmental and social factors, such as neighbourhood violence, lack of safe spaces and peer influence, shape young people's vulnerability to exploitation. Thus, the

tension between inequities and societal goals play a part in individual vulnerabilities to CCE whereby children are drawn into criminality and criminal networks not through criminal intent but motivated by societal goals, reflecting a failure of societal structures to provide legitimate opportunities. As scholars like Densley (2013) and Firmin (2020) argue, addressing these root causes, requires focussed multi-agency approaches to develop preventative measures, community investment and safeguarding systems in preference over punitive responses. Contextual Safeguarding, developed by Firmin (2017), represents a significant departure from traditional safeguarding frameworks by emphasising that harm to children often arises in extra-familial settings such as schools, peer groups, or neighbourhoods. Recognising 'context' aligns with the need to address systemic vulnerabilities, such as community disorganisation or societal inequalities, which create the conditions for exploitation and without which exploitation cannot be fully understood or mitigated. Firmin's framework follows Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socioecological systems theory, to situate children within a network of interconnected and interacting micro-, meso- and macro- environmental systems that influence how risks to children emerge. For example, peer group dynamics, spatial environments, and community norms are critical elements in understanding and addressing the root causes of harm. Barter et al. (2015) highlight that (micro-level) peer-on-peer abuse often arises from (macro-level) normative cultural and institutional power imbalances and social hierarchies within (meso-level) contexts such as schools. Similarly, Lloyd and Firmin (2020) demonstrate how environmental factors, such as poorly supervised spaces and community disorganisation, increase children's vulnerability to exploitation or harm. Firmin et al. (2019) propose that interventions should focus on reshaping harmful contexts, whether through environmental modifications, (micro-) peer group interventions, (meso-) neighbourhood-level changes, such as increasing community vigilance and adult supervision in public spaces, or macro-level change such as improving police practices, actively

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challenging social stigma or addressing community disorganisation can reduce opportunities for harm and deter exploitation by increasing the perceived risks for exploiters (HMICFRS, 2021). These findings reinforce the necessity of situating safeguarding practices within the wider socio-environmental contexts in which risks manifest.

The Circles of Analysis framework (Barlow, 2021). draws on multidisciplinary approaches including Socioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979), Systems Thinking, Firmin's (2017) Contextual Safeguarding and Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality. It posits that CCE is not a result of single elements (the child, the exploiter, or social factors) or isolated, exceptional incidents, but rather is a result of interconnected economic, social, and legal systems creating environments where exploitation can thrive. It builds on Socioecological Systems Theory' foundations focus on the interaction of various layers of a child's environment by visualizing intersecting "circles" of influence. to emphasise that interventions must target the entire system of interactions rather than focusing on a single element. It draws in Contextual Safeguarding insights about environmental conditions (settings) to address the interplay between individual, relational and environmental factors. For instance, how racialised policing and structural inequalities disproportionately expose Black and ethnic minority children to both victimisation and criminalisation, gendered frameworks mean boys are more frequently identified as victims of CCE whilst girls often experience less visible and more complex forms of exploitation and girls from racialised communities face compounded vulnerabilities. It, thus, requires effective multi-agency, multifaceted collaborative interventions involving schools, social services, law enforcement, and community organisations (Featherstone et al. 2014) that address individual vulnerabilities, perpetrator behaviours and environmental conditions. Effective collaboration embeds safeguarding measures across all levels of the ecological system, as no single

agency can, alone, address the complexities of extra-familial harm, and creates a more comprehensive approach to identifying and mitigating risks.

2.6   Theoretical underpinning of this study.

This thesis, at its core, is an integration of theoretical insights which allows for a more nuanced analysis of CCE, acknowledging both macroeconomic forces, meso-level environments and micro-level social processes that contribute to exploitation.

As discussed above, Marxist thinking allows consideration of how CCE reflects broader systemic, structural, cultural, and economic factors underpinning CCE, highlighting how poverty and inequality create environments where children can become an exploitable and expendable labour force for criminal enterprises' financial gain. But this focus on structural inequalities can overlook how individual agency and social relationships play a role in mediating these pressures. Integrating SLT (Bandura, 1977) gives a deeper understanding of how exploited children internalise criminal behaviours through modelling by influential figures, observation and imitation and Rational Choice Theory (Cornish & Clarke, 1987) adds consideration of moral and pragmatic individual decision-making. Socioecological models of vulnerability (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) show how children's susceptibility to exploitation is shaped by the interactions between different levels of their environment. This contextualises individual circumstances explained by Strain Theory (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 2019), Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1997; Akers & Jennings, 2019), and Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969; Thornberry & Krohn, 2005). Feminist intersectional perspectives (Crenshaw, 1989) provide an analytical lens for how overlapping social identities (such as gender, race, neurodiversity) and societal attitudes to them, add to classed dynamics to exacerbate CCE vulnerabilities and additional forms of coercion or violence girls may experience. Contextual

Safeguarding (Firmin, 2017) shifts the perception of safeguarding to risks outside the family and the complexities of such contexts and adopting the multidisciplinary Circles of Analysis Framework in a trauma-Informed way recognises the long-term impact of childhood adversity the multifaceted nature of CCE.

Trauma-informed practice emerged in response to growing evidence about the profound and long-lasting effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect, and exposure to violence (Felitti et al., 1998). Rooted in both psychological and neurobiological research, trauma-informed approaches aim to create systems and services that are responsive to the impact of trauma, prioritising safety, trust, empowerment, and collaboration (SAMHSA, 2014). Within safeguarding contexts, trauma-informed practice encourages practitioners to view behaviours not as isolated incidents of concern, but as potential expressions of survival strategies shaped by past trauma (Hughes et al., 2016). This perspective aligns with the Circles of Analysis Framework when applied through a trauma-informed lens, promoting an understanding of the child's experiences across individual, relational, and contextual domains while avoiding further harm or retraumatisation. The integration of trauma-informed principles into contextual safeguarding approaches allows for a more compassionate and holistic response to the complexities of child criminal exploitation (CCE), recognising how past adversity can heighten vulnerability to exploitation and shape responses to professional intervention.

The complexities of CCE necessitates an evidence-based, multidisciplinary theoretical approach to fully comprehend its underlying causes and ongoing dynamics and to inform robust prevention and safeguarding policies and interventions aimed at mitigating risk and promoting child welfare. This research offers practical, evidence-based recommendations for multi-agency collaboration tackling CCE and emphasises the need for gender- and trauma-

informed safeguarding systems focused on recovery and resilience as well as criminal justice intervention. Combining these perspectives ensures that the proposed framework captures the full diversity of children's experiences and supports equitable safeguarding responses which stress the importance of tackling vulnerabilities across interconnected systems.

Chapter 3: The Child's Journey

This chapter provides an exploration of key aspects of CCE. It begins with an examination of the historical context and evolution of concerns about CCE in the UK and moves on to reviewing the current legal framework to address this issue. The chapter then explores criminal networks, gangs and OCGs and (a victim-centered perspective on) grooming in CCE before proceeding to analyse factors contributing to child vulnerability and the physical, emotional, educational, and social impacts, including long-term, life-trajectory impacts, of CCE on children and their families.

Responses to CCE are then explored including the roles of organisations, such as the police, social services and youth work, and the effectiveness of their safeguarding interventions emphasising the importance of multi-agency collaboration and procedures and therapeutic intervention models. To contextualise the insights from this chapter, case studies and international comparisons are then presented to give real-world examples of CCE.

3.1 Historical Context of CCE in the United Kingdom

As noted in the introduction, child exploitation generally and CCE particularly have long histories. Since the UK's 1991 ratification of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the government has been obligated to uphold the Convention's standards including ensuring that 'in all actions concerning a child, the child's best interests shall be a primary consideration' (Article 3), 'the right of the child to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child' (Article 12) and 'the right to protection from all forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child's welfare' (Article 36). Despite these commitments, significant incompatibilities between UK policy and the Convention's articles have been identified. The Joint Committee on Human Rights (2015) noted that the

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly expressed concerns about the UK's implementation of the UNCRC including not having incorporated the Convention into domestic law and inadequate consideration of children's best interests in policymaking. Over the same period, CCE has remained a pressing issue that contravenes multiple UNCRC articles and the Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children (2024) recommended establishing a statutory definition and a cohesive CCE legal framework to protect children from such exploitation.

Current approaches have been insufficient to halt the rise and evolution of CCE in the UK. Moving forward, whilst unlikely that exploitation can be fully eradicated, actionable steps can still be taken to prevent, intervene early in and mitigate its impacts. Both research and policy must evolve towards a more integrated approach that acknowledges the complexity of exploitation to create safer environments for vulnerable children. This ongoing challenge underscores the necessity for policies that prioritise the safety and rights of young people, as initially advocated by scholars like Griffin (1993). The rise in the prevalence and awareness of CCE and its evolution of increasingly sophisticated methods has occasioned ongoing concern about the resultant increased risks posed to UK children (Local Government, 2021). However, relative neglect in academic literature has left a significant research gap when it comes to CCE. While there is a long history of studies exploring related or overlapping issues, such as gang involvement (Bourgois, 2003), youth crime (Shaw & McKay, 1942), and child sexual exploitation (CSE) (Firmin, 2013), these areas have often been treated separately and as separate to CCE. For example, both Pitts (2008) and Hughes (2000) examined gang-related violence and youth crime but overlooked how these intersect with CCE and studies such as Kelly (2005) and Beckett (2011) have documented the systemic and gendered nature of CSE but have underexplored intersectionality within and between these forms of exploitation. This

has limited the development of a holistic understanding of the full spectrum of risks faced by children and the overlap between gangs, drug trafficking, and the sexual exploitation of minors has only begun to gain attention in recent years (Pearce, 2014). This leaves gaps in understandings of how children are simultaneously exposed to multiple vulnerabilities, particularly in the context of rapidly changing social and technological landscapes.

3.2 Factors Contributing to CCE Vulnerability

As previously established, CCE in the UK is multifaceted with many inter-related personal, familial, social, and environmental factors contributing to the vulnerability of children. This section explores the primary factors identified in existing literature that make children more susceptible to criminal exploitation.

3.2.1 Socioeconomic Deprivation and Poverty

One of the most extensively documented factors contributing to child vulnerability to CCE is socioeconomic deprivation. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socioecological systems theory highlights how a child's development is shaped by interactions within multiple environmental layers, with economic hardship at the meso- and exosystemic levels limiting access to protective factors such as stable family support, educational resources, and community programs. Children in low-income urban areas or communities with high unemployment and social deprivation are disproportionately targeted by criminal grooming (Turner, Belcher, and Pates 2020; Robinson et al. 2019) due to their lack of financial resources and emotional support systems. Structural deficiencies in access to positive role models, stable employment prospects, and extracurricular opportunities that provide a sense of belonging and foster resistance and resilience, exacerbate vulnerability among economically disadvantaged children (Beckett et al. 2017) as outlined by Social Disorganisation Theory (Shaw & McKay,

1942), which posits that communities with weakened social institutions and a lack of collective efficacy are more likely to experience crime due to the breakdown of informal social controls. Ellis (2018) identified that children in such areas resorted to petty crime or gang involvement to secure basic needs such as food, shelter, or clothing due to a lack of legitimate pathways to these, aligning with Merton's (1938) Strain Theory. Following Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory assertion that insecure attachments leave children more susceptible to seeking external sources of validation and security, groomers exploit these circumstances by offering gifts, money, or protection to create a sense of loyalty and dependency (Robinson et al. 2019).

These studies collectively underscore the intertwined relationship between socioeconomic deprivation and CCE, demonstrating how systemic inequalities create fertile conditions for exploitation. Criminal networks infiltrate on these conditions by offering children not only financial incentives, such as the promise of money, status, and material goods they cannot access through legitimate means but also a form of social identity, belonging, achievement, and mentorship. This reflects differential association theory (Sutherland, 1947), which argues that criminal behaviour is learned through interaction with others who endorse deviant values and practices. Consequently, children from deprived backgrounds may come to perceive illegal activity as the only viable means of escaping poverty, further solidifying patterns of exploitation and criminality within marginalised communities.

3.2.2 Dysfunctional Family and Home Environments

Family environment is a key component to a child's vulnerability to exploitation. Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory suggests that children require stable and secure early relationships for healthy emotional and psychological development and when these attachments are

disrupted, children may seek alternative sources of security. Children exposed to criminal activity within their immediate environment, whether through family member or peers are, following Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1947) more likely to adopt criminal behaviours as socially learnt norms. Children who grow up in neglectful or abusive households may perceive criminal activity as an accepted survival strategy, making it difficult for them to later disengage from exploitative relationships, especially when those relationships provide emotional stability in contrast to their home environments (Firmin, 2017),

Familial instability, from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Socioecological Systems Theory, exists within broader systemic inequalities that shape vulnerability. Exposure to higher numbers of ACEs, defined as family breakdown, domiciliary domestic abuse or witnessing familial violence, child abuse and neglect, familial substance misuse or familial imprisonment, is significantly associated with greater engage in criminal behaviour later in life (Radford et al., 2011). They have been linked to long-term emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, attachment disorders and increased likelihood of risk-taking behaviours (Bellis et al., 2017) all of which increase susceptibility to make children more likely to accept alternative bonds which offer a sense of belonging, protection, or material support, even if they are exploitative (Smeaton, 2013). Children who experience higher numbers of ACEs also often live in communities where crime and gang culture are normalised, reinforcing illicit, exploitative pathways (Merton, 1938) as a means of survival. This is particularly relevant for children experiencing homelessness or living in unstable housing, as their lack of material security makes them even more susceptible to exploiters who offer shelter and financial resources (Crawford, 2016).

Many children drawn into criminal exploitation have prior histories of abuse, neglect, or instability (The National Crime Agency, 2022) reinforcing the need for safeguarding interventions that address underlying trauma rather than focusing solely on behavioural risk factors. Research has shown that exposure to trauma disrupts neurological and psychological development (Felitti et al., 1998), engenders hypervigilance (a state of awareness primed for risk awareness), causes young people to seek out protective affiliations, even exploitative ones (Finkelhor et al., 2015) and increases susceptibility to manipulation and coercion (Turner, 2020). Similarly, children from abusive households tends to experience elevated levels of dissociation (disconnect from distressing realities as a psychological defence mechanism) making them more susceptible to grooming techniques that normalise violence and coercion (Hopper et al., 2021). All of these entrench children in (pro-)criminal networks which are difficult to escape and demonstrate how early familial adversity contributes to the cyclical pattern of vulnerability and exploitation.

3.2.3 School Exclusion and Educational Disengagement

Exposure to ACEs have also been linked to a higher likelihood of developing behavioural problems, disengaging from education, and experiencing emotional difficulties (Bellis et al., 2019). School exclusion itself (but not suspension) is another significant predictor of vulnerability to CCE with children excluded from school disproportionately represented in violent criminality (University of Hull and University of Bristol 2025) and CCE cases.

School exclusion means children are seen as 'off the radar' of formal safeguarding systems (HM Government, 2018) out of sight of protective adults and they lack the daily routine and security that schools offer (Long, 2024). Children disengaged or excluded from mainstream education are often left with few structured opportunities for development (Cullen, 2020).

Once excluded, children are more likely to be socially isolated and disengaged from positive peer influences. Alternative provision schools, where children who have been excluded from mainstream education are often sent, are meant to provide tailored support, but many lack the resources to adequately address the complex needs of these marginalised children (Fitzpatrick et al. 2019). Without the protective factors provided by education, such as access to mentors, positive peer groups, and structured activities, excluded children become targets for criminal grooming.

The Times Education Commission (2023) noted excluded children being described by gang recruiters as being "on a conveyor belt" into criminal activity, due to the combination of social disconnection, unstructured time, and unmet needs and many children excluded from school are drawn into drug trafficking and gang-related activities shortly after exclusion (Barnardo's 2019). This illustrates how exclusion for all children can serve as a gateway to further marginalisation and exposure to exploitation (Adams, 2025). But children with SEND are disproportionately impacted in relation to school exclusions and susceptibility to CCE grooming. Delays in SEND assessments, lack of in-school support, and discriminatory disciplinary practices contribute to higher exclusion rates among SEND students (Busby, 2024). As Firmin et al. (2016) argue, schools are not only places of learning but also environments where risky peer interactions can occur. Racially minoritised children experience disproportionate exclusion in education due to systemic biases, stereotyping, and discrimination. This exclusion takes various forms, including disproportionate disciplinary actions, such as suspensions and expulsions, where minoritised students are more likely to be punished compared to their white peers, even for similar behaviors. Such exclusion contributes to the "school-to-prison pipeline," where these children face disruptions in their education and increased involvement within the justice system (Skiba et al., 2011).

Peer interactions also reflect racial exclusion. Racial bullying and social ostracism are common, leading to emotional harm and a sense of exclusion. These experiences can diminish their engagement in school, affecting their academic and social development (Swanson, 2017). The structural factors behind this exclusion include poverty, community segregation, and systemic racism, with schools often failing to address these issues effectively. Many educators lack the cultural competence to engage with racially minoritised students, and curricula often marginalise these students by focusing on Eurocentric narratives (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

To address this, Firmin et al. (2016) advocate for restorative practices in schools and greater cultural responsiveness in teaching. Teacher training should include anti-racist education, and curricula should reflect the diverse backgrounds of all students (Banks, 2015). By tackling these systemic issues, schools can create more inclusive environments that support the success of racially minoritised children.

Policy developments have begun to acknowledge the crucial safeguarding role of schools, but reforms are both limited and fragmented. The Education and Training (Welfare of Children) Act (2021) extended safeguarding duties to providers of post-16 education, yet many acknowledge including the Department for Education (DfE), this does not go far enough in embedding educational institutions within formal multi-agency safeguarding systems such as MASHs and Contextual Safeguarding responses. Too often schools are treated as merely referral routes rather than active safeguarding partners (Lloyd & Firmin, 2020). Full integration would require dedicated liaison roles, access to case information, and training in systemic safeguarding models. The inclusion of schools as core safeguarding actors would support earlier intervention, more holistic assessments, and shared responsibility across the child's socioecological system reducing over-reliance on school exclusion for behaviour management and promoting restorative, relational approaches to pupil wellbeing.

3.2.4 Mental Health Issues, Trauma and Social Isolation

Children who experience childhood trauma or mental health issues are not only detrimentally socially and emotionally developmentally impacted but are at significantly increased risk of criminal activity and exploitation (The Children's Society 2019). Children with undiagnosed or untreated mental health issues, like those with undiagnosed or unsupported SEND conditions, are especially vulnerable. Mental health issues or childhood trauma may mean children lack the mental clarity to assess risks and consequences about involvement in criminal activities accurately (Sethi et al., 2020). Gangs and OCGs are adept at exploiting these vulnerabilities by offering a sense of security, identity or belonging (Luntamo et al. 2021) filling the emotional void that children with mental health issues or trauma histories may feel (Gojkovic et al. 2019). Without adequate support, children with mental health challenges may be unable to navigate the complex social environments of manipulation and exploitation (Dixey et al., 2022). This can leave children feeling isolated, hopeless, and alienated from their peers, rendering them iteratively more susceptible to coercion by exploitative criminal networks, less able to disengage from them and mental health issues or trauma are exacerbated in CCE situations.

Recent studies have emphasised the critical role for early intervention and mental health support in mitigating the risk of exploitation highlighting the urgent need for better mental health screening and intervention strategies for children at risk of exploitation (National Crime Agency 2023). Therefore, addressing mental health and trauma is crucial not only for supporting children in their recovery but also for preventing their further involvement in criminal exploitation.

3.2.5 Peer Pressure and Gang Affiliation

The following section examines how gangs and organised crime groups facilitate CCE, focusing on definitions, typologies and operating practices of gangs and OCGs, particularly the county lines model. It highlights how these systems intersect to recruit, coerce and exploit children into criminal activities.

Gangs are loosely structured, often geographically or culturally tied, groups that engage in illegal activities such as drug supply, robbery, and violence. Densley (2013) found that the hierarchical structure of gangs allows for the recruitment and exploitation of younger members to perform criminal tasks and that these younger recruits are seen as valuable but expendable assets due to their legal status as minors and their lack of criminal records. In contrast, OCGs operate with more sophistication and coordination and tend to be involved in larger-scale operations, such as human trafficking, drug distribution and weapons smuggling (Varese, 2011). The relationship between gangs and OCGs is often symbiotic, with OCGs outsourcing certain criminal activities while maintaining control over high-level operations and gangs serving as local enforcers and distributors (McLean 2020). This dynamic allows OCGs to remove themselves from direct police sight while leveraging the gangs' territorial control and local networks. Consequently, this partnership fosters an ecosystem where the exploitation of minors becomes systematic, further entrenching gang involvement in organised crime.

In the UK, the predominant example of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is 'county lines', where gangs and organised crime groups (OCGs) from urban areas extend their operations into smaller towns or rural locations. These groups exploit children to transport drugs, weapons, and money across geographical borders. The term 'county lines' refers to the

mobile phone lines used by gangs to control the supply and demand of drugs (Spicer, 2020).

Children are often recruited using coercion, debt bondage (where the child 'owes' money to

the gang for lost drugs or other perceived failures), manipulation, or violence, with children as

young as 12 years old being exploited (National Crime Agency, 2020; Robinson, McLean &

Densley, 2019).

A well-documented case that illustrates this is the "Jayden Moodie" case, which drew national

attention. Jayden, a 14-year-old boy from London, was trafficked to Nottingham to operate as

a drug courier for a county lines gang. Jayden had previously been identified as at risk of

exploitation, but despite interventions, he was ultimately murdered by a rival gang in a

targeted attack in 2019. His case highlights not only the violent and fatal risks young people

face but also systemic failures in child protection responses and the effectiveness of inter-

agency safeguarding frameworks (The Guardian, 2019; The Telegraph, 2020).

Another illustrative case comes from the Children's Society, which reported on "Ben", a 15-

year-old from a coastal town in the South East. Ben was groomed by older gang members

who initially befriended him and gave him small gifts and protection. Over time, Ben was

manipulated into delivering drugs, and when he tried to disengage, threats were made against

his family. Ben was eventually found in a 'trap house' a property used for drug storage and

distribution, hundreds of miles from home. His case underscores the psychological coercion

and geographic displacement that are hallmarks of county lines exploitation (The Children's

Society, 2020).

These cases demonstrate how CCE through county lines is not only a matter of criminality,

but one of profound child protection concern. Children are often criminalised rather than

recognised as victims, despite clear indicators of exploitation.

Peer pressure and association with others involved in gangs or OCGs also increase a child's vulnerability to criminal exploitation via a child's desire for social status, recognition, and belonging. Adolescents, in particular, are highly susceptible to peer influence and may become involved in criminal activities as a way of gaining acceptance or avoiding social exclusion (Beckett, Holmes & Walker, 2017). In many cases, children are not initially coerced into criminal behaviour but are subtly recruited into criminal networks through older peers, or even family members (particularly siblings or cousins) already involved in illegal activities (Densley 2013).

3.2.5.1 Grooming in CCE

Peer pressure within gang culture is often framed as a rite of passage, with older gang members using younger children's need for acceptance to encourage their engagement in risky or illegal activities. Grooming, the calculated and systematic process by which criminals establish trust, dependency, and control over children, is a critical process in drawing children into criminal exploitation. Coercive control, first developed in relation to domestic abuse (Stark 2007) but increasingly applied to CCE (Firmin, 2017), is the underpinning power imbalance of grooming and integral to understanding the ways in which children become trapped in exploitative criminal networks (Beckett and Walker 2017).

Children are not always aware that they are being groomed because the process is gradual, may initially appear beneficial and perpetrators adjust their tactics depending on the vulnerabilities of their targets. What is common is that the perpetrator(s) incrementally assert(s) dominance over the child's behaviour, freedom and decision-making, creating an environment where the child is dependent on the perpetrator for safety, material goods, or emotional support. This model is well-documented in CSE cases but is increasingly

recognised within CCE, but instead of sex, children are coerced into drug running, theft, or violent acts (Beckett et al., 2017). Some children are drawn in through a "trap and debt" method, where initial gifts of money, clothes, or phones, are later recast as debts that must be 'paid off' by engagement in criminal activities (Harris, 2021) and others through "protection grooming", where a child is facing or made to believe they are facing threats from a rival group and is offered safety by joining the gang (Beckett & Warrington, 2015). These evolving tactics demonstrate the adaptability of criminal networks and the necessity for proactive intervention measures by professionals working with at-risk youth.

The Children's Society's stages of grooming and recruitment framework provides a structured lens for examining how perpetrators deliberately seek out children made vulnerable by the factors outlined above (Cockbain, 2018). Mapping The Children's Society's model onto broader criminological and sociological theories, makes clear that CCE grooming is highly calculated, drawing upon psychological control mechanisms that make it difficult for children to recognise and resist exploitation.

Gangs and OCGs employ a range of grooming strategies across several stages (targeting, building trust, coercion, and entrapment) (Craven, Brown & Gilchrist, 2006) which mirror broader models of exploitation (Beckett et al., 2017; Firmin, 2017). The initial stage of the model is about initiating contact and assessing a child's susceptibility based on their personal circumstances. Traditionally, perpetrators have targeted children in public places such as schools, parks, shopping centres, fast-food outlets, and transport hubs, where young people often congregate with minimal supervision (Cockbain, 2018). Public transport routes, particularly in areas with high gang activity, have been identified as hotspots for recruitment, with children travelling alone or in small groups approached and manipulated into couriering

(HMICFRS, 2023). Schools, pupil referral units, and care homes are also significant recruitment sites, as they provide access to young people who may already be experiencing social exclusion or instability (Beckett et al., 2017). Children may also be identified on social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp via manipulative posts showcasing money, luxury goods and peer acceptance as lures that appeal to young people's aspirations (Gojkovic 2020). The anonymity and ease of communication that the internet provides allows perpetrators to reach children who may not be accessible through traditional methods, lower barriers to initiating the grooming process and thus online platforms have become crucial spaces for criminals to target and groom children into CCE.

Once a child has been identified, the grooming process advances to the trust-building phase, which The Children's Society describes as a critical in securing a child's compliance and emotional dependency. Perpetrators seek to build a seemingly positive relationships with the child by fulfilling material or emotional needs. This frequently involves the child believing that they are receiving benefits (e.g., money, goods, drugs, status, protection or belonging) in exchange for participation in criminal activity (transactional) and/or feeling they owe something or are indebted (reciprocity) to the perpetrator(s) (Beckett et al. 2017).

As the child becomes increasingly embroiled, the perpetrator isolates them from protective influences, either through coercive control (Stark 2007), encouragement or 'love-bombing', where exploiters shower children with attention and validation to create a false sense of security (The Children's Society, year needed here). This process is marked by a shift from perceived friendship to overt control, where children are encouraged to sever ties with family, teachers, and support networks. This isolation can be both physical and psychological, reinforced by trauma bonding (Windle et al., 2020; Stark 2007) with groomers seen as

parental figures or mentors who offered guidance where traditional support systems had failed, and cognitive distortions that reinforce the OCG as the only source of loyalty and protection (Brayley and Cockbain 2014) or normalise criminal behaviour and reshaping the child's perceptions of right and wrong (McLean, 2019), reinforcing the power imbalance and making it increasingly difficult to leave (Windle et al. 2020; Coomber & Moyle, 2018). Cognitive distortion is reinforced by gang culture, where criminality is celebrated and loyalty to the group is paramount and can lead to cognitive dissonance, where the child understands the illegality of their actions but is unable to fully reconcile their moral compass with their loyalty or perceived dependence on the groomer (McLean, 2019).

Finally, the entrapment and exploitation phase, often representing a 'point of no return' in CCE, is where the child is fully immersed in criminal activity and 'asked' to commit increasingly serious crimes (transporting drugs, hiding weapons, or engaging in violence) under threat of reprisal violence, humiliation, loss of their newfound 'family' or harm to family members (Robinson, McLean & Densley 2019). By this stage, many children recognise they are trapped but often feel too enmeshed in the exploitative relationship to resist or escape due to fear, coercion, or a deep sense of loyalty toward their exploiters (Coomber & Moyle 2018).

Grooming in CCE is highly (normatively) gendered. Male victims are frequently groomed through gang culture promises of power, respect, and hyper-masculist ideals which reinforce the idea that participation in drug dealing, or violence is a means of proving one's manhood (Densley & Stevens, 2015). Young boys and adolescents, particularly from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are particularly vulnerable to this form of recruitment, as gangs appear to offer an alternative pathway to perceived success, status,

and economic stability (Hallsworth & Young, 2008; Merton, 1939). The pressure to conform to these masculine ideals entrenches their involvement, making it difficult for them to exit the cycle of exploitation as leaving becomes synonymous with de-masculinisation.

However, the grooming of girls in CCE operates differently. Girls are more likely to be exploited through emotional manipulation, coercive relationships, and sexual violence (Beckett et al., 2013). Gangs and OCGs frequently use romantic or familial dynamics to control girls, drawing them into facilitation, concealment or perpetration of criminal activities to support their 'boyfriend' or maintain gang loyalty (Firmin, 2017). The concept of "boyfriend grooming," where older gang-affiliated men establish relationships with young girls to manipulate and exploit them, is a common tactic (Coy, 2009). This dynamic was exemplified in the Rochdale CSE case, where a group of men systematically groomed and sexually exploited vulnerable teenage girls under the guise of romantic relationships, posing as 'boyfriends', using emotional control, gifts, and flattery to gain the trust of their victims before subjecting them to repeated abuse. Female victims are also often coerced into recruitment of new victims which makes them complicit in the normalisation and continuation of exploitation. Together, these patterns make girls' exploitation less obviously visible compared to that experienced by male victims (Firmin, 2020; Beckett et al., 2017).

This Rochdale CSE case highlights how grooming can be deeply intertwined with patterns of control and coercion; mirrored in CCE and County Lines exploitation, particularly in the way girls are manipulated into compliance and silence through emotional dependency. Girls, then, experience dual victimisation as they are both criminally exploited and subjected to gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence, as a means of control and subjugation (Miller, 2001). This makes their position within gang structures even more precarious, as they are

simultaneously seen as valuable commodities and as expendable assets. It also demonstrates systemic failures in recognising and responding to such abuse, stigma surrounding female gang involvement, criminality and sexual exploitation often prevents girls from seeking help, fearing retribution or societal judgment (Beckett & Warrington, 2015), contributes to the perception of underreporting and the continued invisibility of girls within broader discussions of CCE.

3.2.5.2 Online Grooming and the Role of Digital Recruitment

Technology, particularly social media, has revolutionised CCE. The rise of "DM [direct message] recruitment" means perpetrators now have an uninterrupted, private means of communication with potential recruits. Snapchat's disappearing message feature and WhatsApp's encryption provide a level of secrecy that prevents parents, carers, and law enforcement from monitoring interactions (Coomber & Moyle, 2018). Furthermore, gaming platforms such as Fortnite and Call of Duty have been identified as additional spaces where perpetrators befriend young players, gradually exposing them to criminal opportunities under the guise of friendship or mentorship (National Crime Agency, 2022). Social media has also revolutionised surveillance and coercive control, extending emotional manipulation, ensuring children feel monitored even when not physically with exploiters or in gang-dominated areas and lessening the opportunities for disengagement (Brayley & Cockbain, 2014).

3.3 The Impact of CCE on Children

CCE profoundly impacts the physical, psychological, educational, and social lives of children, often resulting in long-term trauma, disrupted education, social marginalisation, and even long-term physical harm. This section explores what is known about the multifaceted impact

of CCE on children, focusing on their emotional and psychological well-being, physical safety, educational attainment, and long-term prospects.

3.3.1 Physical Harm and Safety Risks

Child victims of criminal exploitation face significant risks to physical safety from exploiters use of violence or the threat of violence to coercively control and manipulate children into dangerous situations such as confrontations with rival gangs, drug-related violence, and physical assaults. Many children suffer from injuries as a result of beatings or punishments. County lines drug operations frequently involve the use of children as couriers, making them travel long distances on public transport, stay in unsafe locations such as drug dens or "trap houses", exposing them to substance abuse, and placing them at the forefront of dangerous criminal activities (Turner and Belcher 2020) and rival gangs (National Crime Agency 2020). Moreover, children exploited for criminal purposes may also experience physical neglect or a lack of basic needs including nutrition, shelter, and access to healthcare (Robinson et al. 2019) which can contribute to both short-term and long-term physical consequences.

3.3.2 Emotional and Psychological Impact

CCE also has long-lasting, and potentially severe, emotional and psychological impacts manifested in numerous ways, including anxiety, depression, PTSD and self-harm (Ahn et al., 2022). Coercive control and emotional or material complexity by exploiters means children become isolated from their families and support networks and, at the same time, fear violence and retaliation from their new 'support' networks which leads to significant emotional distress (Firmin 2017). Children become gradually desensitised to criminal activities and violence and as a result, may suffer from feelings of guilt, shame, and confusion about their role as both victim and participant in illegal acts (The Children's Society 2020).

Trauma theories, including the roles of ACEs, trauma bonding and C-PTSD illuminate the cognitive and emotional processes that make children both more vulnerable to exploitation and shape their long-term responses to harm. Trauma bonding is widely documented in situations where perpetrators manipulate victims into dependency through a combination of coercion, fear, and perceived care (Walker et al., 2020) such as domestic abuse, human trafficking and forms of child exploitation. Many victims become psychologically as well as socially and criminally entrapped and rationalise their exploitation as a form of loyalty or protection, even when they recognise the harm they are experiencing (Hardy et al., 2021). The sophisticated grooming techniques that individuals, gangs and criminal networks employ may offer children a sense of belonging, security, or financial stability particularly appealing to those from unstable backgrounds before gradually escalating control through threats, violence, and debt entrapment (Cockbain et al., 2021). Such trauma bonding may be vertical with victims experiencing emotional attachment to their exploiters due to cycles of abuse and intermittent reinforcement (Reid, 2016) or horizontal with other victims due to a sense of solidarity through shared experiences of exploitation, abuse, and psychological manipulation; both of which reinforce the exploiters' cycle of control, discourage individuals from seeking external help due to a sense of (dis)loyalty and fear that the consequences of breaking ties will be worse than the dangers of continued exploitation. (Hales & Hobbs, 2022) and make it more difficult to exit these exploitative situations. Trauma bonded victims are less likely to report or seek help for their exploitation and struggle more to disengage from exploitative relationships (Lloyd, 2021). They and may develop a distorted sense of identity and self-worth, leading to difficulties in forming healthy relationships and maintaining stable mental health in adulthood (Beckett and Warrington 2015).

Emotional entanglement between victims can be particularly potent in CCE, where peer influence plays a significant role and where the exploitation may include manipulating victims to act as recruiters and exploiters often manipulate these bonds to maintain control, positioning older or more experienced victims as intermediaries who reinforce the structure of exploitation. CCE safeguarding measures should account for the complexities of victim-perpetrator and victim-victim relationships and ensure that interventions are designed to address both individual recovery and the dismantling of exploitative group dynamics. Addressing trauma bonding in CCE requires multi-faceted interventions which focus on dismantling these psychological ties, fostering healthy relationships outside of the exploitation network and providing alternative sources of validation and connection. Without adequate access to mental health services and trauma-informed care, many victims of CCE struggle to recover fully from their psychological damage (Baginsky et al. 2020) and the psychological scars persist long after the child is no longer involved in criminal activity.

The chronic nature of CCE where children are repeatedly exposed to violence, threats, and criminal activity exacerbates the likelihood of C-PTSD, with research indicating that prolonged exposure to coercion reshapes neurological functioning, impairing decision-making and increasing susceptibility to further victimisation (Hopper et al., 2021). This has profound implications for multi-agency safeguarding efforts, as traditional punitive approaches (such as criminal prosecution) may retraumatise victims rather than facilitate recovery. Unlike traditional PTSD, which often results from a single traumatic event, C-PTSD develops in response to prolonged and repeated trauma, particularly in situations where the victim perceives no possibility of escape (van der Kolk, 2014). Many children exploited through CCE exhibit symptoms of C-PTSD, including emotional dysregulation, persistent feelings of worthlessness, and difficulties forming healthy relationships (Turner, 2020).

3.3.3 Educational Disruption and Exclusion

One of the most significant impacts of CCE on children is disruption to education (Cullen, 2020). Exploited children often experience elevated levels of absenteeism due to criminality involvement and many disengage from education all together under direct pressure from exploiters or from the psychological toll of exploitation. Compounding this, children involved in CCE are at higher risk of school exclusion due to misunderstood behavioural issues, such as aggression or defiance, resulting from exploitation (The Children's Society 2018). School exclusion removes one of the few structured environments in which exploited children could receive support (Firmin 2017) making them even more isolated and pushing them further towards the criminal networks exploiting them.

Educational disruption has consequences for a child's life prospects. Children removed from education due to their involvement in CCE often struggle to return to mainstream schooling, achieve formal qualifications and thus have limited future employment opportunities. This in turn, this increases their vulnerability to continuation of or re-engagement in exploitation and criminal involvement (Cullen 2020).

3.3.4 Social Marginalisation and Stigma

Children exploited for criminal purposes are socially marginalisation and stigmatised, both during and after their involvement in CCE. Alienation from families and communities resulting from exploiters' coercive isolation removes children from positive influences and protective social networks that could support their escape. Reintegration into family and community life can be challenging for children who have been manipulated into distrusting or distancing themselves from those who care about them (The Children's Society 2020) and for the adults

who love them. Exploited children may be viewed by peers, communities and even professionals, as criminals rather than victims, making it difficult for them to reintegrate into society or rebuild their lives after escaping exploitation (Ellis 2018).

3.3.4.1 Canada: Indigenous-Led Child Welfare and Safeguarding

Canada has developed a distinctive approach to child safeguarding in response to the disproportionate representation of Indigenous children within both the criminal justice and child protection systems. This over-representation is widely acknowledged as a consequence of historical injustices, including the legacy of residential schools, forced assimilation, and systemic marginalisation. In recognition of these enduring harms, Canadian safeguarding policy has increasingly shifted towards Indigenous-led frameworks that prioritise culturally grounded, community-based responses to child welfare and exploitation (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2012). The Canadian model is underpinned by a decolonial ethos that seeks to empower Indigenous communities to reclaim authority over child protection and family wellbeing. It acknowledges that mainstream, state-led interventions have frequently failed to meet the needs of Indigenous children and have often reproduced cycles of trauma and family separation. In response, recent legislative and policy developments place Indigenous knowledge systems, community governance, and holistic care at the heart of safeguarding efforts (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

The enactment of Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth and Families (2019), affirmed the legal rights of Indigenous communities to design and implement their own child protection systems, independent of provincial or territorial child welfare authorities. The Act ensures that safeguarding practices are not only culturally appropriate but are also reflective of Indigenous worldviews, values, and kinship structures (Blackstock, 2021). It

places a legal obligation on governments to respect the jurisdiction and autonomy of Indigenous communities in matters concerning children and families. Central to this model is a holistic, community-based approach to safeguarding. Child welfare services are embedded within extended family networks and supported by community infrastructure, reducing reliance on state intervention and mitigating the risks associated with out-of-home placements. This emphasis on family preservation is vital in countering the historical disconnection caused by state-run care systems. Community ownership and participation are considered essential in ensuring that interventions are sustainable, relational, and grounded in local cultural knowledge (Sinha et al., 2011).

Canada's model incorporates restorative and preventative strategies informed by Indigenous traditions and healing practices. Rather than focusing solely on punitive or risk-driven responses, safeguarding frameworks are designed to address the root causes of vulnerability, such as poverty, intergenerational trauma, and systemic exclusion. Restorative justice mechanisms alongside the integration of traditional ceremonies, counselling, and land-based education are used to support healing and reintegration, both for children who have been exploited and for their families and communities (Greenwood et al., 2020).

Despite its progressive aspirations, the implementation of Indigenous-led safeguarding systems across Canada has encountered challenges. One of the primary concerns is jurisdictional fragmentation. The child welfare landscape in Canada is governed by a complex interplay of federal, provincial, and Indigenous authorities, which has at times resulted in inconsistencies in service provision and delays in transferring full control to Indigenous communities (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). Effective coordination across

these layers of governance remains an ongoing challenge that requires sustained political will and resourcing.

Moreover, while Canada's model is specifically tailored to the unique historical and cultural context of Indigenous populations, its principles have broader relevance. The emphasis on culturally responsive, community-led safeguarding and the use of restorative approaches offer valuable insights for safeguarding marginalised children in other contexts. In the United Kingdom, for instance, these lessons could inform more inclusive and locally driven responses to child criminal exploitation, particularly among communities that have historically experienced institutional mistrust and social exclusion.

Canada's decolonial approach to safeguarding highlights the critical importance of self-determination, cultural continuity, and relational accountability in protecting children from exploitation. It serves as a powerful reminder that child protection systems must be responsive to the lived experiences and values of the communities they serve, and that sustainable safeguarding is rooted in empowerment rather than control.

3.3.5 Long-Term Impact on Life Trajectories

Many children who are exploited for criminal purposes experience adverse life outcomes as a result of the trauma of exploitation combined with the social and legal consequences of criminal involvement which create significant barriers to recovery and reintegration (Beckett and Walker 2021). Children groomed into criminal activities at an early age are more likely to transition into adult criminal behaviour, potentially including perpetrating CCE themselves, particularly if they have limited opportunities for education or employment (Home Office, 2020; Robinson et al. 2019). Children who are arrested, or subsequently charged, for (even

coerced) criminal activities face legal consequences that limit access to education, employment, and housing (Turner & Belcher 2020). Social Care proceedings relating both to themselves and any subsequent children they have (Oliver, 2019; Oliver, 2021) are stigmatised and stigmatising with protective systems often failing to distinguish between a victim's exploitation and their resulting behaviour (Oliver 2021, Children's Commissioner, 2020).

As noted by the NSPCC (2021) when justice systems neglect to properly address a victim's history and circumstances, they not only fail in their duty to protect but also enable the cycle of harm to continue, create further harm, the punishment of survivors for the effects of their trauma (Centre for Social Justice, 2019) and entrapment in cycles of poverty, exploitation and criminalisation well into adulthood.

3.3.5.1 Portugal: Decriminalisation and Harm Reduction in Exploitation Contexts

Portugal garnered international recognition for its progressive drug policy enacted in 2001 which pioneered decriminalisation of personal drug possession and reoriented its legal response toward public health, harm reduction, and social rehabilitation (Hughes & Stevens, 2010). This policy shift had profound implications for youth involvement in organised criminal networks including CCE. The decriminalisation model is grounded in the understanding that punitive legal responses often exacerbate social vulnerabilities, entrenching individuals especially children and young people in cycles of marginalisation, criminalisation, and re-exploitation. It challenges the assumption that deterrence through punishment is effective, instead recognising that underlying socioeconomic and psychological factors must be addressed in order to disrupt involvement in illicit economies (Domalewski, 2011).

A central mechanism in Portugal's harm reduction framework is the use of Comissões para a Dissuasão da Toxicodependência (Dissuasion Commissions); multi-disciplinary panels composed of legal experts, social workers, and mental health professionals tasked with assessing each individual's circumstances when they are found in possession of drugs. Rather than subjecting exploited or vulnerable individuals including children to criminal proceedings, the commissions undertake a holistic assessment of the person's health, housing, education, and employment needs, with the aim of offering targeted interventions that reduce risk and promote recovery (Greenwald, 2009).

Portugal's model relies on an integrated harm reduction infrastructure that links public health services, educational programmes, and social support mechanisms. Youth identified as vulnerable to exploitation or substance misuse are provided with mental health care, access to vocational and educational training, and assistance in securing stable housing. This network of support ensures that the response to exploitation is rehabilitative rather than retributive, helping young people to exit exploitative environments without the stigma and barriers associated with criminal records (Gonçalves et al., 2015). Empirical evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach, since the policy was introduced, Portugal has experienced a marked decline in drug-related deaths, lower rates of drug-related incarceration, and a reduction in adolescent drug use. These outcomes point to the success of preventative, welfare-oriented strategies in addressing complex social harms, and provide a compelling counter-narrative to conventional punitive models (Stevens, 2012).

The applicability of Portugal's model to the UK CCE context presents several challenges. The entrenched reliance of the UK CJS on punitive responses offers limited scope for the adoption of decriminalisation policies or harm reduction strategies, as there remains significant

institutional and ideological resistance to shifting away from enforcement-led approaches (Shiner et al., 2018). Additionally, whilst the model is effective in reducing drug-related harm and associated imprisonment, it does not explicitly or comprehensively address the coercive and violent mechanisms that characterise CCE. Practices such as debt bondage, intimidation, and the use of children as instruments of organised crime require responses that not only support victims but also confront the structural dynamics of exploitation. Thus, the model would require adaptation to tackle the specificities of CCE, particularly in contexts where children are deliberately targeted and manipulated by criminal networks (Windle & Farrell, 2020).

Chapter 4: Organisations, Interventions and Multi-Agency Collaboration

The clandestine nature and dynamics of child exploitation means that offenders exploit weaknesses in systems meant to protect children (Horvath et al., 2017; Pearce, 2009), which necessitates a coordinated response between stakeholders. Siloed working within and between agencies impairs the ability to provide comprehensive, cohesive support to vulnerable children, as no single agency possesses all the necessary expertise to fully address CCE cases. Without a joined-up approach, critical signs of exploitation may be missed, or children may fall through the gaps in the system, further increasing their risk of harm (Firmin, 2019). A multi-agency approach, bringing together police, social workers, schools, healthcare providers and other key stakeholders, is widely recognised as one of the most effective strategies for tackling CCE (Smith & Williams, 2021; Jones & Roberts, 2020), enabling a more holistic response and ensuring that the multiple needs of vulnerable children are addressed.

4.1 Current Legislation

Although CCE is being identified in HSCS, CJS, educational and other settings, including referrals to the NRM, the current legislative framework is complex, lacks a statutory criminal law definition (Home Office, 2019) and needs greater clarity (The Children's Society, 2021) to address the evolving nature of CCE (Hill 2019).

The proposed Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) Act is currently under consideration in the UK Parliament. As of May 2025, the bill is at an early stage of review, with its second reading scheduled for July 2025. This thesis does not explore the details of the Act extensively, as it has not yet been passed, and numerous stages remain before any provisions come into

effect. However, it is worth noting that the Act seeks to create a specific offence for child criminal exploitation, introduce prevention orders, and amend existing laws to offer stronger protection to children. Key principles of the Act include targeting the actions and intentions of adults who exploit children, the implementation of civil orders aimed at preventing exploitation, and ensuring criminal penalties for breaches of such orders. These measures aim to address the growing concerns surrounding child exploitation, but as the bill is still in its legislative stages, its full impact remains to be seen.

4.1.1 The Modern Slavery Act 2015

CCE falls within the remit of the Modern Slavery Act (2015) which was introduced to provide a criminal law framework for punishing and rehabilitating perpetrators of various forms of exploitation for criminal activity and to support their victims.

There are debates about whether the term 'slavery' is appropriate in contemporary contexts of exploitation. 'Slavery' refers to some of the most egregious violations of human rights, which historically, have been deeply racialised, such as the transatlantic slavery and other systems of enslavement which targeted specific groups, most notably from Africa, for dehumanisation, subjugation and commodification. The legacies of this racialised slavery persist today as systemic inequalities, racial hierarchies, and forms of modern exploitation that disproportionately affect marginalised racial and ethnic communities. While contemporary forced labour and human trafficking share some characteristics with historical slavery, they do not necessarily still have the racial dimensions of historical injustices rooted in state-sanctioned colonial and imperial histories, although, in many cases, racialised structures of power continue to shape who is most vulnerable to extreme forms of exploitation. Acknowledging exploitation as a human rights abuse by naming it as 'modern slavery' does

reinforce the gravity of such violations, helps amplify the voices of victims and fosters greater public awareness. It also promotes more accountability for and prevention of exploitation and systemic change under international human rights frameworks, such as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNHRC, 2011).

However, the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights does not require the use of the label 'slavery' (UNHRC, 2011) and critics argue that applying the term 'slavery' to contemporary forms of exploitation risks trivialising historical experiences of slavery (Bales, 2005) and creating new ambiguities about 'modern slavery' and other forms of exploitation (O'Connell Davidson 2015). This can undermine efforts to distinguish between victims and perpetrators particularly where children involved in CCE are simultaneously victims of coercion and participants in criminal activities, challenging traditional binaries of innocence and culpability.

Despite its controversies, the potential of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 remains unfulfilled, and many practitioners are still unaware of its applicability to CCE cases resulting in inconsistent recognition and application of protections for exploited children (Home Office, 2020), which undermines the Act's capacity to shield vulnerable children from exploitation and hold offenders accountable.

4.1.2 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (2022)
In 2021, The Children's Society proposed an amendment to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill to introduce a statutory definition of CCE. The Children's Society, with support from Barnardo's (2021), gave evidence to the Bill's committee stage arguing that without a clear definition, the lack of shared understanding hampers coordinated responses to

exploitation (House of Commons, 2021). The situation surrounding this amendment is still evolving as, although the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill received royal assent in 2022, details of how the Modern Slavery Act (2015) would be amended to include a statutory definition of CCE are still being clarified. In addition, whilst under the Modern Slavery Act (2015) victims of trafficking were afforded legal protections and support to help victims recover from their exploitation, regardless of the circumstances of their arrival, the Illegal Migration Act (2023) tightened qualifying criteria for such protections for trafficking victims arriving in the UK via irregular migration routes, even if their entry was linked to coerced criminal activity. There are limited exceptions for victims who actively cooperate with CJS investigations or prosecutions related to trafficking networks, but they are restricted to a maximum of 30 days. Whilst, many of the existing safeguarding and well-being protections for children remain, the new eligibility criteria could mean some child victims, particularly those unable to provide sufficient evidence of exploitation, will no longer be able to access the previous range of modern slavery protections. The long-term impact of these changes remains a subject of concern among child welfare and anti-trafficking organizations, who argue that vulnerable children could face increased risks of re-exploitation or inadequate protection.

4.1.3 Child Sexual Exploitation Legislation

There is more fulsome legislation for CSE with The Children's Act (1989) (as amended by the Children and Social Work Act 2017) and Sexual Offences Act (2003) offering more developed frameworks for recognising children as victims of abuse and providing specific protection measures. The Serious Crime Act (2015) further strengthened CSE protections by criminalising sexual communication with a child and introducing provisions for tackling

coercive control. In comparison to the protections available for victims of CSE, the same level of specificity is absent in legislative efforts to tackle CCE.

Acknowledgment of this need for clearer legislation prompted Labour MP Lyn Brown's 2021– 2022 Parliamentary session 10-Minute Rule Private Member's Child Criminal Exploitation Bill. Brown stated at its first reading (2021), "More than anything, we need criminal laws that work to destroy the business model of county lines," and "our response is simply not at the level needed to wipe out this form of child abuse". However, the proposed Bill was not comprehensive and, ultimately, Parliament prorogued the Bill, meaning it made no further progress. Recognising the gaps in protection and prosecution, the UK government has introduced the Crime and Policing Bill 2025 to Parliament, which strengthens legal protections for children by introducing a specific offence for individuals who targeting minors for exploitation through criminal activities, such as drug trafficking and theft, which, upon conviction has a maximum custodial sentence of ten years (Home Office, 2025). Alongside this, the bill removes the supervision exemption from the definition of regulated activity, requiring all relevant roles to undergo the highest level of criminal record checks and introduces a statutory duty for individuals in regulated activities related to children to report cases of child sexual abuse, with failure to comply resulting in potential barring from working with young people (Home Office, 2025). Furthermore, grooming behaviour is now considered an aggravating factor in child sexual offence sentencing, leading to more severe penalties for offenders (UK Government, 2025). However, these provisions do not extend to other forms of exploitation.

This fragmented approach underscores a critical issue: without a unified and coordinated legal response, the criminal justice system struggles to protect victims effectively while

holding perpetrators accountable. The lack of a comprehensive strategy allows certain forms of exploitation to slip through the cracks, with vulnerable children left exposed to continued harm.

To remedy this, the UK must prioritise the development of clearer and more robust legislation surrounding CCE. Legislative frameworks should not only aim to punish offenders but also focus on a holistic approach to victim protection, ensuring that all forms of exploitation are covered by consistent, well-defined laws. These measures, when implemented, would form the foundation for a safer and more secure environment for children, minimising the risks of exploitation and ensuring that every vulnerable child is afforded the protection they deserve. Whilst steps have been taken toward recognising and addressing the problem of CCE, the legislative landscape remains underdeveloped and fragmented. There is an urgent need for a coordinated and comprehensive approach that is not only reactive but proactive in safeguarding vulnerable children and tackling exploitation in all its forms. Strengthening legislative clarity and ensuring the consistent application of protective measures will be essential for effectively addressing CCE and preventing future exploitation.

4.1.4 Policy and Legal Directions in Tackling CCE

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is not a standalone offence under UK law but is covered through a range of intersecting legal instruments, statutory guidance, and safeguarding frameworks. As mentioned this includes the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which explicitly recognises the criminal exploitation of children in Section 2(1) as a form of modern slavery (Home Office, 2015). Under this legislation, children coerced into activities such as drug

trafficking (e.g. county lines), theft, or forced begging are considered victims of trafficking, regardless of whether they appeared to consent.

In addition, Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2018) provides statutory guidance for all safeguarding partners (including local authorities, police, and health services), emphasising early intervention, contextual safeguarding, and a multi-agency response to exploitation. This guidance aligns with Section 17 and Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, which place duties on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need, and to initiate enquiries where a child is suspected to be suffering significant harm.

The Serious Violence Duty introduced under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 further strengthens this framework by requiring specified authorities (e.g. police, health bodies, education providers) to work collaboratively to prevent and reduce serious violence, including CCE-related activity (Home Office, 2022). This policy context underscores the shift from purely criminal justice responses to a public health and safeguarding approach to youth criminal exploitation.

Additionally, the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) provides a formal pathway for identifying and supporting children who are potential victims of trafficking and exploitation. Children do not have to consent to be referred to the NRM, and any indication of coercion or vulnerability should trigger safeguarding procedures (Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, 2020).

These frameworks collectively underpin the legal and professional duties of agencies in responding to CCE. They also shape how accountability, protection, and risk are interpreted and operationalised at the local level, including within Gloucestershire's multi-agency structures.

The lack of coherence in national policy, the absence of a statutory definition, continued criminalisation of exploited young people, and ineffective multi-agency collaboration results in disparities in victim identification, ineffectiveness of safeguarding interventions, failure to intervene early enough and inadequate legal protection (The Children's Society, 2022), allows criminal networks to continue exploiting vulnerable children with impunity (Cockbain et al., 2021).

The absence of a statutory definition for CCE leads to ambiguities and inconsistencies in victim identification and recognition, particularly in cases where children are both criminal perpetrators (for example of drug trafficking, serious violence, or financial crime) and victims of exploitation; failures in safeguarding and inconsistent prosecutorial decision-making. Unlike CSE, CCE remains a legal grey area resulting in inconsistent interpretation, assessment and responses among and between the HSCS's, law enforcement and the judiciary (Crown Prosecution Service, 2023), ultimately leaving exploited children without appropriate protection. Whilst the Modern Slavery Act 2015 offers some protections in the case of forced criminality, it does not explicitly address CCE's complex coercive mechanisms, such as debt bondage, threats of violence, and psychological manipulation (ECPAT UK, 2021). Frontline practitioners, including police officers and social workers, often struggle to differentiate between voluntary criminal involvement and exploitation, leading to misidentification of victims as perpetrators and failure to implement core principles of child protection safeguarding laws (National Crime Agency, 2022).

A statutory, legislative definition of CCE would clearly establish that children involved in criminal activity due to coercion, threat, or grooming are, legally, victims. This definition should be incorporated into both the Children Act 1989 and the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to

ensure a uniform approach to safeguarding obligations automatically triggered when a child is identified as being exploited. In Sweden, a similar statutory framework has been implemented, recognising all exploited children as victims, thereby ensuring mandatory protective interventions rather than punitive responses (Sarnecki, 2017) and mandating cross-sector training for frontline workers (Lindström & Lundeberg, 2021). Additionally, the UK needs to establish clear prosecution guidelines that prevent the criminalisation of exploited children while holding perpetrators accountable. These measures would provide a more cohesive and proactive safeguarding framework in the UK, aligning with international best practices such as those in Sweden and Canada's Integrated Child Exploitation Units, which employ a centralised, multi-agency approach to ensure uniform identification and intervention procedures across provinces (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2022). Adopting similar approaches would enhance the UK's effectiveness and consistency in legal and protective responses to CCE.

The effectiveness of CCE interventions depends on multi-agency collaboration, yet existing safeguarding structures suffer from fragmented communication, inconsistent local practices, and the absence of clear statutory duties. Current legislation, including the Children Act (1989) and the Crime and Disorder Act (1998), outlines general safeguarding responsibilities but does not impose a specific statutory obligation for agencies to collaborate on CCE cases. This results in safeguarding failures, as police, HSCS, education providers, and youth offending teams often operate in disconnected silos, leading to delays in intervention and missed opportunities to disrupt exploitation networks (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022).

Despite some recognition that children involved in CCE are victims, many continue to be arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced for crimes they were coerced into committing. The UK's

current youth justice framework remains punitive rather than protective, often failing to account for the coercive dynamics of exploitation. The Modern Slavery Act (2015) S45, gives victims of trafficking and forced criminality a statutory defence against prosecution, however, this remains underutilised, as many exploited children struggle to meet the high evidentiary threshold required to prove coercion (Cockbain et al., 2021). Furthermore, racial disparities in prosecution rates highlight systemic inequalities within the youth justice system. The Lammy Review (2017) found that Black and minority ethnic children are disproportionately prosecuted for drug-related offences, despite being more likely to be victims of CCE than their white counterparts. The Howard League for Penal Reform (2022) found that children as young as twelve had been prosecuted for county lines drug-related offences, despite unmistakable evidence that they were victims of grooming and coercion. This criminalisation of exploited children is not only ethically problematic but also counterproductive, as evidence suggests that custodial sentences increase vulnerability to further exploitation rather than breaking the cycle of victimisation (Prison Reform Trust, 2022).

A reformed youth justice framework must prioritise diversion from prosecution and access to specialist safeguarding interventions for all children exploited in criminal contexts. Sweden and Scotland provide child-centred justice models where exploited children are automatically diverted away from the CJS into safeguarding and support services (Lundström, 2020). The UK must expand its youth diversion schemes and strengthen statutory protections, ensuring that no exploited child is subjected to criminal punishment for actions resulting from coercion. Implementing mandatory trauma-informed training for police officers, prosecutors, and judicial officials is also crucial to ensure that exploitation is recognised as a mitigating factor rather than a criminal offence.

4.3 The Role of Police and CJS

The Police, both locally and nationally, play a pivotal role in the prevention, identification and investigation of CCE, disruption of criminal networks, rescue of exploited children and compilation of information for the prosecution of those responsible. The NCA's County Lines Coordination Centre, established in 2018, works coordinate with regional police forces to disrupt drug trafficking, carry out raids, arrest gang members, and protect children involved in these operations (Brady 2019). Local and regional intelligence-led preventative policing operations focus on mapping criminal networks, identifying vulnerable children, tracking gang movements, and disrupting the logistics of county lines operations (Hales and Gelsthorpe 2020). But where criminal organisations use children as couriers across regions and Police Force areas, tracking and monitoring both of children and criminal groups is complicated by inadequate resources, jurisdictional conflicts (National Crime Agency, 2020) and the use of encrypted communication platforms which are difficult for police to intercept, require extensive technical expertise and resources to recover and analyse and difficult to use in Court (Home Office, 2021).

Current CJS responses primarily frame exploitation through the lens identifying criminal acts and pursuing accountability through legal processes (Moore, 1995). The blurred or porous boundary between victim and offender and resultant tension between enforcement and safeguarding complicates the role of police officers trained to detect and respond to criminal behaviour but who may not be equipped to recognise the signs of exploitation (Firmin 2017). Unlike other forms of criminal activity where tangible evidence, such as physical goods or

illicit substances, may be present, CCE cases often rely on the testimonies of exploited

children who may be unwilling or unable to cooperate with police attempts to obtain evidence

due to the reasons outlined above (Firmin 2019; Densley 2013) making it difficult for police to

intervene early in cases of exploitation (Robinson et al. 2019). Where there is tangible

evidence, this often only extends to the illegal activities of the exploited young people, and not

their exploiters, leading to exploited children being arrested. Children identified as victims of

exploitation may still be prosecuted for serious crimes (Beckett and Walker 2021) due to

overly punitive and sanctions-focused approaches (Ellison and Harker 2020), and policies,

which require 'children and young people to earn their status as victims whereas they are

eagerly ascribed their status as offenders' (Brown 1998 p.96). Some victims describe

repeated negative interactions whilst trying to seek help from the Police, "Them ones were

exactly the same as the last lot. I was not believed or really taken seriously" and being

dismissed as a "waste of time and resources" (Macdonald, 2018, p. 126).

Parents, in particular, have stressed the importance of an approach that prioritises the child's

well-being over procedural or investigative goals (Brown et al., 2020). There are examples of

alternative ways of working, the Metropolitan Police's Operation Makesafe, focus on

proactively engaging the community in early identification by training local businesses and

hotels to spot the signs of child exploitation leading to increased reports (Metropolitan Police,

n.d.). There are also some efforts to decriminalise exploited children, such as the NRM and

the YJB's (2021) adoption of a Child First approach as the guiding principle for policy,

strategy, and practice across the YJS. The Child First approach reframes how children in

contact with the YJS are perceived and treated, emphasizing viewing children as 'children'

rather than 'offenders', recognising their vulnerabilities before considering their involvement in

offending behaviour and diverting them away from punitive frameworks and towards Trauma-

Informed protective services. The essence of the Child First approach lies in advocating for a more welfare-oriented perspective that understands offending behaviour within the broader socioecological context and prioritising child well-being and rights. The Child First paradigm thus seeks to focus on prevention, safeguarding, diversion, rehabilitation, and trauma-based interventions that reduce the stigmatising effects of YJS contact, disrupt cycles of reoffending and promote positive developmental outcomes for children. The NRM and introduction of Slavery and Trafficking Risk Orders (STROs), which identify children as victims of exploitation and trafficking, complement the Child First approach underscoring the importance of distinguishing coerced or exploited behaviour from criminal intent,

Most UK police forces now also purport to have a Child First approach and its implementation across the YJS has shown promising outcomes. However, balancing police objectives and the Child First approach is a key challenge as decisions about whether to treat a coerced child as a victim or an offender often remains within police discretion creating tension between the police's duty to safeguard vulnerable children and their traditional role in enforcing the law and safeguarding the public (Home Office, 2018; National Crime Agency, 2017). Early research indicates that the Child First approach delivers benefits for the experiences and rights of children within the system and also reduces reoffending (Case & Browning, 2021).. Further embedding, however, will require better ongoing training and support for police and justice professionals around consistent and fair application of the Child First principles in a way which acknowledges its complexities (Youth Justice Board, 2021).

4.3.1 Sweden: A Child-Centred Justice System for Exploited Youth

Sweden has a welfare-focused social model, including free access to healthcare, education, and social support, which has, in areas with high engagement in social welfare programs,

reduced youth involvement in criminal activities by over 30% (Swedish Crime Prevention Council, 2023). It is internationally recognised for its commitment to a child-centred justice system, prioritising the protection and rehabilitation of exploited young people over punitive responses. Unlike the UK, where children coerced into criminal activity are frequently processed through the criminal justice system and face prosecution, Sweden has adopted a legal and welfare-based framework that explicitly identifies such children as victims rather than offenders. This legal orientation reflects a broader societal commitment to children's rights and the understanding that criminal exploitation constitutes a form of abuse. The Swedish model is built on the premise that the state has a duty to protect, support, and rehabilitate children who have been manipulated or coerced into illegal activity, rather than subject them to further harm through criminal proceedings. Central to this approach is the Child Welfare Act (1990), which establishes that when children commit offences under conditions of exploitation or duress, they should not be criminalised but instead referred to appropriate safeguarding and support services (Sarnecki, 2017).

Municipalities across the country are legally obligated to implement proactive measures to identify and support children at risk of exploitation. A key component of this responsibility is preventative social work through early Family Support Services (FSS), which aim to strengthen family units, reduce social exclusion, and prevent children from being drawn into criminal activity. These efforts reflect the principles of Contextual Safeguarding, recognising that risks to children often emerge outside the home in schools, peer groups, and neighbourhoods. Diversion programmes are designed not only to remove children from exploitative environments but also to provide them with the tools and opportunities to build secure and independent futures (Brunnberg & Pećnik, 2017). This includes school-based outreach initiatives, community social work, and accessible mental health services.

Addressing economic, educational, and social disadvantage, these interventions create safer contexts for young people and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.

One of the most distinctive features of Sweden's justice system is its legal recognition of exploited children as victims. Legislation mandates that children who have committed offences as a result of coercion, manipulation, or exploitation must not be prosecuted for those acts. Instead, they are redirected into the child protection system, where multidisciplinary teams assess their needs and develop tailored interventions that prioritise recovery and long-term safety (Petren et al., 2019). This legal safeguard serves to interrupt cycles of re-exploitation and prevent the long-term consequences associated with criminal records, such as exclusion from education, employment, and housing opportunities. In addition to legal protections, Sweden operates specialist youth courts that function separately from the adult criminal justice system. These courts are specifically designed to accommodate the developmental needs and vulnerabilities of children and adolescents. They operate with a rehabilitative ethos, focusing on restorative justice and the reintegration of young people into society. The procedures in these courts are deliberately adapted to be less adversarial, ensuring that the child's voice is heard and that judicial decisions reflect a holistic understanding of their circumstances (Lundström, 2020).

While Sweden's child-centred approach offers an exemplary framework for protecting exploited youth, it is not without challenges. It is a resource-intensive model requiring substantial and sustained investment in social care, mental health services, and alternative legal structures. The increasing influence of transnational criminal networks (Davidsson and Dahlstrom 2019) is challenging. Furthermore, critics have expressed concern that the high threshold for prosecuting juvenile offenders may, in some cases, limit the capacity of the

justice system to act as a deterrent against organised criminal exploitation. There is a risk that

perpetrators may perceive the system as lenient and target children with the understanding

that legal consequences are minimal. This underscores the need for robust parallel

enforcement strategies that focus on disrupting criminal networks and holding exploiters to

account, without undermining the protective ethos afforded to exploited children (Sarnecki,

2017).

For jurisdictions with constrained budgets, such as certain regions within the UK, replicating

this model in its entirety may prove financially unfeasible in the short term (Petren et al.,

2019). Nevertheless, Sweden's justice model provides valuable insights for UK policymakers

exploring alternatives to criminalisation in cases of CCE. It demonstrates that legal systems

can be structured in ways that uphold children's rights, prioritise their wellbeing, and respond

meaningfully to the complex realities of exploitation, without compromising public safety or

legal accountability.

4.4 The Role of Social Services in CCE

Whilst concerns about child exploitation are systemically widespread, different interpretations

of it across organisations leads to fragmentation. The Police's crime-focused approach means

exploited children who demonstrate loyalty to their exploiters or fail to recognise their

victimisation, remain invisible (Smith et al., 2020). In contrast, safeguarding systems, such as

those within HSCS and youth services, emphasise addressing the welfare needs and the

harm inflicted upon the child (Parton, 2014) and shift focus toward prevention and resilience.

This addresses the structural and environmental factors that contribute to exploitation by

identifying and mitigating risk factors within a child's surroundings (Featherstone et al., 2018).

Instead of responding reactively to harm already inflicted, functioning safeguarding systems recognise the child's vulnerability, situate the problem within a broader socio-environmental context, emphasise building a protective and supportive environment and seek to strengthen the family and community networks around the child (Munro, 2011). Social Services and Social Workers are, thus, instrumental in the identification and protection of children at risk of or involved in CCE through provision of support services, risk assessments and safeguarding interventions and are tasked with acting as advocates for children, to ensure that interventions are child-centered and children's voices are heard within multi-agency partnerships (Turney et al., 2012; Munro, 2011; Horwath & Tarr, 2015).

However, Social Workers often face high caseloads and limited resources which exacerbate the challenges of responding to CCE. Baginsky et al. (2020) found that underfunding in social services has left many local authorities struggling to meet the demands placed on them, with social workers often unable to dedicate the necessary time and attention to each case. Furthermore, many children involved in county lines may not be known to local authorities, making them harder to track (Turner and Belcher 2020). Thus, whilst models appear to be effective in preventing children from exploitation there is limited resources available to sustain this approach.

4.4.1 United States of America Safe Harbor Laws

In the USA, a police-focused approach, through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, has led disruption and prosecution of criminal networks approaches. However, there is increasing recognition for the need of trauma-informed care and some states have introduced Safe Harbor Laws, typically including immunity from certain charges, diversion from the criminal justice system and toward supportive services, to prevent the

criminalisation of exploited children. Instead of prosecuting a minor for prostitution or drugs offenses, these laws, instead, mandate the police to refer them to child welfare services or specialised shelters and connect them with counselling, healthcare, and educational resources. These laws recognise the coercion, manipulation and force minors involved in these situations experience and shift the perspective from legal to social approaches.

4.5 The Role of the Education and Healthcare Systems

Teachers and school staff have regular contact with children and are often the first to notice behavioural changes that may indicate involvement in CCE such as unexplained absences, disengagement from schoolwork or sudden access to money or material goods (Robinson and Beckett 2017). This makes schools critical partners in multi-agency collaborations yet for years schools have staff lack targeted training on how to identify signs of criminal exploitation and lack confidence in how to respond to and report cases of CCE (Cullen, 2020), It has now been enforced that mandatory training must be provided to all school staff of CSE with optional additional child exploitation training available. Even though schools must have a DSL to liaise directly with local authorities and the police, ensuring that children showing signs of exploitation are referred to the appropriate services, schools often adopt a narrow safeguarding policy focus predominantly addressing more traditional forms of abuse, such as neglect or sexual exploitation, leaving schools unequipped to address the full spectrum of exploitation risks (Pemberton & Goldstein, 2021; HM Government, 2018). As a result, many early warning signs of CCE are overlooked, preventing timely intervention.

Some schools are beginning to implement tailored training, including from organisations such as Barnardo's and the NSPCC, which demonstrate significant potential for practitioner

awareness of and response to CCE and some are adopting multi-agency collaboration approaches. Systemic gaps remain (Children's Commissioner, 2021). The availability, consistency, and quality of safeguarding training and response protocols vary significantly across regions and institutions, often influenced by disparities in funding, staffing levels, and local authority engagement (Morgan and Davies, 2022). These inconsistencies create a disjointed landscape in which the effectiveness of child protection efforts is uneven and, in some cases, inadequate.

Healthcare providers, similarly play a key role as exploited children often present in healthcare settings with physical injuries from violent or coercive encounters or mental health issues relating to their exploitation. Thus, it is important that healthcare professionals, especially in general practice, emergency departments and mental health services, are equipped with the tools to identify children who may be victims of exploitation and to appropriately collaborate with safeguarding agencies (Drakeford and Barnes 2020). Despite NICE (2020) guidelines for healthcare professionals training on the identification of child exploitation, healthcare staff express a lack of awareness or confidence in recognising the signs of CCE, particularly when the child may not present as a traditional victim of abuse (Wright et al. 2021).

A key challenge within healthcare is that children involved in CCE may not present as traditional victims. They may appear hostile, evasive, or reluctant to engage, particularly when they perceive professionals as part of the system that has failed them (Firmin, 2019; Beckett, 2020). Without training that addresses the relational and psychological dynamics of exploitation including grooming, manipulation, and trauma bonding healthcare staff may misinterpret or minimise signs of abuse (Wright et al., 2021). Even when concerns are

identified, professionals may be unsure how to escalate these appropriately within safeguarding pathways, especially when multi-agency communication is weak or disjointed (Drakeford & Barnes, 2020). For example, A&E departments and general practices often lack clear and consistent referral routes for suspected cases of CCE, relying instead on overburdened social services or inconsistently applied safeguarding protocols (Children's Commissioner, 2021).

Despite efforts to improve professional education, systemic barriers continue to undermine the effectiveness of both education and healthcare systems in tackling CCE. These include chronic underinvestment in safeguarding infrastructure, the absence of a coordinated national strategy for CCE-specific training, and a lack of integrated digital systems to support timely and secure information sharing across sectors (Morgan & Davies, 2022; HM Government, 2018). To move beyond fragmented practice, both sectors must adopt a more proactive, trauma-informed, and child-centred safeguarding ethos. This includes embedding CCE training into initial teacher education and clinical training curricula, providing regular professional development, and fostering robust multi-agency partnerships that do not rely solely on local leadership or personal initiative (Cullen, 2020; NICE, 2020).

It is evident that both education and healthcare professionals are crucial to disrupting patterns of exploitation and protecting vulnerable children. However, in order to fulfil this safeguarding role effectively, professionals within education and healthcare must be equipped not only with the knowledge, but also with the professional confidence, adequate resources, and systemic support structures necessary to respond decisively and collaboratively to the evolving and complex nature of child criminal exploitation.

4.5.1 Germany's Early Education and Intervention

In Germany, the approach focuses on early education and youth outreach with local government funded youth centres that provide extracurricular activities and vocational training for at-risk children. These centres serve not only as recreational spaces but also as crucial environments for fostering resilience, social inclusion, and personal development among vulnerable youth (Goetze, 2022) A central component in this system is the Jugendamt (Youth Welfare Office), which plays a key role in child protection and operates under the mandate of the Social Code Book VIII (SGB VIII). These officers collaborate closely with schools, police, healthcare providers, and child and adolescent psychiatry services to monitor and assess risk factors such as neglect, domestic abuse, truancy, and gang affiliation. Interventions typically include counselling, family support, and, where necessary, temporary out-of-home placements (Thobaben, 2022). This integrated system is designed to provide a safety net that addresses the root causes of youth involvement in crime and in exploitation. In the Netherlands, local municipality multi-agency partnerships coordinate between police, social workers, and education providers to address CCE (Aalbers 2021) Municipalities operate under the Youth Act (Jeugdwet), which mandates local responsibility for child welfare and allows for flexible, community-based responses. One distinctive feature of the Dutch system is the use of civil legal instruments, such as preventive supervision and temporary protective custody orders, which can be used to remove children from exploitative environments without the need for criminal proceedings (van den Brink, 2019). These measures are framed as protective rather than punitive, reflecting the Dutch emphasis on safeguarding over criminalisation.

Recent policy developments in the Netherlands have emphasised the early identification of risk indicators such as non attendance in schools, increases in wealth, and involvement with

older peers engaged in criminal activity. Schools and youth workers are trained to recognise these signs and report them to Veilig Thuis (Safe at Home), the national reporting centre for domestic violence and child abuse, which then coordinates with relevant local agencies to inform appropriate interventions (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2021).

Both the German and Dutch models offer examples of how multi-agency collaboration, early intervention, and child-centred policies can be established to prevent child criminal exploitation. While differing in structure and legal framework, both systems underscore the importance of addressing the socio-economic and relational vulnerabilities that underpin exploitation, rather than relying solely on punitive or criminal justice approaches.

4.6 The Voice of the Voluntary Sector in Multi-Agency Safeguarding

In CCE cases, coercion, fear, and past negative experiences with professionals often prevent children from disclosing abuse. The involvement of the VCS is often overlooked in formal safeguarding policy and practice and ecosystems, despite these organisations frequently serving as the first point of contact for children at risk of exploitation, particularly those disengaged from statutory services or who have experienced institutional harm. Youth workers often provide relational continuity, cultural competence, non-stigmatised support and trust-based rapport with young people. Perceived as supportive, not authoritative, figures in children's lives, they often hear more from the child than statutory agencies. VCS workers often operate in low-threshold, community-based environments, making them more accessible and less intimidating than formal statutory actors. Numerous studies and inquiries underscore the VCS's capacity to build rapport with young people who are wary of statutory agencies. For instance, research highlights that young individuals frequently find it easier to

engage with VCS services due to the non-judgmental and welcoming approach of staff, which

contrasts with their experiences in statutory settings (BMC Health Services Research, 2010).

Additionally, evaluations of organisations like Safer London demonstrate that consistent,

genuine, and trauma-informed interactions foster meaningful relationships with young people,

enhancing their willingness to seek support (Stevenson, 2024). Such approaches are

particularly effective in engaging those who have previously been let down by statutory

services (Stevenson, 2024).

A growing tension in VCS work, based on funding requirements, safeguarding protocols, and

the need for parity in multi-agency settings, is the push towards professionalisation, which can

support standardisation and raised safeguarding awareness. However, critics argue it may

also dilute the value of lived experience, peer support models, and relational practice that

define many grassroots initiatives (McLeod, 2019; Taylor & Davidson, 2021). This raises

questions about epistemic legitimacy (whose knowledge counts in safeguarding) and voice

(who gets to make decisions in multi-agency forums) (Giddens, 2020; Smith & Thomas,

2021). Some voluntary practitioners report feeling undervalued or tokenised when expected to

provide intelligence or engagement access in multi-agency processes but are rarely given

influence over safeguarding decisions (Jenkins, 2022). Privileging formal qualifications risks

excluding practitioners with deep contextual knowledge and community embeddedness,

whose work may be essential for reaching the most marginalised children. These dynamics

create hierarchies of (dis)trust and (il)legitimacy which prioritises statutory voices, even when

they are more removed from a child's lived experience.

There is increasing recognition that effective responses to CCE must involve the voluntary

sector as equal and empowered partners with formal pathways for VCS organisations to

contribute to safeguarding decisions, information sharing, and strategic planning

(Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse [IICSA], 2022). To enable this, policy

recommendations include formalising VCS organisations' role in MASHs and MASPs

including access to case information and decision-making forums to ensure that the insights

of VCS practitioners inform safeguarding strategies; funding peer- and community-informed

interventions, particularly those led by individuals with lived experience, to enhance cultural

competence and relatability in support services; creating interdisciplinary training programmes

bringing together statutory and VCS workers to foster mutual respect and shared language

around CCE, facilitating more cohesive and effective multi-agency collaboration. Embedding

these changes would not only strengthen engagement with at-risk children but also support

more culturally competent, community-led safeguarding strategies that address structural

inequities and build resilience at the grassroots level. However, implementation remains

considerably varied between local authorities.

4.6.1 Hackney's Contextual Safeguarding Model

Firmin's Contextual Safeguarding model marks a significant conceptual evolution within the

field of child protection. Unlike traditional models that concentrate primarily on familial

contexts, Contextual Safeguarding broadens the scope to include peer relationships, school

environments, local neighbourhoods, and digital spaces as critical sites of potential harm

(Firmin, 2020). This paradigm recognises that children and young people are frequently

exposed to risk in environments outside the home and, therefore, necessitates a safeguarding

framework that can effectively respond to extra-familial threats. Hackney has emerged as a

leading authority in the implementation of Contextual Safeguarding, taking a proactive stance

in embedding the approach within its statutory child protection structures. Central to this

implementation is the establishment of Contextual Safeguarding Panels, which bring together

multi-agency professionals to assess environmental risk factors. These panels play a pivotal role in identifying patterns of harm within specific community settings and in designing tailored, place-based interventions that extend beyond individual case management.

One defining feature of Hackney's Contextual Safeguarding approach is the deployment of neighbourhood-based interventions to enable collaborative environmental risk assessments by multi-agency teams in areas identified as high-risk for child exploitation. Working alongside local businesses, community organisations, and transport services, these aim to modify the physical and social landscape in ways that enhance safety and reduce opportunities for harm. Such interventions are premised on the belief that protective environments can be engineered through collective community action. Another key aspect is the focus on peer group safeguarding. Recognising that exploitation frequently occurs within peer networks, Hackney's model adopts a group-level lens when assessing risk. This represents a departure from the individualised approach typically associated with traditional child protection practices and enables professionals to intervene within social dynamics that may be perpetuating harm.

The integration of schools and youth services is also fundamental to the model's effectiveness. Schools in Hackney play an active role in identifying early signs of extra-familial risk and are instrumental in delivering peer support initiatives, establishing safe spaces, and implementing targeted anti-exploitation programmes. This level of engagement positions educational settings as both sites of potential risk and as critical platforms for preventative work. Furthermore, Hackney has taken a strategic approach in advocating for policy and legislative change. By collaborating with national and local policymakers, the borough has influenced the development of safeguarding protocols that explicitly acknowledge and address extra-familial harm. This advocacy ensures that the unique risks posed by contexts

outside the home are incorporated into statutory safeguarding responsibilities, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy and sustainability of the model.

Despite its innovative design and localised success, Hackney's Contextual Safeguarding model faces several implementation challenges. While Hackney has demonstrated how the model can be effectively operationalised, its One scalability across other local authorities and consistency when it is more widely adopted remains uneven. This variability in practice limits the potential for a cohesive, national safeguarding strategy that adequately addresses contextual risks (Lloyd & Firmin, 2020). Additionally, the complexities of data protection and information sharing for effective multi-agency collaboration whilst navigating confidentiality requirements has proven difficult. The tension between safeguarding imperatives and legal constraints on data usage can inhibit the timely exchange of critical information between professionals across sectors. Additionally, professional resistance to change presents a barrier to full integration. Practitioners who are deeply rooted in traditional, family-centric safeguarding paradigms may struggle to adapt to the broader conceptual demands of Contextual Safeguarding. This resistance can hinder multi-agency cooperation and reduce the efficacy of interventions that require a contextual, rather than individual, focus (Firmin et al., 2019).

4.7 The Effectiveness of Safeguarding Procedures

Throughout this thesis, the concept of *proactive safeguarding* refers to a shift away from reactive, incident-led interventions towards anticipatory and preventative approaches that seek to identify, address, and reduce risk *before* harm occurs. In the context of child criminal exploitation (CCE), proactive safeguarding involves early identification of vulnerability

indicators, targeted disruption of grooming and exploitation networks, and the implementation of contextual and relational interventions at the individual, familial, community, and systemic levels (Firmin, 2020; Beckett et al., 2017).

Proactive safeguarding includes practices such as risk mapping in communities, multi-agency information sharing about early signs of exploitation, the deployment of youth outreach services, and embedding exploitation risk indicators into routine frontline assessments in education, health, and policing (HM Government, 2018). It also involves addressing structural risk factors such as school exclusion, housing instability, poverty, and digital grooming through coordinated prevention strategies that recognise children's vulnerabilities as contextual rather than individualised (Barlow, 2021).

This approach contrasts with traditional safeguarding responses that are typically triggered by acute disclosures, visible trauma, or confirmed criminal behaviour. A proactive model places greater emphasis on systems thinking, trauma-informed practice, and equity-oriented safeguarding, aiming to prevent harm by recognising patterns and risk environments early (Firmin, 2017; Featherstone et al., 2014).

Thus, within this research, proactive safeguarding is used to describe a paradigm that centres prevention, early intervention, contextual awareness, and child-centred systems change. It forms a key evaluative lens for the framework developed in this study.

In the UK, the Children Act (2004) mandates multi-agency collaboration to safeguard children as in practice this collaborative approach has been shown to foster more effective identification and intervention strategies (McEwen and Crawford 2020) and improve outcomes for exploited children by ensuring that their needs are addressed comprehensively. *Working Together to Safeguard Children* guidance (2023) emphasises the importance of this multi-agency approach in responding to these risks. This multi-agency approach ensures that vulnerable children receive the necessary support and attempt to protect them from

exploitation and crime. Multi-agency collaboration brings significant benefits in building a detailed intelligence picture through information-sharing (National Crime Agency, 2019; Department for Education, 2018), early intervention (Johnson et al., 2016), pooling of resources (Firmin, 2019), support for victims and families (Turner & Belcher, 2020; Coomber & Moyle, 2018), more successful prosecutions (Smith et al., 2018), and ensuring a more holistic and trauma-informed response that addresses both immediate safety concerns and long-term recovery needs (Turner & Belcher, 2020; Firmin, 2019).

Pockets of good practice exist, in West Yorkshire, specialist Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) teams embedded within communities focus on early intervention and prevention. These teams utilise intelligence gathering and community outreach to disrupt criminal networks that prey on young people (National Crime Agency, 2020). Camden Council's Integrated Youth Support Service (IYSS) and Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership combine social work, policing, and youth outreach to prevent CCE by engaging at-risk youth early (Taylor et al., 2019). Their multi-agency teams operate across schools, youth clubs and communities to provide consistent support, mentoring, and safeguarding to young people and diversion from criminal activities. Research highlights that early intervention strategies, such as mentorship programs and social care support, significantly reduce the likelihood of children being drawn into crime (Firmin, 2020) and MASPs bring together local authorities, police, and healthcare providers to share information, assess risks and coordinate interventions. Social Services and the Police are tasked with working collaboratively, for example, through joint risk assessments and enabling protective measures to be put in place (Lloyd, 2018; Hickle & Hallett, 2016). This approach aligns with the principles set out in the UNCRC (1989), particularly Article 19, which mandates the protection of children from all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation.

By safeguarding children from criminal exploitation and providing educational and social care support, authorities uphold their commitment to ensuring every child's right to safety.

However, despite its advantages, multi-agency collaboration is challenging and safeguarding procedures' effectiveness vary across settings; in practice, multi-agency collaboration and coordination is often fragmented and lacking effective communication and information sharing between agencies (Turner & Belcher, 2020). *Multi-agency responses to serious youth violence: working together to support and protect children* (year) found that while some areas had developed strategic responses to serious youth violence and CCE, inconsistencies remained. There is siloed working, a lack of standardisation of procedures for cooperation across different agencies (Firmin, 2019; Davies and Morgan 2023), resource limitations and competing professional frameworks which complicate efforts to respond effectively to CCE and organisations such as schools and healthcare providers may not be equipped or adequately trained to recognise the broader indicators of exploitation.

Many victims share concerns that agencies, such as the police and social services, are often more focused on the investigation process than on addressing the immediate needs of the child (Johnson & Harris, 2019). Police Forces typically operate within a framework that prioritises CJS outcomes, while social services and other welfare agencies focus on protection and well-being. These divergent priorities result in tensions in how CCE cases are handled (Coomber & Moyle, 2018). Additionally, each agency operates within its own mandate, organisational culture, specific priorities, key performance indicators and confidentiality and information-sharing protocols, which can lead to conflicts, delays, and misunderstandings (Turner & Belcher, 2020, Firmin, 2019). Resource limitations further exacerbate these challenges impeding both the ability of individual agencies to fully engage in

multi-agency efforts (Coomber & Moyle, 2018) and to provide careful and timely coordination between diverse stakeholders required by the complex nature of multi-agency working in CCE cases to ensure consistent communication, aligned priorities and interlinking organisational practices (Turner & Belcher, 2020). This is additionally true were working across local authority, regional or Police Force areas as there is significant disparity in local policies, practices and the level and type of support available, undermining the goal of a unified response to exploitation (Turner & Belcher, 2020). Recent reports from HMICFRS (Year) provide insights into the current state of multi-agency responses to CCE. In the inspection of the Metropolitan Police Service's handling of child sexual and criminal exploitation, HMICFRS identified significant concerns in joint planning and information sharing and emphasised the necessity for improved multi-agency collaboration. It recommended that the Metropolitan Police Service work closely with partner agencies to develop and implement effective strategies to safeguard exploited children.

Some victims highlight instances where safeguarding policies were not followed; Holly Archer, survivor of the Telford CSE networks, recalls professional's attitudes of "if they wanted to do it, leave them to it" (Archer, 2021) which resulted in her being deemed a child sex worker rather than an exploitation victim and Sammy Woodhouse (2015, p. 247) recalls that "Social services said I wasn't a severe enough case for them... I was passed around every support service... most did not have a clue how to deal with my case." An exploited child might be seen by a healthcare professional for injuries and a teacher may note repeated unexplained absence but unless both share their concerns with social services or police there will not be a cohesive response to the child's exploitation (Miller & Smith, 2021). Victims report feeling overwhelmed by the number of people involved in their case and confused about the roles of different professionals and support services available to them (Brown, 2019). Many describe

the frustrating and disorienting impact of repetitive, often invasive, questioning about their experiences by different professionals (Macdonald, 2018), for example, "The more questions I was asked, the more confused I became" (Ceci and Bruck, 1995 p.304). The requirement to repeatedly share their stories led to a sense that their accounts were disbelieved or not valued (Macdonald, 2018) and made them feel blamed, complicit or criminal with professionals misinterpreting a young person's actions as poor decision-making rather than a response to coercion and exploitation (Jay Report, 2014), even to the point of being denied compensation from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority for having 'consented to the abuse' (The Guardian, 2017).

Victims also express concern about frequent staff changes negatively impacting the level and quality of contact and communication with agencies (Smith et al., 2020). Rapport-building is essential for developing trust between victims and professionals (Johnson, 2018) but frequent changes in staff undermines this trust and potentially reduces victims' willingness to engage with professionals (Miller & Lee, 2021). For example, a child may have only sporadic contact with an investigating police officer or team, be allocated to a social worker who may only visits once every 20 days, unless a crisis situation arises, and both of these often rely on single or multiple voluntary services to provide support (Taylor, 2020). As a result, victims' trust in professionals is undermined, future or further disclosures discouraged, and victims feel limited meaningful work can be accomplished leaving them leaving them feeling isolated and unsupported.

To enhance the effectiveness of multi-agency responses to Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), previous recommendations have included establishing formal collaboration protocols with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, standardising procedures, and implementing regular

multi-agency training and capacity-building programs involving all agencies involved in a child's care (Coomber & Moyle, 2018). Fostering trust, cultivating a culture of openness, and building effective communication between agencies based on a shared commitment to the child's welfare is essential (Turner & Belcher, 2020). Furthermore, *Multi-agency responses to serious youth violence: working together to support and protect children* (year) underscored the importance of coordinated efforts among agencies and advocated for standardised procedures and regular joint training to ensure all agencies are equipped to identify and respond to exploitation effectively. Some survivors, like Sammy Woodhouse, now argue that "mandatory reporting of failings should be compulsory," and "professionals should be punished for failings" (Woodhouse 2017).

4.7.1 Glasgow's Public Health Approach to Youth Exploitation

In recent years, Scotland has adopted a public health framework to address youth violence and child criminal exploitation (CCE), moving away from a punitive, criminal justice-led response and towards a model grounded in prevention, early intervention, and community resilience (Williams, 2018). Central to this paradigm shift is the work of the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) based in Glasgow, which operates as a multi-agency initiative bringing together stakeholders from law enforcement, education, healthcare, and the voluntary sector. Glasgow's public health model conceptualises youth violence and exploitation not solely as criminal issues but as public health concerns rooted in inequality, trauma, and social exclusion. This reframing allows for a broader, more holistic understanding of risk and encourages interventions that build protective factors within families, peer groups, and communities. The VRU aims to tackle youth exploitation through a systemic, preventative approach that addresses the social determinants of harm and promotes long-term wellbeing for young people. The VRU's collaborative ethos and evidence-informed strategies are

designed to reduce harm before it escalates, challenging the notion that criminalisation is an effective or just response to exploitation.

A defining feature of the VRU's approach is its emphasis on early intervention and diversion from the criminal justice system. Working in partnership with schools, social care services, and youth organisations, the VRU identifies children who are vulnerable to exploitation at an early stage. These children are then supported through diversionary initiatives, which may include mentoring, vocational training, and tailored youth engagement programmes. The aim is to offer meaningful alternatives to criminal involvement and to interrupt the pathways that lead young people into exploitative networks. Community-based prevention also forms a critical component of the VRU's strategy. By partnering with grassroots organisations, local charities, and faith-based groups, the VRU seeks to disrupt exploitation at the local level. These collaborations enable the development of community-led responses that are culturally informed, context-specific, and sustainable. The approach strengthens community cohesion, increases awareness of exploitation, and promotes environments where safeguarding responsibilities are shared.

Another key innovation is the introduction of trauma-informed policing practices. Police officers engaged in VRU programmes receive specialist training in recognising the psychological and behavioural impacts of trauma, including how these may manifest in the actions of exploited children. This training helps to shift perceptions within law enforcement, encouraging responses that prioritise welfare over prosecution. As a result, the likelihood of unnecessarily criminalising victims is reduced, and trust between young people and statutory services is enhanced, facilitating greater engagement with safeguarding processes.

Despite the positive outcomes associated with Glasgow's public health approach, several challenges remain. A primary concern is the sustainability of funding for youth and community services, particularly in the context of broader austerity measures and public sector cuts. The long-term viability of many preventative programmes is threatened by financial instability, which undermines their ability to provide consistent and impactful support (Cockbain et al., 2021). Without sustained investment, there is a risk that early gains may be reversed, and vulnerable young people may be left without adequate protective interventions. Additionally, there is ongoing resistance within certain sectors of law enforcement to fully embrace non-punitive and trauma-informed methodologies. Traditional policing cultures, which often favour authoritative and retributive approaches, can clash with the preventative ethos promoted by the VRU. Overcoming this resistance requires continued professional development, cultural change within policing institutions, and robust leadership committed to child-centred safeguarding.

4.8 Support Services for Victims of CCE: Rehabilitation, Therapy, and Reintegration

Even if interventions do happen successfully, concerns remain about the long-term protection of children once they are removed from exploitative environments despite awareness that support services for children who have been victims of CCE are essential for their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Victims can require extensive therapeutic intervention to address the trauma experienced and practical support to help them return to education, employment, and family life. Therapeutic support helps victims process their experiences and develop coping mechanisms to deal with the trauma of exploitation. Reintegration programs aim to help victims of CCE rebuild their lives, re-engage with education or vocational training, and reduce the risks of re-exploitation by offering alternatives

to criminal involvement. Barnardo's (2019) highlighted the importance of long-term mentoring and support in helping children transition away from exploitative environments. Despite this, a major challenge in supporting CCE victims is ensuring that services are sustained over the long term. Short-term interventions, while helpful in the immediate aftermath of exploitation, often fail to provide the continuity of care necessary for full recovery and children who receive consistent, long-term support are less likely to return to criminal networks (Robinson, McLean, and Densley 2019).

The following section explores current therapeutic intervention models, focusing on Person-Centred Practice (PCP) and Trauma-Informed Practice (TIP). It examines the theoretical foundations and development of these approaches, highlighting PCP's centring of empathy, active listening, and the creation of a supportive environment for personal growth and TIP's emphasis on understanding and addressing the effects of trauma to create a safe and empowering space for healing. Finally, the integration of PCP and TIP is discussed to illustrate how these models complement one another to provide a more holistic and effective therapeutic framework.

4.8.1 Person-Centred Practice (PCP)

Developed from Carl Rogers' (1951, 1957) humanistic work in psychotherapy and healthcare, PCP posits that individuals have an inherent capacity for growth and self-actualisation if provided with the right conditions, empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. PCP's key principles include respect for individuals' rights, preferences, and life experiences, as well as fostering environments where individuals feel heard, valued, and supported in making choices about their own lives. Thus, PCP places the individual at the centre of decision-making, emphasizing their autonomy, preferences, and unique needs. Individuals,

therefore, should not be treated as passive recipients of care or services but as active partners in shaping their own outcomes.

This is embedded in health-based policy frameworks where enhancing patient satisfaction, engagement and adherence to treatment, defined as "the extent to which a person's behaviour taking medication, following a diet, and/or executing lifestyle changes corresponds with agreed recommendations from a health care provider" (World Health Organization, 2003, p. 3), are critical goals to and reduce disparities in healthcare. When individuals feel in control of their care, they experience better psychological and emotional well-being, leading to more successful and meaningful health outcomes (Smith & Johnson, 2020). This approach has been shown to enhance self-efficacy and improve health outcomes (Stacey et al., 2017). The *NHS Constitution for England* (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021) highlights the importance of patient involvement in their own treatment and care and expects to see this demonstrated through initiatives like "shared decision-making" in clinical practice, where patients and healthcare professionals collaborate to make informed decisions about treatment options, particularly in managing long-term conditions such as diabetes and heart disease (Elwyn et al., 2012). Over time, the use of this theory has expanded beyond healthcare, influencing various sectors including the criminal justice system, education, and social care (Coulter & Collins, 2011).

In UK schools, PCP integration has been particularly focused on the SEND Code of Practice (2015) which emphasises the importance of involving children, young people, and their families, in decisions about their education and support and tailoring responses to the individual learner. These efforts reflect the broader movement in the UK towards more inclusive, flexible, and responsive service delivery systems that prioritise individual agency

and personalise d support. In social care sector, the Care Act (2014) established a legal framework that requires care and support based on the individual's needs, wishes, and preferences. PCP planning ensures individuals have control over the support they receive, with services tailored to their personal goals, values, and abilities. PCP is now standard practice particularly in services for people with disabilities or those receiving elderly care.

Research into PCP shows that this model can lead to improved health and social outcomes. Individuals who receive person-centred care often feel more understood, respected, and empowered, which in turn supports better engagement with services and more sustainable outcomes over time (McCormack & McCance, 2017). Research on the CJS experiences of victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence found that when victims were treated with empathy and their voices were central to the intervention process, they felt more empowered and able to navigate the legal system which improved their emotional resilience, gave a greater sense of control over their recovery, better understanding of their options moving forward, better psychological adjustment and were more likely to remain engaged in and more satisfied with legal proceedings and outcomes (Nicolson et al. 2017; Kelly et al. 2014).

However, within the criminal justice system, and particularly in relation to exploited children, PCP is underutilised. For many young people, CCE creates a profound sense of powerlessness and lack of control over their lives which can be replicated in traditional, top-down, punitive models of justice which alienate and further marginalise vulnerable children. The underlying issues young people involved in crime often have (trauma, mental health, or developmental disabilities) are frequently overlooked in standard criminal justice responses (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2018). PCP interventions in youth justice, tailoring responses to the unique circumstances and strengths of each child, can significantly reduce

reoffending rates and improve outcomes. Southwark Youth Offending Service integrates

Person-Centred Practice (PCP) to support children at risk of exploitation by gangs in their

"Divert" program, which links young offenders with mentoring, vocational training, and

therapeutic intervention, prioritising rehabilitation over punitive measures (Southwark Council,

2020). This program has been particularly effective in reducing the number of children

returning to the criminal justice system and has gained recognition for its success in

reintegrating exploited youth into their communities (Ministry of Justice, 2021). The UK YJB

has also begun to incorporate PCP approaches in its work with young offenders, particularly

through restorative justice practices that emphasise active collaborative processes involving

the young person in determining how to build accountability, repair harm and reintegrate

offenders in ways which prioritise the needs and strengths of the young person and the

affected community (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001). The trauma-informed restorative justice

pilot in Leeds offered young offenders the chance to understand the impact of their actions

while receiving the support necessary to heal from their trauma (Leeds City Council, n.d.;

Mind Mate, 2022) and the use of strengths-based frameworks, such as the Good Lives Model

(GLM), which focus on helping offenders (and offending young people) to achieve personally

meaningful goals while addressing criminogenic needs, have been observed to lower

reoffending rates and improve psychological well-being among participants (Ward & Maruna,

2007). Restorative justice practices reduce recidivism rates compared to traditional punitive

measures, as they foster a sense of responsibility and connection rather than alienation

(Wilson, Olaghere, & Kimbrell, 2017). Thus, using PCP recognises these young people as

individuals with complex histories and needs that require individualised support, allows

professionals to see the whole person and offer them agency within their rehabilitation

journey, instead of viewing them through the narrow lens of criminality.

4.8.2 Trauma-Informed Practice

TIP emerged in the 1990s following psychological and social research on the effects of trauma and recognises the pervasive impact of trauma on individuals' cognitive and physical health, relationships, and social behaviour and is increasingly recognised as a necessary framework for working with CCE victims. Central to TIP is a shift from asking "What is wrong with you?" to "What has happened to you?" (Bloom, 2013; Bath, 2008), which reframes the conversation to foster a more compassionate understanding of individuals' behaviours as coping mechanisms or survival strategies developed in response to traumatic experiences. TIP, thus, emphasises the need for services to respond in ways that do not further cause harm or continue traumatisation.

TIP's central pillars are safety, trustworthiness, peer support, creating opportunities for shared understanding and mutual empowerment which can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and stigma (Mead & MacNeil, 2006), collaboration, empowerment, and cultural competence (Fallot & Harris, 2001). It is designed to be holistic, inclusive, and responsive to the complex ways trauma manifests across various aspects of life (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014) and aligns with the Child First approach. Both emphasise the importance of understanding individuals, particularly children, through the lens of their experiences, rather than focusing on labelling or judging behaviours, reframing responses to children's actions to focus on what they have endured rather than assuming there is something inherently wrong with them. In both frameworks, principles such as safety, trustworthiness, and empowerment guide practice. In a child-focused context, this means creating environments where children feel supported and valued, rather than isolated or stigmatised. The shared emphasis on peer support in TIP allows children to connect with others with similar experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing the impact of

trauma. Furthermore, cultural competence ensures that interventions are sensitive to and inclusive of the diverse socioecological environments of children. Thus, TIP provides a solid framework that enhances the core values of the Child-First Approach, making it both holistic and effective in addressing the complexities of trauma in children's lives.

The shift towards TIP use reflects a broader recognition that traditional service delivery models often overlooks the role of trauma in shaping behaviour and outcomes and thus fail to meet the needs of trauma-affected individuals. Fallot and Harris (2001), advocating for TIP in mental health settings, emphasise that many individuals seeking care have experienced significant trauma and the NICE guidelines (2018) for mental health services recommend TIP approaches, particularly for treating individuals with complex needs such as having experienced abuse, violence, exploitation or addiction. Scholarly work (SAMHSA, 2014; Bloom, 2013) consistently shows that services incorporating TIP to empower individuals to reclaim agency over their lives, build supportive relationships strengthen resilience and facilitates recovery from trauma (Herman, 1992) whilst environments emphasising safety and trust enable individuals to engage more fully in recovery processes (Fallot and Harris 2009). Organisations implementing TIP see reductions in re-traumatisation, improved staff-client relationships, and higher satisfaction rates among service users (SAMHSA, 2014; Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010). These outcomes underline the efficacy of TIP in addressing the pervasive and long-lasting impacts of trauma, not only on individuals but also within broader service systems.

TIP has expanded beyond clinical settings into fields like education and social work based on understandings that trauma is widespread and often underlies behaviours that are misunderstood or punished in non-trauma-informed systems. But the CJS's, punitive

approach, particularly in its dealings with exploited children and young people who found to have experienced an average of four ACEs (Youth Justice Board 2016), fails to recognising that trauma that underpins many young people's engagement in CCE and that punitive measures can exacerbate trauma and increase the risk of re-offending. TIP advocates a Child First approach, seeing these young people as victims shaped by their experiences of coercion and manipulation and understanding their criminal behaviours as survival strategies.

Adopting TIP in policing shifts thinking towards early intervention, ensuring exploited children are identified as victims rather than perpetrators, and urges systems to replace punitive measures with supportive, rehabilitative therapeutic interventions. Implementation of TIP within YOTs in the UK has aimed to address the underlying vulnerabilities of children involved in offending, such as exploitation, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and socioeconomic disadvantages. Greater Manchester YOT utilises a holistic, diversionary approach away from the CJS and focusing on early intervention and tailored support plans. This initiative includes multi-agency collaboration with social workers, mental health professionals, and education specialists to provide children with stable environments and address the root causes of their behaviour. As a result, the region has seen a significant decrease in reoffending rates among participants.

Implementing TIP within policing, social work, and youth justice services has been shown to improve victim engagement, reduce re-exploitation risks, and ensure that interventions prioritise psychological healing alongside legal protection (Hanson & Lang, 2020). However, the implementation of trauma-informed practice (TIP) remains uneven. While some services and professionals recognise the importance of adopting trauma-sensitive approaches to support victims of CCE, others still fail to consistently integrate TIP principles and do not

adequately address trauma experienced through coercion, manipulation, and violence which

can undermine the effectiveness of interventions with children who have been exploited

(DeAngelis et al., 2019). To effectively combat CCE and support recovery, TIP must be fully

embedded across all sectors involved in child protection and CJS.

4.8.3 Integrating Person-Centred & Trauma-Informed Approaches

The need for more widespread and consistent application of Person-Centred Planning (PCP)

and Trauma-Informed Practice (TIP) is frequently highlighted by UK-based researchers and

practitioners, particularly in high-stress environments like prisons, police services, and child

protection. For instance, studies in women's prisons have shown that while trauma-informed

care is being implemented, operational practices often undermine efforts to create supportive

environments, highlighting the challenges of applying TIP in such settings (Beresford et al.,

2024). Similarly, research into police custody reveals that, despite policy commitments, the

realities of custody practices often conflict with trauma-informed principles, suggesting a gap

between policy and practice (Vaswani et al., 2024). These findings underscore the importance

of integrating PCP and TIP to enhance service delivery and support for individuals in these

sectors. When addressing the complex needs of vulnerable children requires a systemic shift

towards the transformative potential of PCP and TIP integrating compassion, prevention,

context- and trauma-awareness and person-centred practices in a broader way. Limited

approaches includes schools tendency to adopt TIP approaches for better classroom

behaviour management and to support children's emotional and mental well-being (Cole et

al., 2013) and HSCS's integration focusing on local authorities' work with children in care who

often come from backgrounds of significant trauma and disempowerment (Bazalgette et al.,

2015).

Contrastingly, there are examples of integration of broader TIP principles. The Welsh Government's *Whole School Approach to Mental Health and Wellbeing* (2021) explicitly incorporates TIP to try and ensure school environments are sensitive to the needs of children who have experienced trauma. The UKs' YJS Enhanced Case Management pilot addresses the complex needs and trauma histories of young offenders through a Trauma Recovery Model focused on the developmental stages and specific needs of children. In evaluation the pilot was found to have enhanced practitioners' understanding of the influence of attachment issues, trauma and ACEs on young offenders' behaviour, improved practitioners' engagement with and support for the young offenders and enabled more comprehensive and co-ordinated multi-agency collaboration. However, the evaluation also noted challenges including in measuring the impact on reoffending rates given the complexity of the children's needs and the relatively short evaluation period. Similarly, Scotland's Whole System Approach (WSA) (2011) incorporates TIP in diverting young offenders from formal systems of criminalisation and emphasises early intervention, family support, and rehabilitation (Whyte, 2016). This approach has demonstrated a reduction in the number of young people entering the formal CJS and better long-term outcomes for those involved (McAra & McVie, 2010; Lightowler, Orr, & Vaswani, 2014). These findings underscore the potential of trauma-informed practices to improve outcomes in the YJS while highlighting the need for further research and longer-term evaluations to assess their effectiveness more comprehensively (Ministry of Justice, 2019).

To achieve consistent results, it is essential to embed these approaches across all sectors, ensuring that exploited children are met with support rather than stigma at every stage of their journey. However, such interventions need to embed TIP and PCP principles in full from professionals listening to and engaging with young people in a manner respectful of their

individuality, socioecological contexts and autonomy in decisions about their own care or legal proceedings. Embedding TIP into CJS policy and processes dealing with exploited or at-risk children and young people, such as the NRM, would help ensure safeguarding, psychological support, prioritisation of rehabilitation over criminalisation (Centre for Justice Innovation 2021), multi-agency collaboration (between agencies and between) (Hickle & Roe-Sepowitz, 2018). By ensuring that TIP is embedded across training, policy, collaboration and restorative practices, the UK's criminal justice system can provide more appropriate, compassionate, and effective responses to children exploited by criminal networks.

4.9 Trust, Power, and Interagency Collaboration in CCE Responses

While frameworks such as *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government, 2018) promote information sharing and joint accountability, the reality of interagency work is often fragmented, adversarial, and mistrustful (Featherstone et al., 2014; Sidebotham et al., 2016) which has tangible consequences for safeguarding, as the absence of shared trust and aligned priorities can impede intervention, delay protection, and erode engagement with vulnerable children. The quality of interpersonal and institutional trust, both between professionals and between services and young people, is an essential but underexplored aspect of effective multi-agency CCE safeguarding. Often, earlier negative experiences with statutory services, such as being disbelieved, misidentified as offenders, or passed between services without meaningful intervention, compromise children subject to CCE's trust in professionals (Beckett et al., 2017; Firmin, 2020) and contribute to a pervasive sense of institutional betrayal (Robinson et al., 2019) exacerbated by a lack of trauma-informed engagement (Garstka et al., 2021). The Children's Society (2022) and Lloyd (2021) highlight how fear of criminalisation, combined with coercive control from exploiters, leads children to

actively resist intervention. This is particularly acute among Black and minoritised children, who face disproportionate rates of adultification a bias that leads professionals to perceive them as more culpable and less vulnerable than their white peers (Davis & Marsh, 2020; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). Racialised and gendered perceptions not only limit access to support but also reinforce a cycle of disengagement, wherein exploited children may avoid contact with services altogether reinforcing the need for relational safeguarding models that prioritise consistency, empathy, and cultural competence.

While trust between professionals and children is crucial, so too is trust amongst professionals. Structural barriers to collaboration include conflicting priorities, variable safeguarding thresholds, and a lack of shared language around risk and exploitation (Bovarnick et al., 2018; Cockbain & Bowers, 2019). These challenges are evident in CCE cases as statutory agencies have divergent conceptualisations of harm. This divergence can create adversarial dynamics, where professionals operate defensively within their organisational silos, with the police focusing on criminal activity and legal thresholds while social workers emphasise trauma and vulnerability (Pearce, 2019). Workload pressures, legal concerns or perceived irrelevance can lead to withholding information (Sidebotham et al., 2016) whilst miscommunication and role confusion contribute to missed intervention opportunities (Turney et al., 2020). These issues are often exacerbated by a lack of equal participation in decision-making, with voluntary sector agencies who may hold vital trust relationships with young people frequently excluded from formal safeguarding structures such as MASH panels or strategy meetings (Firmin & Lloyd, 2020).

4.9.1 Greater Manchester's Complex Safeguarding Approach

In response to evolving and increasingly sophisticated forms of harm such as child criminal exploitation (CCE), modern slavery, and serious youth violence, Greater Manchester has adopted a Complex Safeguarding model. This innovative framework was developed to address forms of exploitation that often fall outside conventional child protection mechanisms (Rochdale Borough Safeguarding Children Partnership, 2020). A central premise of the model is the recognition that children subjected to criminal exploitation frequently do not meet established child protection thresholds. As a result, they are at risk of being misclassified as offenders rather than being recognised and supported as victims (Lloyd & Firmin, 2020).

At the center of the Complex Safeguarding model is the establishment of the Complex Safeguarding Hub. This multidisciplinary hub integrates the expertise of specialist social workers, police officers, youth workers, psychologists, and representatives from the voluntary sector. The co-location of these professionals facilitates a comprehensive and cohesive safeguarding response tailored to the needs of children at heightened risk. By working collaboratively in a shared environment, professionals are able to engage in real-time information sharing, coordinated case management, and joint decision-making, thereby ensuring that interventions are both timely and contextually informed (Cockbain et al., 2021).

A defining feature of the Complex Safeguarding model is its victim-centred and trauma-informed ethos. Rather than prioritising punitive responses, the model seeks to provide therapeutic support to children who have experienced exploitation, recognising the importance of addressing trauma as a means of recovery and prevention. This approach ensures that children are supported as victims of harm rather than being subjected to further criminalisation.

Another integral component of the model is its emphasis on robust inter-agency intelligence sharing. Secure data-sharing platforms enable professionals from different sectors to identify patterns of exploitation and intervene pre-emptively. This collaborative use of intelligence enhances situational awareness and allows agencies to target interventions more effectively. The model also places considerable emphasis on the disruption of organised criminal networks that facilitate exploitation. Police officers embedded within the safeguarding hub collaborate closely with child protection professionals to pursue enforcement strategies, including the use of gang injunctions, financial investigations, and intelligence-led operations aimed at dismantling offender networks. Furthermore, the model encompasses proactive youth engagement and support initiatives. These include mentoring schemes, access to alternative education provision, and the creation of pathways into employment. Such services are designed not only to support recovery but also to reduce the likelihood of re-exploitation by addressing the socio-economic vulnerabilities that criminal networks often exploit.

While the Complex Safeguarding model has demonstrated considerable promise, it is not without its challenges. A key operational concern is the impact of high caseloads and constrained resources. These pressures have resulted in delays in assessment and intervention, compromising the timeliness and effectiveness of support offered to at-risk children (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022). Structural and cultural differences between participating agencies have also presented obstacles. For instance, tensions can arise between the procedural priorities of policing and the welfare-oriented ethos of social work. Such differences can lead to inconsistencies in risk assessment and intervention strategies, potentially undermining the coherence of the safeguarding response (Cockbain et al., 2021). Additionally, limited public awareness regarding the nature and signs of child criminal exploitation remains a significant barrier to early identification and referral. Many families, as

well as frontline practitioners in education and healthcare, may lack the knowledge necessary to recognise indicators of harm, thereby reducing opportunities for timely intervention and support.

4.10 Implications for Multi-Agency Collaboration

Without a trauma-informed framework, interventions frequently misinterpret exploited children's complex behavioural responses to trauma, such as aggression, substance misuse, or going missing from home or care as signs of criminality or defiance (Turner, 2020) and punish, rather than safeguard, through school exclusion or arrest. This not only fails to address the root causes of a child's behaviour but may reinforce feelings of rejection and further entrench their exploitation (Hanson & Lang, 2020).

In order to break these harmful cycles and promote meaningful recovery, multi-agency safeguarding efforts must be rooted in trauma-informed approaches. This involves a cultural shift across professional sectors, encouraging practitioners to view exploited children not as offenders, but as victims of abuse in need of protection, care, and support. By prioritising rehabilitation over criminalisation, agencies can better address the long-term wellbeing and safety of young people.

Such as trauma-informed, multi-agency safeguarding strategy would include trauma-informed policing by officers trained to recognise signs of trauma and be aware that a child's involvement in criminal activity can be the result of manipulation, coercion, and control by exploiters rather than deliberate wrongdoing. A safeguarding-first approach, involving early referral to social care and coordinated multi-agency working, would help ensure that exploited

children are treated as victims and not as criminals. Referrals would then lead to consistent therapeutic Social Work interventions which go beyond immediate protection to supporting long-term emotional recovery. By building trusting relationships and focusing on the child's strengths and resilience, social workers can help young people begin to process their experiences and develop a sense of safety and stability. Further referral or signposting to trauma-informed, multi-disciplinary therapeutic services, including counselling, psychological support, and mentoring is then needed. This would support schools in reducing exclusions and incorporating trauma-informed practice into staff responses to distressed behaviour. Alternative education provision, mental health support, and strong safeguarding measures should be available to help at-risk pupils remain engaged in learning and connected to positive adult role models. Finally, youth services and community organisations would strong outreach programmes; supportive, consistent relationships; safe spaces and positive creative and sports opportunities to help foster resilience, build self-esteem, and promote a sense of belonging outside of harmful environments.

Comparative analysis of international safeguarding models offers valuable lessons for the reform of UK CCE policy. The Portuguese model evidences the efficacy of treating exploitation and related behaviours through a public health lens rather than through the CJS reducing the criminalisation of vulnerable youths and redirecting focus toward support and rehabilitation. Sweden furthers this by adopting legislative reforms that prioritise child safeguarding over prosecution through a legal framework that places the needs and rights of victims at its core. This victim-centred paradigm shifts the emphasis from punitive to preventative and protective social work intervention and the provision of comprehensive support services to vulnerable families. Meanwhile, Canada exemplifies the value of community-led, culturally responsive safeguarding strategies through grassroots models

demonstrating how culturally competent interventions can build trust, enhance engagement, and deliver more effective outcomes for marginalised and exploited children. Germany's integrated approach provides a robust framework for addressing the root causes of exploitation whilst the Netherlands' multi-agency municipal partnerships highlight the importance of localised, coordinated responses to CCE. Meanwhile, the shift towards trauma-informed care in the USA's, exemplified by Safe Harbor Laws, illustrates the growing recognition of the need to treat exploited children as victims.

Collectively, these international models underscore the potential for the UK to transition towards a more holistic, preventative, and child-centred approach to CCE. Integrating these evidence-informed practices into national policy would support the development of a more robust and ethical safeguarding infrastructure. Five core principles emerge from the international analysis. Firstly, integrated multi-agency collaboration is essential to ensure comprehensive responses to exploitation, enabling the sharing of intelligence and the coordination of support across health, education, social care, and law enforcement sectors. Secondly, trauma-informed, and victim-centred approaches are critical in reframing exploited children not as offenders but as victims in need of protection and recovery. Thirdly, contextual, and environmental safeguarding, recognising that exploitation often occurs in specific social and physical spaces must be embedded into all levels of child protection policy and practice. Fourth, prevention and early intervention strategies should be prioritised over punitive enforcement measures, with a focus on addressing the root causes of vulnerability, such as poverty, exclusion, and familial instability. Finally, consistent cross-sector training and professional development are vital in cultivating a shared understanding of CCE, ensuring that all practitioners are equipped to identify and respond to exploitation effectively and compassionately. Incorporating these principles into the UK's safeguarding framework would

mark a significant shift towards a model that recognises the complex realities of child exploitation, addresses systemic failures, and upholds the rights and dignity of every child.

4.11 Contemporary Challenges in addressing CCE

The complex, multifaceted nature of CCE requires nuanced, context-sensitive interventions that address not only the exploitation itself but also their structural, legal, and societal enablers. This section explores the key challenges in identifying, defining, and addressing CCE, as well as the systemic barriers to multi-agency collaboration, victim support, and prevention strategies.

Key challenges in addressing CCE include inconsistent identification of children warranting early agency intervention and the lack of a clear, universally accepted definition of CCE. Definitional problems are manifold, including who is considered a child, what constitutes exploitation, and how to define a gang or organised crime. Statutory definitions of and duties to a child varies between counties and countries in the UK; including variation in terms of age of criminal responsibility, what constitutes a crime against children, application of legal instruments, safeguarding, parental responsibility, and consent. For example, the age of criminal responsibility is 10 in England and Wales, one of the lowest in Europe, which complicates efforts to treat exploited children as victims rather than offenders (Goldson, 2020). Another significant challenge in addressing Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) is the inconsistent application of trauma-informed approaches across various services. Children who are victims of exploitation often experience severe emotional and psychological trauma, which can manifest in behaviors that are mistakenly seen as criminal rather than indicative of victimisation. However, many agencies, including social services, policing, and education may

lack the necessary training or awareness to identify these signs or provide the appropriate support. This gap in understanding can result in children being treated as offenders rather than receiving the care and intervention needed to address their trauma (Hickle, 2019) Practitioners often struggle to accurately identify and record instances of CCE due to ambiguities around terms such as "exploitation" or "gang involvement" (Robinson et al., 2019). This lack of standardisation hinders cross-agency collaboration, as differing interpretations creates gaps in safeguarding resulting in inconsistent responses across local authorities. The lack of definitional clarity has direct implications for data collection, policy formulation, and service provision.

Another barrier to successful multi-agency collaboration is some families and children's reluctance to engage with statutory services, particularly the police. Exploiters often utilise manipulative tactics such as coercion, threat or carrying out violence and "debt bondage", coercing children into committing crimes to "pay back" fabricated debts (Lloyd, 2021). Children involved in CCE are groomed to distrust authorities, and fear of criminalisation within the CJS or retribution from their exploiters prevents them from seeking help. Trauma-informed approaches create safe and supportive environments that prioritise the child's sense of control and agency in decision-making processes, recognising the impact of trauma on victims' behaviour and the complex emotional and psychological needs of exploited children. However, trauma-informed approaches are often more embedded in voluntary sector organisations than in statutory ones and voluntary organisations are not typically integrated into MASH arrangements. This disconnect is a gap in the current safeguarding framework, as voluntary organisations are often better positioned to build trust with vulnerable children and families (Pearce, 2019).

The criminalisation of exploited children further complicates the issue. Many children in CCE are arrested and prosecuted for offences they were coerced into committing, such as drug trafficking, theft, or violence. This reflects a broader societal tendency to view young people involved in crime as offenders rather than victims, failing to account for the coercive control exerted by individuals or criminal networks (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). Despite the Modern Slavery Act 2015 providing a legal defence for individuals coerced into criminal activity, its application remains inconsistent as frontline practitioners often lack sufficient training for utilisation, particularly in identifying and applying this provision (Cockbain & Bowers, 2019).

The covert and manipulative nature of CCE presents additional challenges. Unlike more visible forms of child abuse, CCE often involves hidden grooming processes that make it difficult for professionals, families, and communities to recognise the signs of exploitation. Grooming can occur both online and offline, with exploiters leveraging social media platforms to recruit and control children (Whittaker et al., 2021). The digital dimension of CCE introduces new complexities, as law enforcement and safeguarding agencies struggle to keep pace with rapidly evolving technologies used by exploiters.

Furthermore, socio-economic and systemic factors exacerbate vulnerabilities to CCE. Children from marginalised communities, those living in poverty, or those with unstable home environments are disproportionately targeted by criminal individuals and networks (Lalor & McElvaney, 2020). These systemic inequities not only increase the risk of exploitation but also limit the availability of resources and support for victims. Addressing these underlying socio-economic drivers requires holistic, long-term approaches that go beyond immediate safeguarding responses to tackle the root causes of exploitation. Addressing these inequities, required a more balanced approach integrating legal, social, and psychological dimensions of

CCE. This involves recognising the child as both a victim and, in some cases, an individual coerced into perpetrating criminal activity, whilst also accounting for perpetrators' roles and the societal structures that facilitate exploitation. Such an integrated approach would prioritise both justice and safeguarding and only then can exploited children's needs be effectively met. Developing such an approach necessitates not only interdisciplinary training but also commitment to fostering research that bridges existing gaps in understanding and helps inform more effective practice. Greater investment in training for frontline professionals, alongside the inclusion of voluntary sector expertise in statutory frameworks, is critical to creating a robust, cohesive response to CCE.

4.12 Child Exploitation Case Studies

From victim testimonies to those working in statutory agencies, the system's response to CCE is categorised as 'inconsistent' (Selby, Phillips, & Barnett, 2021). This section contextualises the ideas above in case studies from safeguarding practice reviews and victim-survivor literature to explore what makes effective or successful service responses for young people and their families. Young people are experts-by-experience and thus their opinions are invaluable in improving approaches to CCE (Beckett & Warrington 2015).

The Rotherham, South Yorkshire, cases represent one of the most widely known and extensively documented CSE networks in the United Kingdom. The decades of abuse involved the systematic grooming and exploitation of vulnerable children, predominantly young girls, by organised groups of perpetrators. Investigations revealed that an estimated 1,400 children were abused in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013, with institutional failings by local authorities and law enforcement contributing to the prolonged suffering of victims.

These cases received significant attention in both academic and public discourse which helped bring national and international awareness to grooming and exploitation and remain a critical reference point in the UK for discussions on safeguarding, institutional accountability, and the long-term impacts of exploitation. One of the most prominent Rotherham survivor-advocates is Sammy Woodhouse who was groomed from the age of 14, manipulated and coerced into a cycle of sexual exploitation by a group of men in Rotherham and, like many other victims, faced the dual trauma of abuse and systemic failure. Despite being in regular contact with professionals, including social workers and police, her exploitation went largely unrecognised and she was eventually convicted of weapon's offences which her perpetrators blamed on her. Central to her victim-advocacy is campaigning for Sammy's Law, a proposed legislative change that would pardon victims of CSE for crimes they were coerced into committing during their abuse. The proposed law seeks to acknowledge the lack of agency these victims had and to remove unjust criminal records that continue to affect their lives long after their exploitation has ended. This underscores the importance of survivor-led advocacy in shaping more compassionate and just responses to abuse.

Sammy's Law highlights a broader need for trauma-informed practice within the justice and social care systems. Trauma-informed approaches prioritise understanding and responding to the impacts of trauma on behaviour, which can lead to more equitable and effective responses to CCE. These principles are embedded in person-centred practice, which demands professionals focus on an individual's lived experience, agency, and needs rather than pathologising their behaviour. This shift aligns with wider international practices such as Sweden's child-centred justice model, which ensures legal proceedings involving young people are adapted to their developmental stage, trauma history, and individual capacity.

Woodhouse's experience emphasises how professionals treated her as complicit in her abuse, furthering her trauma.

Authorities have identified more than 3,000 victims of criminal exploitation across the UK, one of which was Jayden Moodie, a 14-year-old boy, had been repeatedly identified by authorities as being involved in drugs, violence, and gang activity, with six documented warnings about these in 2018 alone. Moodie's behaviour was often interpreted by professionals as an expression of individual (rational) choice for which he was criminalised rather than supported. Just three months before his murder, Moodie was arrested in possession of 39 wraps of cocaine in Bournemouth, over 100 miles away from his home, yet no protective measures were put in place to safeguard him from further exploitation. This underscores the systemic failures to recognise the signs of exploitation or intervene in a timely manner in child exploitation. Despite clear concerns about his vulnerability and exploitation, various agencies responsible for his welfare failed to accurately assess his case or take meaningful action and Moodie was subsequently murdered on a London street in January 2019. This case illustrates a persistent gap in multi-agency safeguarding practice, where the lack of consistent frameworks for inter-agency collaboration undermines efforts to protect children from exploitation. Greater inclusion of the voluntary and community sector which often has more trusted relationships with at-risk youth could enhance early identification and wraparound support. These organisations frequently adopt person-centred, culturally informed approaches and are often more agile in addressing risks that statutory bodies may miss

Not in our community's short docudrama, *Behind Alfie's Story*, based on real-life events, was produced to raise awareness of and encourage learning from the challenges associated with tackling CCE and the complexities faced by young people. It focuses on extra-familial

grooming across peer networks, public spaces, and online platforms and exploitation. Reflecting the Contextual Safeguarding approach (Firmin, 2020), it emphasises that preventing and responding to CCE requires a multi-agency approach which considers the social and environmental contexts in which harm occurs and provides professionals, educators, and families with practical insights to help identify early warning signs, address risks and create safer environments for young people. This reflects key tenets of Germany's approach to early education and intervention, where there is strong emphasis on holistic support and interprofessional collaboration from early childhood onwards. Germany's "Early Help" (Frühe Hilfen) networks link families to health, welfare, and educational supports, showing how systemic, proactive investment in prevention can reduce later vulnerability to exploitation

The Berkshire-West Safeguarding Children Partnership SPR for Adam, the Surrey and Gloucestershire SPR for Ash and the Birmingham SPR for Mohammed illustrate recurrent systemic issues and inconsistent responses to children at risk of criminal exploitation. Both reviews exposed gaps in statutory agency's approach to CCE. Despite clear evidence of vulnerability, professionals were quick to criminalise the young people's behaviours, interpreting them as individual (rational) choices, and failed to intervene in a timely and effective manner. In Adam's case, despite being identified as at risk of CCE, professionals focus on his behaviour led to missed intervention opportunities to protected him from further harm. The SPR highlights the need for more nuanced and informed approaches from statutory agencies which do not rely on societal patterns of seeing individuals as criminals before assessing their victim status. Similarly, despite signs of grooming and manipulation, Ash was not sufficiently recognised as a victim of exploitation by multiple agencies who did not communicate nor collaborate effectively leading to delays and inconsistencies in

intervention. The review revealed that professionals failed to adopt a Contextual Safeguarding approach and consider the social and environmental factors that played a role in Ash's vulnerability and coordination between multiple agencies to identify risks early. In Mohammed's case, systemic gaps in addressing the factors contributing to youth violence meant statutory agencies misrepresented Mohammed's exploitation as criminal perpetration and meant there were inconsistent approaches across agencies, where some were proactive and others reactive, leading to missed opportunities for intervention and support. A lack of early intervention and coordination between services were identified in the SPR and its conclusions stress the need for stronger community involvement and improved training for professionals to recognise the signs of underlying vulnerability.

These reviews reflect ongoing challenges in applying trauma-informed and child-centred frameworks in practice, especially when young people present with complex behaviours. Models such as the United States' child labor and exploitation laws, including recent attention to trafficking in industries like agriculture and hospitality, emphasise prevention through policy enforcement and early detection. UK safeguarding systems can learn from such models by integrating stronger legal protections and clearer accountability pathways across agencies

These cases highlight a pattern of insufficient recognition and inadequate responses to child exploitation, whether criminal or sexual, and highlight the need for systemic change in safeguarding practices nationally. To improve outcomes for young people at risk of CCE, a more comprehensive, coordinated response is essential. Agencies must prioritise understanding the broader contexts of exploitation and work collaboratively to create a protective framework that goes beyond simple criminalisation of vulnerable youth.

By embedding TIP across multi-agency collaborations, systems can move beyond short-term or surface-level interventions and create holistic, sustainable strategies that meet the need to shift the focus from punishment to protection and ensure children affected by exploitation receive the long-term support they need to thrive. Key enablers of effective interagency collaboration includes co-location of professionals (Hood, 2014), joint training initiatives to align values, clarify roles, and break down stereotypes between agencies (Laming, 2009; Raws, 2016) and emotionally literate leadership engendering reflective supervision promote a culture of psychological safety and shared responsibility (Munro, 2011). Moreover, integration of trauma-informed practice and contextual safeguarding frameworks encourage a shift toward more collaborative, relationship-based approaches to CCE (Firmin, 2020) which recognise the context in which CCE risks occur (Firmin et al., 2016; Lloyd & Firmin, 2020). As such, multi-agency collaboration must be not only operationally efficient but relationally coherent, with services working together to provide a consistent, child-centred message.

Successful multi-agency collaboration bringing together police, social services, and charities to identify and support exploited children is possible, as demonstrated by London's Rescue and Response program. There is an urgent need to align domestic responses to CCE with current UK safeguarding legislation such as the Children and Social Work Act 2017, which underlines the importance of multi-agency working and early help This initiative proactively employs data analysis and intelligence-led safeguarding measures to map county lines activities. However, it has faced criticism for its strong reliance on policing strategies, which risk criminalising the very children it seeks to protect (Smith et al., 2022). In contrast, Sweden's integrated child protection approach positions social workers as the primary responders, fostering greater trust among exploited youth and their families (Lindström &

Lundeberg, 2021). These contrasting models highlight the importance of balancing enforcement with child welfare to improve outcomes in multi-agency collaboration.

Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) remains a growing international concern, with organised criminal networks targeting vulnerable children across jurisdictions. While the UK has primarily addressed CCE through criminal justice and safeguarding frameworks, other countries have adopted alternative strategies that emphasise harm reduction, public health, and community empowerment. By examining a range of international responses including Portugal's decriminalisation model, Sweden's child-centred justice approach, and Canada's Indigenous-led child welfare system we gain valuable insights into effective, rights-based interventions.

Taken together, these case studies provide a comparative, evidence-based foundation for evaluating the UK's current safeguarding policies. They underscore the potential of more holistic, welfare-led approaches to reform existing systems and better protect children from exploitation. This includes embedding the voice of the child and voluntary sector contributions in decision-making processes

Chapter 5: How the Research Was Conducted

This research combined theoretical exploration, policy analysis and qualitative primary research methodologies. While ethnographic fieldwork alone could have provided insights into the lived experiences of exploited children, ethical considerations and access constraints limit its feasibility. Similarly, while quantitative methods, such as surveys, could offer statistical breadth, they would not capture the depth of practitioners' experiences in navigating multi-agency collaboration. By utilising qualitative interviews, this research ensures a balance between depth and breadth, allowing for rich, contextualised data on the challenges and successes of multi-agency interventions.

5.1 Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality includes factors such as social identity, background, and status, which shape their perspective and relationship with the research process (England, 1994). In qualitative and mixed methods research, researcher positionality influences not only the interactions between the researcher and participants but also how data is interpreted. This recognises that research is not a neutral, objective activity; rather, the researcher's identity and perspective are inevitably woven into the research process (Haraway, 1988). Thus, understanding and critically reflecting on positionality is key to achieving a deeper understanding of the research context and the power dynamics at play.

It is important to acknowledge my own positionality in this research, given my prior professional experiences. Having worked both within charitable organisations and the MASH, I approached the research with *a priori* perspectives regarding the strengths and challenges of multi-agency working. I had witnessed the benefits of co-locating multiple agencies, such as improved opportunities for information sharing and collaboration; however, I also

experienced the limitations, such as the lack of meaningful integration exemplified (such as not being introduced to social workers situated within the same office space and a lack of training). Attending multi-agency meetings exemplified their sometimes lack of effective decision-making with key professionals frequently absent and I was often not given clarity regarding the meeting's purpose . Working within the charitable sector, I was aware of how the flow of information to external partners was restricted and opportunities for meaningful involvement in safeguarding processes limited. These experiences sometimes fostered a sense of helplessness, particularly when policy frameworks dictated that intervention could only occur once risks had escalated to a critical level. Furthermore, there was a lack of cross-agency shared understandings regarding the roles, responsibilities, and expertise of other professionals, which hindered effective multi-agency collaboration. All of these experiences shaped my perspective and informed my critical engagement with the research process

5.2 Ontology & Epistemology

Ongoing debates within social science research focus on the most appropriate methodological approaches for various studies. Central to these debates are philosophical paradigms that shape ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations, influencing the selection of research methods. For instance, Burrell and Morgan (1979) categorised social science research into four paradigms based on assumptions about social order and objectivity. Additionally, the integration of ontological and epistemological considerations is essential in determining the most suitable methodological approach for a given study (Pretorius, 2023). Traditionally, different paradigms relate to distinct epistemological and methodological positions. Objectivism tends to guide positivist ontologies and epistemologies, and quantitative methodologies. Positivism, as Creswell (2014) outlines,

assumes that an objective reality exists independently of human perception and can be understood through empirical observation, quantification, and the pursuit of generalisable laws via deductive reasoning. In contrast, a subjectivist paradigm guides phenomenological, constructivist or interpretivist epistemologies; and qualitative methodologies. Interpretivism, views reality as socially constructed and context-dependent, prioritising the understanding of subjective experiences through inductive reasoning (Bryman, 2016).

While some projects often align with only a single paradigm, this research transcends the traditionally drawn rigid boundaries and adopts a pragmatist paradigm (Silverman, 2013). Pragmatism rejects the false dichotomy between positivist and interpretivist approaches, instead prioritising research strategies that are most effective for addressing practical problems. It is concerned less with adherence to abstract philosophical debates and more with what *works* in answering specific research questions (Silverman, 2013). Adopting a pragmatist paradigm enabled methodological flexibility, allowing the study to harness the structured, empirical strengths of positivism alongside the nuanced, contextual insights of interpretivism.

A post-positivist ontology challenges the absolute objectivity of scientific inquiry, combines elements of both positivism and subjectivism and recognises the influence of human fallibility on observation and interpretation. Post-positivism promotes a critical realist view: acknowledging that while knowledge strives to reflect reality, it is always provisional and subject to revision and demonstrates the practical coexistence of multiple paradigms as methodological flexibility, or pluralism (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This research adopted a realist ontology and a broadly positivist epistemology which guided the framing of CCE as an objective phenomenon, the formulation of research questions, systematic data collection and

quantifiable analysis methods to enhance reliability and generalisability. Methodological pluralism combined this interpretivist methodologies recognised the deeply personal, context-specific nature of CCE and the subjective, lived experiences of professionals).

The deliberate choice to adopt a realist ontology, positivist epistemology and interpretivist methodologies, guided the formulation of research questions to address the complexity of CCE . Systematic interpretation of quantifiable data ensured reliability and grounded the research in objective realities whereas integrating interpretivist methodologies enabled a richer, more nuanced exploration of subjective realities and acknowledges the personal and context-specific nature of CCE experiences. This significantly enhances both the depth and breadth of the research findings, offering a nuanced approach that bridges traditionally distinct theoretical and methodological perspectives. By integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study maintains a high standard of methodological rigour while also maximising the practical relevance of its conclusions for shaping effective safeguarding policies and interventions.

5.3 Aims and Objectives

This study focused on critically assessing the effectiveness of current multi-agency collaborative frameworks addressing CCE in Gloucestershire by examining specific success measures and intended outcomes of policing practices, safeguarding interventions, and inter-agency communication. By doing so, the study aimed to generate a nuanced understanding of how coordinated agency responses are guided by different framework measures of success and propose a new framework to build better frontline practice and lived experiences of young people affected by criminal exploitation. The specific aims and objectives of the research are as follows:

A1 - To establish the context of Gloucestershire's CCE multi-agency responses
O1 - Examine the legislative and strategic frameworks that underpin multi-agency working and operational, policy and societal context within which Gloucestershire's CCE responses are delivered.

A2: To understand professionals' perceptions of success
O2 – Through primary data collection, understand how success is perceived and defined by various stakeholders in multi-agency CCE work.
O3 - Acknowledging that perspectives on success can differ depending on role, responsibilities, and priorities of different agencies, identify shared goals and areas of divergence between agencies.

A3 - To Develop a Comprehensive Framework for Assessing Impact and Success:
O4 – Based on the data collected, design a thorough and nuanced framework for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of multi-agency CCE interventions incorporating both qualitative and quantitative measures and addressing Child-Centred Outcomes, Procedural Effectiveness, and Inter-Agency Collaboration.

5.4 Methodology

At the core of this approach is methodological pluralism, which holds that neither qualitative nor quantitative research methods are inherently superior. Rather, each offers distinct advantages and limitations, and their combined use can provide a more holistic understanding of complex social phenomena. Methodological pluralism strengthened the study by leveraging the strengths of both paradigms: positivism's structured, empirical analysis and interpretivism's depth of understanding regarding lived experiences.

Mixed methods research, increasingly prevalent in the social and behavioural sciences (Fox, Grimm, & Caldeira, 2017), is "research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or programme of inquiry" (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007, p. 4). Timans et al. (2019), amongst others, argues that mixed methods are especially appropriate when addressing multifaceted research questions that require both breadth and

depth of insight. Its advantages include the capacity to explore phenomena from multiple perspectives (Robson, 2011), the opportunity to triangulate data sources to strengthen reliability and validity (McNeill & Chapman, 2005), and the potential for generating more robust interpretations of social realities (McEvoy & Richards, 2006).

In this study, this pluralist mixed methods design allowed the integration of interpretivist, qualitative data collection techniques for in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences and broader contextual and quantitative considerations. The quantitative elements contributed to the empirical grounding of the findings and their potential generalisability. This deliberate synthesis of approaches enhances analytical richness, ensures the research is both theoretically informed and allows the study to navigate between this and the lived realities of those affected by CCE. In doing so, it bridges epistemological divides and supports the development of grounded, evidence-based recommendations for practice and policy.

5.4.1 Case Study Methodology

Case studies are a research model (Stake, 1995) for field research in natural settings where the researcher collects first-hand information and explores real life behaviour patterns and reasons (Yin, 2018). They are, then, an in-depth analysis of a specific individual, group, program, or event at a single point in time or longitudinally (Yin, 2003) employing multiple sources of data (for example, observations, interviews, and archival data) (Jack & Baxter, 2008). Case study methodology is frequently employed to understand, modify and evaluate programmes, suggest interventions, and develop theory.

Through qualitative research traditions, which emphasise close contact between researcher and participant to understand context from an insider's perspective (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), case study methods encourage researchers to actively engage with the people being studied, often through participatory or ethnographic approaches, which facilitate deeper immersion and understanding (Berg, 2009) and builds trust and rapport with informants leading to more authentic insights (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Stake (1995) refers to three types of case study: the intrinsic, the instrumental and the collective. An intrinsic case study is conducted to solely learn about that particular case therefore there is no expectation that the results will lend themselves to similar cases. An instrumental case study is conducted to refines a theory or explore a social issue. Finally, a collective case study includes multiple smaller studies to investigate a group, phenomenon, or issue. For this research, intrinsic case study design offered significant benefits in understanding the intricate dynamics and nuances within the specific context.

However, as with all methodologies, case study methodology also has weaknesses. They are unable to establish causation, mainly due to the lack of control groups or samples which means it is challenging to rule out confounding factors (Yin, 2018). Additionally, whilst case studies offer deep and valuable insights into particular cases, their findings are shaped by the context in which the study is conducted, the researcher's perspective and the particular circumstances of the case. These can all introduce biases into the interpretation of data, limiting the reliability and generalisability of the results (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case studies also frequently focus on atypical individuals, small groups, or unique situations, making it difficult to apply the conclusions to larger populations or draw generalisable inferences. This restricts the external validity of case study research, meaning that while the insights gained can be rich and detailed, their applicability to other settings or individuals is often constrained

(Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). In the context of this study, the focus on the Gloucestershire CCE means the conclusions drawn cannot necessarily be generalised to other police settings nor suggest universal measures of success for all types of crime.

5.4.2 Evaluation Research

Evaluation research goes beyond monitoring data (Gertler, et al. 2016) to assess the merit of a programme or policy, its effectiveness in reaching its goals and objectives and if it is worth continuing (Clarke, 1999). In society where policy makers demand accountability through results and outcomes instead of inputs (Gertler, et al. 2016; Hansen 2005), robust evidence produced by impact evaluations is increasingly used to test innovative programmes (Sarantankos, 2005). However, there are numerous evaluation models (Rossi et al., 2004; Hansen, 2005) and methodological frameworks depending on the type of evaluation question being asked. Impact Assessments produce an estimate of the effects of an intervention through observable change (Fox, Grimm, & Caldeira, 2017) whereas Outcome Analysis explores whether a programme achieves its aims and whether the outcomes deviate from the intended outcomes (Stern, et al., 2012; Peersman, 2015; Robson, 2011). Both approaches offer critical information, but their application and interpretation depend on the unique aims and scope of the evaluation, reinforcing the need for clear objectives and a well-structured methodology to guide the research process.

5.5 Primary Data Collection: Sampling

Purposive sampling was initially used which focused on 'a sample from which most can be learned' (Merriam, 2002: 12) selected for their expertise or experience in a diverse range of sectors and roles in the specific area of CCE (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013) ensuring both strategic and operational perspectives were included In simple terms,

participant selection was criterion based (Mason, 2002) for participants' knowledge and experience of working with victims of CCE. As this research was requested by Gloucestershire Constabulary sampling initially focused solely on the CCE team and as some team members worked remotely during the interview phase, making it often challenging to arrange times that aligned for interviews, it was usually those who were present on site who were more readily available to be consulted.

However, the researcher's identification of gaps in the initial participant cohort and to ensure a broader range of perspectives, alternative methods of recruitment were also utilised. Snowball sampling, whereby participants are asked to identify other potential participants (Noy, 2008), recruited additional individuals who contribute to multi agency working to extend the data. These additional people were accessed through the researcher's networking links with other employees of Gloucestershire Constabulary and partner agencies and allowed the researcher to access additional participants who might otherwise have been difficult to include. Additionally, convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method whereby participants are selected based on their accessibility was used to ensure inclusion of a selection of individuals who could provide valuable insights into multi-agency working based on prior research and work experiences. While it offers advantages, it is a practical and cost-effective approach, it also introduces limitations, including the risk of selection bias which can affect the generalisability of the study findings, as the sample may not fully represent the wider population. Researchers using this approach must remain mindful of its limitations, particularly the potential to overlook diverse perspectives outside the immediate pool of accessible participants.

5.6 Data Collection Methods

The methods of data collection are described below.

5.6.1 Ethnographic Methods: The Importance of Local Research

Local research is fundamental to ethnographic inquiry, offering nuanced insights into the lived experiences, cultural norms, and social dynamics of specific communities. By situating research within a particular locale, such as Gloucestershire, researchers can deeply engage with participants' everyday environments, leading to more authentic and contextually rich data. This approach aligns with the concept of "committed localism," which emphasises sustained, place-based engagement to understand relational processes within communities (Skovgaard-Smith, 2024).

Local research enhances the ethnographic commitment to reflexivity and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), as the researcher must continuously interpret meaning within the specific cultural and social fabric of the place. This approach aligns with the tradition of "deep hanging out" described by Geertz (1973), where prolonged presence in a local setting leads to the uncovering of layered meanings behind everyday actions. Moreover, local research enables collaborative knowledge co-construction, fostering positive relationships between researchers and participants. This not only enriches the data but also empowers communities by validating their experiences and perspectives. Such collaboration is particularly effective in addressing complex social issues, as it grounds interventions in the specific cultural and social contexts of the community (Sobo, 2024). Geopgraphical embedding of the research in Gloucestershire allowed for direct observation of and engagement with participants in their natural settings, capturing the subtleties of informal interactions, place-based identities, and environmental cues elements that are vital to the ethnographic methods of observation,

conversation, and fieldnote writing described in the following section . This proximity facilitated the collection of detailed fieldnotes and the capture of subtle social cues, enhancing the depth and authenticity of the data. By embedding the research within the local context, the study was able to uncover the intricate interplay of individual attitudes, group dynamics, and environmental factors, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the community's social fabric.

Observational field notes are described as the foundational building blocks of ethnography (Fetterman, 2010: 116) and serve as the primary tool for documenting informal interactions, behaviours and language patterns. They are also key to transforming a researcher's personal (and sometimes untidy or disorganised) experiences into written narratives (Emerson et al., 2011). Fieldnotes offer capture context, non-verbal cues, and researcher observations during data collection (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Once outside of the data-gathering setting, ethnographers choose and rearrange specific sections of fieldnotes to complement sections of verbatim interview data. Here, timely, if not synchronous, field notes were made by jotting down as much information as possible using notepads, mobile phones, and laptops as delays have the potential to diminish the vivid immediacy of contemporaneous observations (Fetterman, 2010). So upon returning home or finding a safe and uninterrupted environment, a more comprehensive fieldnote was compiled. In the end, a total of thirteen distinct fieldnote documents were generated which, although not an extensive quantity, held abundant detail for the study's findings and were valuable in analysis and interpretation.

Ethnographic research also emphasises informal conversations, also known as ethnographic interviews, which provide researchers with a means to explore participants' meanings, shared values, perceptions and cultural fabric. Ethnographic interviews are characterised as friendly

conversations which gradually infuse research elements to elicit information from participants (Fetterman, 2010, Spradley 1979) unlike semi-structured interviews which have an interview schedule. For this research, the researcher adopted a participant-centred approach to observe and informally engage with the participants during on-site research time. This allowed individual attitudes and the dynamics of the group to be gauged. Aware that contextual factors could impact research findings, the researcher was sensitive to changes in the environment and interactions among participants to help capture nuanced insights that might have otherwise been overlooked.

5.6.2 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are described as one of the most prevalent qualitative research methods (Kitchin & Tate, 2000) and a crucial ethnographic data-gathering technique (Fetterman, 2010). Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to their balance between structure and flexibility, allowing for both thoughtful questioning and participant responses and their effectiveness in collecting information from research participants (Dunn, 2000; Flick, 2018). They encourage participants to provide detailed insights based on their personal experiences (Bryman, 2008) and are adaptable in, for example, the phrasing of questions depending on the participant'[s role, levels of experience and involvement with CCE cases and to follow participants' leads towards unanticipated, yet significant, areas pertinent to the research.

The interviews had two phases, firstly with members of the direct CCE team and secondly with a wider group of professionals including other employees of Gloucestershire Constabulary and working partner agencies. Reflection on the results from the first phase identified key themes incorporated into the second phase. In total, 12 individuals participated

in this research. The interviews lasted between 20 and 115 minutes and all were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed by the researcher.

The first interview phase addressed the research objectives to gain a deeper understanding of the CCE team's views on what constitutes success and contemporary challenges particularly regarding multi-agency collaboration. To facilitate exploration, an interview schedule (Appendix 5) was designed in three sections. The first gathered background information on the practitioner's role working with CCE-involved individuals to provide context and allow tailoring of later questions to their specific responsibilities and areas of expertise. The second asked more focused questions on participants' perceptions of CCE and insights into how they understand their role in CCE interventions to illuminate the varying understandings and potential gaps in perspectives between professionals. The concluding section focused on identification and responses to CCE to explore what actions participants thought could prevent CCE locally and nationally.

The second phase of interviews aimed to provide a more holistic understanding of multi-agency collaboration in the context of CCE and capture a wider set of perspectives from safeguarding and other professionals in related fields who work collaboratively to address CCE. Whilst building upon the key themes identified in the first phase, the second phase interviews marked a shift in focus, diving deeper into the complexities of multi-agency working. Key themes identified in these interviews were incorporated into the second phase of interviews which had a separate interview schedule (Appendix 6). For example, when discussing parental involvement in multi-agency work, the second-phase interviews sought to explore how professionals from other sectors, such as safeguarding and social care, who have different types of interactions with both exploited children and their families, engage with

families and perceive the role that parents can or should play in the intervention process. By gathering these wider perspectives, the research aimed to highlight synergies and tensions between several types of professionals and how multi-agency collaboration can be strengthened by addressing the broader social and family dynamics at play.

5.7 Data analysis

Having considered approaches including discourse analysis and social field analysis (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986, 1990; Savage and Silva, 2013), thematic analysis was chosen for this project. Although regarded by many as a tool rather than a fully developed method (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan and Bernard, 2000), thematic analysis is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.6) as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data." Its flexibility and accessibility make it a powerful tool for qualitative research, particularly when an inductive and interpretive approach is required. Thematic analysis has the capacity to generate nuanced, layered understandings of participants' experiences while not being constrained by a fixed theoretical orientation (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In alignment with the constructivist epistemology underpinning this study, an inductive thematic approach was employed, allowing meanings to emerge organically from participants' accounts and their embedded social contexts.

To ensure a rigorous and consistent approach, the same methods were applied across both fieldnotes and interview transcripts. These methods included data condensing and memoing, which supported both the organisation and deep interpretation of the material. Data condensing, as described by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014), is an iterative process involving the summarisation, coding, and clustering of data into analytically meaningful units.

This process facilitated the management of large volumes of complex qualitative material while retaining the richness and contextual relevance of field-based insights. Memoing, through reflective annotations made on both transcripts and fieldnotes, played a key role in connecting emergent patterns to field-level observations, thereby supporting the development of thematically coherent interpretations (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model for thematic analysis, although some adaptations were made in line with the evolving nature of the data. The process began with familiarisation, which was deeply embedded in the transcription stage and extended through multiple re-readings. This allowed for a close engagement with the data and enabled the identification of early points of interest and subtle shifts in meaning across different accounts.

During the second phase, initial codes were generated through a detailed reading of the data. This coding process involved identifying features that were meaningful or noteworthy, and labelling them with concise and descriptive tags. Codes such as "process issues," "knowledge-based limitations," "role confusion," and "emotional responses" were commonly applied. These labels captured both explicit content and more implicit tensions within participants' narratives, enabling a broad yet focused foundation for further thematic development. The coding remained grounded in the data itself rather than being shaped by predefined theoretical categories.

In the third phase, the analysis moved toward identifying preliminary themes by grouping related codes into broader conceptual categories. Patterns began to emerge around key challenges, such as the lack of a clear and shared definition, limitations in information

exchange, and the absence of a structured or coordinated approach. These clusters of meaning pointed to underlying systemic issues and organisational disjunctions. Visual mapping techniques and theme charts were used to explore how different codes intersected, supported or contradicted each other. This stage marked the transition from fragmented data points to early thematic frameworks that could be interrogated further.

As the process continued into the fourth phase, reviewing themes, a more critical lens was applied to examine the internal coherence of each candidate theme and the distinctions between them. It was at this point that the need for two overlapping yet distinct frameworks became apparent. This insight emerged from the data itself, particularly where participants described shifting roles, overlapping responsibilities, and flexible interpretations of operational boundaries. The themes could not be meaningfully organised within a single linear structure, as they reflected both strategic-level considerations and practice-based complexities. As such, a dual-framework model was developed to honour this fluidity and to more accurately reflect the lived realities described in the data.

In the fifth phase, the themes were refined, defined, and clearly named. This involved a deeper interrogation of the essence of each theme and the selection of names that would best convey their analytical scope. The six key themes that emerged from this stage were: Prevention and Early Identification, Adaptable Responses, Multi-agency Collaboration, Investigation, Prosecution and Convictions, Victim Support and Community Engagement, and Data, Evaluation and Learning. Each theme encapsulated a distinct yet interconnected dimension of the broader issue, and together they formed a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The sixth and final phase involved producing a detailed analytical account of the findings. This phase required moving beyond description to interpret the implications of the themes within the wider policy and practice context. Representative extracts were selected to illustrate the themes, supported by analytical commentary that unpacked the significance of what was being said and how it related to broader patterns. This process involved synthesising the thematic findings with theoretical insights and policy literature to produce a layered and meaningful narrative. The resulting report sought not only to present the findings in a clear and accessible way but also to generate insights that could inform practical responses and strategic development.

Throughout, the credibility of the analysis was strengthened by triangulating the findings with relevant policy documents and existing research. This helped ensure analytical depth and contextual relevance, while also supporting the overall validity of the conclusions drawn from the qualitative data. Moreover, during the analysis phase, the data was triangulation by discussing the themes and findings with colleagues and supervisors which helped counterbalance any potential biases brought into the research and allowed multiple perspectives of the data ensuring a more balanced interpretation.

As discussed above, both the interviews and fieldnotes were iteratively coded and themes identified. The interviews often included detailed accounts from first-hand experiences of specific cases working with exploited children. Exploring these illustrates the complexity of CCE and the different nature of interventions required to address it. Fieldnotes captured both operational and systemic realities of the current management of CCE cases.

Interview Themes
Prevention & Early Identification
Adaptable Responses

Observation Themes
Intelligence sharing

Multi-agency Collaboration
Investigation, Prosecution and Convictions
Victim Support & Community Engagement.
Data, Evaluation & Learning

Multi-agency Collaboration
Victim support

Figure 2 Thematic Analysis

5.8 Ethical Considerations

Recognising the sensitivity of the topic, ethical practices were central to all stages of the research process and governed by the University of Gloucestershire's Ethical Code for Undertaking Research, the British Society of Criminology's (2015) *Statement of Ethics for Researchers*, the British Sociological Association's *Statement of Ethical Practice* (2017) and the National Youth Agency's (2004) *Ethical Conduct in Youth Work*. Prior to commencement of data collection, ethical approval was sought and granted by The University of Gloucestershire's Research Ethics Committee. Undergoing an ethics committee review helps determine not only that the research is appropriate for human 'subjects' but also that the chosen methodology is suitable for the research question (McAreavey & Muir, 2011; Piper & Simons, 2005) and relevant safeguards are in place to protect both the participants and the researcher.

Key ethical considerations included voluntary consent; privacy, anonymity and confidentiality and data protection. For research to be ethical, consent must be informed and voluntary, meaning the participant has full knowledge of the topic, the purpose of the research and how the information is to be used. Informed consent is not static, but is an iterative process, renegotiated through the participation process (British Sociological Association 2017). Informed consent was facilitated via a participation information sheet (Appendix 2) provided before participation was agreed and which explained the research, how the data will be used

and participant's right (and process) to withdraw without consequence (Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004). Consent was documented by a Consent Form (Appendix 3) to show that participants understood what was involved in the study, their rights, that they were happy for the interview to be recorded and consent for their data to be used in the thesis and publication(s). Additionally, two verbal consents were recorded during the interview. For the ethnographic elements of the research, an undisguised naturalistic mode of observation supported ethical practice as participants were made aware of the researchers' presence and observation of their behaviour.

Safeguarding the privacy and confidentiality of research participants, aligned with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), Data Protection Act 2018 and Information Commissioner's Office, 2018 guidance, meant strictly controlling access to personally identifying information to prevent unauthorised disclosure and to anonymise (or de-identify) publicly available data to prevent potential harms and increase willingness to share honest and uninhibited insights (Health Research Authority, 2017). Participants may be reluctant if they fear responses could be traced back to them, even with anonymisation measures in place, particularly in sensitive or professional research areas where breaches of confidentiality could have significant consequences for individuals' careers or the reputation of their agencies (Wiles et al., 2008). Personal participant data was expunged from any documentation other than the Consent Form and substituted with a unique personal ID code to safeguard participant confidentiality.

To ensure the secure storage of data, all consent forms, recordings, and transcripts were stored in university-provided, password-protected cloud storage and only accessible to the researcher. To meet with Ethical Codes, a Data Sharing Agreement was developed for the

use of secondary data and the sharing of material between the researcher and Gloucestershire Constabulary prior to sharing of any material. This agreement sets out the purpose of the data sharing and how and what the data would be used. As secondary data does not directly impact individuals, the main ethical concerns were to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the information previously created by other human subjects (Stommel & Jol, 2016) and this will be protected within the data sharing agreement.

Additionally, the researcher was mindful of their responsibility to avoid causing unnecessary intrusion or harm to participants and ensuring their emotional well-being by recognising and managing distressing topics. To ensure participants' emotional well-being throughout the study, the researcher implemented several key strategies to create a supportive and comfortable environment. Prior to participation, each individual was thoroughly informed about the sensitive nature of the research, with clear explanations provided regarding the topics that would be covered. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences, which helped to alleviate concerns about potential discomfort. To foster a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, the researcher used a conversational approach during interviews, rather than a rigid or formal structure. This allowed for a more natural flow of dialogue and helped build rapport, encouraging participants to share their experiences freely and openly. The researcher was also highly attuned to emotional cues, such as changes in body language or tone of voice, and was prepared to adjust the conversation if any signs of distress emerged. At any point, participants had the freedom to pause or exit the interview without feeling obligated to continue, ensuring that they felt in control of the process. By combining clear communication, a flexible interview style, and constant sensitivity to emotional cues, the researcher aimed to provide a safe, supportive

space for participants to engage in the study while minimising any potential emotional discomfort or distress.

Grenz (2005) highlights that both the researcher and participants can occupy shifting positions of power and powerlessness throughout the research process. When interviewing participants who occupy lower status positions or where the researcher controls the structure of the interview, the researcher may feel empowered. In this position of greater authority, when the researcher is seen as powerful, researchers must mitigate power imbalance and create a more balanced dynamic. This was done by carefully considering the framing of questions, for example, to avoid leading questions or making assumptions about participants' experiences. I also paid attention to non-verbal cues and body language to gauge whether participants felt uncomfortable or hesitant, making adjustments as necessary to create a more comfortable environment. In situations where participants were reticent or appeared to be withholding information, I made efforts to reassure them of the confidentiality of the research and the value of their honest responses. I offered participants a choice of where they would prefer to be interviewed, where appropriate, as Darrow et al. (1986) suggests that the location of an interview can significantly influence the quality and authenticity of the interaction. By giving participants autonomy over their interview setting, I aimed to minimise external pressures, allowing them to express themselves more freely without the concern of being overheard or judged. Moreover, the timing of the interview was controlled by the interviewee to offer them a time to engage which was suitable around their workload.

Power dynamics between researcher and participant are somewhat different when "interviewing up", conducting elite interviews, where the researcher interacts with participants who hold higher authority, status, or expertise (Mikecz, 2012). When interviewing practitioners

who hold more authority or when the researcher encounters time pressures, workplace interruptions, or resistance to participation, the researcher may experience powerlessness.This power fluidity was evident in this research. When conducting interviews at participants' places of work, their time constraints and professional obligations dictated the pace and nature of our interactions. These power imbalances were sometimes exacerbated by participants' higher status within their profession, as well as their role in shaping the outcomes of the research. In these moments, I felt like I had little control over the interview structure or the level of engagement from the participants.

This was compounded when engaging with difficult interviewees. Whilst it is not uncommon in qualitative research that some participants are more reticent or resistant to sharing certain aspects of their experience, it can evoke feelings of frustration and inadequacy. In these instances, I often felt that the lack of status involved in being an "outsider" in their professional domain added to the power differential and hindered the interview's flow. One interviewee, a senior professional with many years of experience, also actively questioned my interview style by pointedly remarking that some of my questions felt too simplistic or as though I was treating them like someone without knowledge of the subject matter. This feedback was unsettling, left me feeling professionally vulnerable and it was difficult not to internalise such feedback. It made me reflect on the way I had framed and conducted my interviews, and how my positionality as a researcher might be perceived by participants. I began to wonder whether my own assumptions about the participant's level of experience or their familiarity with the subject had inappropriately shaped the questions I asked and prompted me to critically evaluate my own assumptions and the power dynamic between myself as a researcher and the expert practitioner. In supervision and as part of fieldnotes I explored my feelings of defensiveness and self-doubt, noting my initial reactions to these confrontations,

attempting to discern whether my discomfort stemmed from a genuine misstep in my approach or if it was simply the vulnerability that arises from engaging with an interviewee who holds more power in the research context. Speaking with my supervisors helped me process my feelings and gain clarity on how to navigate these situations. In particular, I learned the value of reflexivity: by examining my emotions and reactions to these difficult moments, I could learn from them rather than letting them derail the research process. My supervisors encouraged me to embrace these moments as part of the learning process, rather than letting them cause me to question my capability as an interviewer, both through reflexivity and exploring alternative explanations for behaviours.

In the aftermath of these challenging interactions, whilst keeping to my original approach of asking open-ended questions, avoiding assumptions about the participants' knowledge, and acknowledging their expertise, I worked consciously to reframe my approach during subsequent interviews. While it was important to maintain control of the interview to ensure that I gathered the necessary data, it was equally critical to adjust my style to ensure that I was not alienating participants or unintentionally diminishing their professional identity. Furthermore, I took these experiences as a reminder of the ethical responsibility to treat participants as equals and to be conscious of the interpersonal elements of conducting research. This did not mean discarding my interviewer role but rather ensuring that I approached the interview with humility and openness to feedback. This dynamic reflects how power in qualitative research interviews is not merely about positionality but also about real-time relational dynamics between interviewer and interviewee.

Further complicating these dynamics was the risk of confirmation and desirability bias. Social desirability bias is where participants feel inclined to present a version of themselves that they

felt aligned with my expectations or I, as a researcher, would deem more acceptable. In these situations, I actively worked to minimise the risk by Confirmation bias is where researchers unconsciously favour data that confirms pre-existing beliefs or expectations, especially if they develop familiarity with participants over time (Berger, 2015). To guard against this, I reflexively acknowledged and reflected on my own subjectivity, how my background, experiences, and positionality shaped the research process (Finlay, 2002). By remaining self-aware and transparent about my biases, I was able to mitigate their impact on the data and ensure a more authentic and accurate portrayal of the participants' perspectives.

These ethical considerations were central to maintaining the integrity of the research process and fostering trust between the researcher and participants. The combination of thorough preparation, transparency, and a flexible approach to interviewing helped mitigate potential power imbalances, emotional distress, and biases. Furthermore, by maintaining a reflexive stance throughout the research process, the researcher was able to critically examine personal biases and adapt their approach to ensure ethical standards were upheld, allowing for a more nuanced and respectful exploration of the research topic.

5.9 Limitations

Like all research, this study has inherent limitations which may influence wider interpretation of findings. These can broadly be categorised into sample size and sampling methods, data collection techniques, researcher biases and temporal and geographical constraints.

5.9.1 Sample Size and Sampling Methods

Whilst qualitative research typically uses smaller samples to allow for an in-depth exploration of a particular issue (Mason, 2010), this comes at the expense of broader representativeness

(Creswell & Poth, 2016) and the extent findings can be extrapolated to a wider population (Robinson 2014). So, whilst this research provides valuable insights into the dynamics of multi-agency work in Gloucestershire, the small sample limits its generalisability to other regions or contexts without significant modifications. The findings from Gloucestershire may not align with the experiences of practitioners elsewhere (Patton, 2014) as contextual differences such as resource constraints or variations in the severity and types of CCE cases in other regions.

The study employed purposive, snowball, and in certain phases convenience sampling, each of which introduces potential biases that may influence the data collected and the subsequent findings. Purposive sampling, while ensuring participants are knowledgeable, risks selection bias because of the pre-defined recruitment criteria, potentially excluding diverse or dissenting viewpoints (Patton, 2014). It can inadvertently lead to homogeneity of participants which can limit the diversity of the data collected and may not provide a representative range of perspectives (Mason 2002). This can be exacerbated by snowball sampling which introduces network bias, where participants tend to recommend colleagues or acquaintances who share similar views or experiences (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) and lead to over-representation of certain perspectives, therefore, caution is needed around generalising findings. At certain stages of the research process, convenience sampling was employed as a supplementary method to enhance the overall participant pool. This sampling technique is characterised by the selection of participants primarily based on their accessibility and willingness to take part in the study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The rationale behind using this approach lies in its practicality, as it allows researchers to recruit individuals in a timely and efficient manner. Further complicating these, self-selection bias may have affected generalisability as those who chose to take part in the study may only represent (some of)

those with a strong interest or investment in the topic (Denscombe, 2014) resulting in over-representation of individuals with particularly positive or negative experiences of multi-agency work on CCE.

Both the research process and the interpretation of the findings were inevitably influenced by the researcher's own beliefs, experiences, and assumptions (Creswell, 2013). But the variation of data collected may also have been influenced by the relationship between the researcher and the gatekeepers who provided access to participants (Davies & Peters, 2014).

5.9.2 Data Collection Methods

Whilst the sample may suffer from self-selection bias, semi-structured interviews rely on self-reported data which introduces several challenges. Participants may only provide responses that they believe are expected or favourable (social desirability bias) (Furnham, 1986). For example, practitioners may have felt compelled to present their multi-agency work in a positive light, particularly if they believe that criticisms could reflect poorly on their organisation or themselves. However, the thoughtful critique of the existing system suggests that this was not a factor for at least some of the participants. Similarly, asking participants to reflect on past experiences may introduce recall bias, as human memory is not always reliable and/or participants may have unintentionally omitted or distorted details particularly when recalling complex multi-agency interactions over time (Hassan, 2005).

Semi-structured interviews also risk interviewer bias, where the researcher's presence or phrasing of questions may unintentionally influence participants' responses (Maxwell, 2013) resulting in participants emphasising certain aspects of experience and potentially leading to skewed data. To mitigate this, researchers are encouraged to adopt reflexivity throughout the

research process (Berger, 2015), which involves continuous self-awareness and reflection on how their own positionality may affect the data collection process. During the interviews, I used neutral and open-ended phrasing for my questions, avoiding leading language that might steer participants toward specific responses. For instance, instead of asking, "Did you feel frustrated by the experience?" I framed the question as, "Can you describe how you felt during that experience?." Additionally, I actively monitored my verbal and non-verbal cues, ensuring that my reactions (e.g., tone, facial expressions) did not inadvertently signal approval or disapproval of participants' responses, I was conscious that I can often nod in agreement. Therefore, I was conscious to use gestures only to encourage participants to continue offering information. I also conducted pilot interviews to refine my questioning style and identify areas where I might unintentionally influence responses. After the interviews, I reviewed the recordings with a focus on my own role in the interaction, identifying moments where my phrasing or demeanour might have influenced participants. I incorporated this self-awareness into subsequent interviews to continuously improve my approach. These reflexive practices helped to minimise bias and enhance the credibility of the collected data.

While observations provided valuable insights into real-time multi-agency interactions, they were inherently limited by the scope of the researcher's access. Although ethnographic observation often captures a partial and context-dependent view of social phenomena (Atkinson & Hammersley 1994), in this study, observations were limited to certain meetings and interactions which may not have fully represented the everyday reality of multi-agency CCE work. Furthermore, participants may have altered their behaviour during observed meetings, a phenomenon known as the Hawthorne Effect (Adair, 1984), leading to overly positive portrayals of inter-agency collaboration.

5.9.3 Temporal & Geographical Limitations

The research is conducted within a specific time frame and geography which introduces temporal and geographical limitations that may affect the comprehensiveness of the findings. CCE activity and multi-agency work fluctuates over the course of a year, with certain times being more or less active due to seasonal factors such as school holidays or changes in criminal patterns and this temporal variability may have affected the data collected (Vogl, 2013). Also, CCE multi-agency work is a longitudinal process, and success may evolve over time as agencies refine strategies and improve collaboration. By focusing on a particular period, the study only captures a snapshot of longer-term multi-agency interactions (Saldana, 2003). Future, longitudinal, research would be necessary to assess the sustainability of the framework developed and its long-term impact on CCE interventions.

This study's sample consists mainly of practitioners from Gloucestershire Constabulary and associated partner agencies. While these individuals provide relevant insights into local practices, their experiences are unlikely to be representative of multi-agency practices in other regions of the UK or internationally due to resource contexts, organisational cultures, local policies, and social norms (Teddlie & Yu 2007). Additionally, whilst it was convenient to use the Constabulary's premises to conduct interviews and, indeed, interviewing staff in their place of work may have attracted feelings of ease and relaxation, a more neutral place free from interruptions and noise disturbances may have provided richer and more open responses from participants in occupations with high levels of discretion and confidentiality such as the police and YOTs due to fear of being overheard.

Chapter 6: Findings: Organisations, Interventions and Multi-Agency Collaboration in Gloucestershire

This chapter explores the critical contributions of key agencies involved in safeguarding vulnerable children within Gloucestershire, particularly focusing on the police, social services, and youth services. Each organisation plays a distinct yet interconnected role in both identifying and responding to cases of CCE. By examining the functions and responsibilities of these agencies, this chapter highlights the challenges and successes of multi-agency collaboration. Furthermore, it aims to illustrate how coordinated interventions can provide a more comprehensive and holistic approach to tackling CCE, ensuring that at-risk children receive the necessary support, protection, and opportunities for recovery. The synergy between these organisations is crucial in disrupting exploitative networks, offering a collective safeguard against the dangers posed by CCE.

6.1 The Local Situation

In 2020, Gloucestershire Constabulary received a total of 164 referrals concerning children who were assessed as being at moderate or significant risk of CCE, According to the Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership (2024), the number of referrals in county has steadily increased when compared to previous years, which reflects the national trend in line with the growing concerns surrounding child exploitation. Nationally, in 2023 the number of referrals to the NRM reached 17,004, the highest annual figure recorded since its' start in 2009. This was a modest increase from the 16,921 referrals made in 2022, as reported by the Home Office (2024). The 2023 figure represents a 0.5% increase nationally in the number of potential victims of modern slavery, including minors, compared to the previous year. The increase in both local and national referrals highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions and robust safeguarding measures to address the growing threat of CCE and

modern slavery. To address the complex and multifaceted nature of CCE, various

organisations and their collaborative efforts are paramount to effective intervention and

prevention.

Due to limited available data for Gloucestershire alone the below image demonstrates the

increase of referrals being made to the NRM since 2015 it demonstrates that since 2022 43%

of the referrals being made to the NRM were for concerns of criminal exploitation. This graph

shows the extent of concerns for children on a national scale for CCE; however it also

demonstrates that there is limited data for county specific referrals. This further emphasises

themes which are later identified in this thesis.
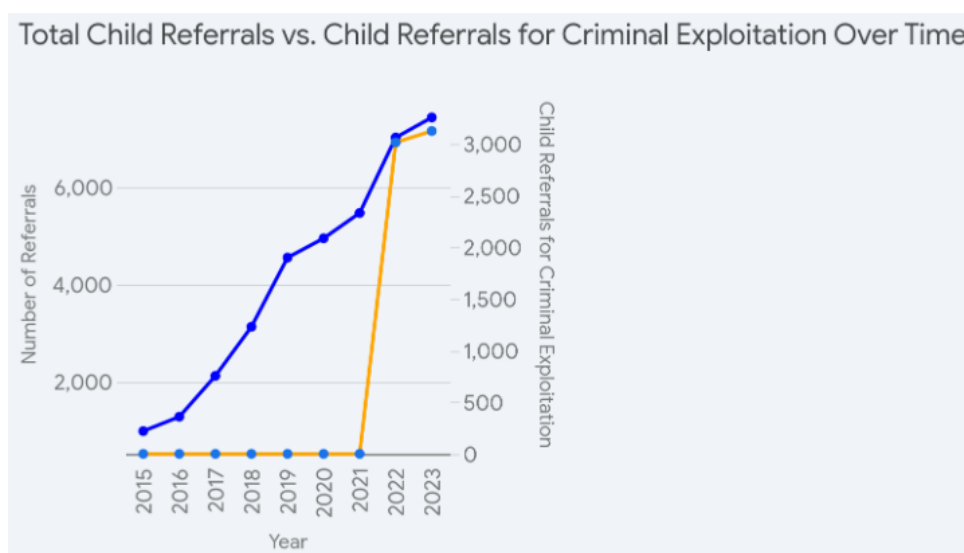
Figure 2 Referrals made to the NRM including those identifying concerns of CCE.

6.1.1 The Role of Police and Criminal Justice System

The transient nature of CCE complicates Gloucestershire Constabulary's ability to develop

robust intelligence and monitor cases effectively. Exploiters frequent change of tactics, use of

modern technologies and exploitation of gaps in police (and multi-agency) practices means

police must constantly adapt in the face of evolving threats. Rural areas provide havens for

county lines operations and the police must often collaborate with neighbouring police forces and metropolitan forces such as London or Birmingham to disrupt the flow of drugs and exploitation. Additionally, county lines exploiters often operate on a "no contact" basis with their victims, using anonymous mobile phones or digital platforms to issue orders and control young runners (Gloucestershire Constabulary, 2021). Without access to direct communication or cooperation from the children involved, the police often face obstacles in securing enough evidence to arrest or charge those orchestrating the exploitation. The local police have also emphasised the need for more training and guidance on balancing enforcement with safeguarding, particularly in cases where children are caught with drugs or weapons but are believed to be under duress from criminal gangs (Gloucestershire County Council, 2022).

Gloucestershire's Youth Support Team (YST) does work collaboratively with schools and community groups to identify vulnerable young people early in the exploitation process integrating trauma-informed approaches and restorative practices to address the root causes of vulnerability to exploitation (Gloucestershire County Council, 2022).

6.1.2 The Role of Social Services

Children's Services are tasked with conducting assessments and implementing care plans for children at risk. However, underfunding and resource shortages often undermine the ability of social workers and safeguarding teams to provide consistent and effective interventions (Turner, 2020) and Gloucestershire social workers report challenges in securing the necessary resources and ensuring that agencies share information effectively (GSCP, 2021). For example, social workers report difficulties in managing the complex needs of children involved in county lines while also juggling other high-risk cases (Gloucestershire County Council, 2022). Recruiting and retaining social workers and police officers is a significant

challenge in Gloucestershire and across the UK, leading to a strain on resources that impacts vulnerable children and families. The increasing demand for social services, combined with high turnover rates, burnout, and difficulty attracting new talent, means that social workers are often forced to manage caseloads that exceed recommended limits. A 2023 report by the Local Government Association (LGA) found that 71% of local authorities were struggling with recruitment and retention in social work, and vacancy rates have been rising steadily, with 9.5% of adult social care roles unfilled as of 2021 (Local Government Association, 2023). This results in prioritising urgent cases and, in some instances, leaving children at risk of harm without the timely support they need. The situation is similar within the police force, where officers are stretched thin, managing both complex crime situations and community concerns with limited resources. In 2023, the Police Federation reported that 9,192 officers resigned, the highest number of leavers on record, highlighting the severe challenges of retaining officers (Police Federation of England and Wales, 2023). The emotional toll of these professions, particularly in high-stress environments, is exacerbated by funding cuts, heavy workloads, and insufficient mental health support, contributing to elevated levels of burnout and early retirement. In Gloucestershire, the rural nature of the county further complicates these challenges, making it difficult for social workers to access resources or professional development opportunities. The impact on vulnerable children is particularly concerning, as the need for intervention may be overlooked when cases are deprioritised due to the sheer volume of work.

Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership (GSCP) has taken significant steps to improve inter-agency collaboration in recent years, recognising the critical importance of multi-agency cooperation in safeguarding children. As outlined in their 2021 report, the partnership has focused on enhancing communication and coordination between key

agencies such as local authorities, health services, the police, education providers, and other community organisations. This approach aims to ensure that information is shared effectively and that all relevant parties work together to identify and respond to safeguarding concerns at the earliest opportunity. By fostering a culture of collaboration, the GSCP has implemented joint training programmes, developed integrated processes, and established clear protocols for information sharing and decision-making. These efforts are intended to create a more cohesive and responsive safeguarding system that can better meet the complex needs of children and families across Gloucestershire.

6.1.3 The Role of Youth, Education and Healthcare Systems

Youth work focuses on building trusting relationships and fostering resilience among young people, which can act as a protective factor against exploitation. Outreach programs delivered by youth workers often engage with individuals in communities where CCE risk factors, such as poverty, social exclusion, and gang presence, are prevalent (Catch22, 2020). Nationally, organisations such as The Children's Society provide frameworks for youth workers to deliver one-to-one mentoring and support services. These interventions focus on helping young people disengage from exploitative relationships and develop healthier connections within their communities (The Children's Society, 2021). Alongside the outreach work of the YST, Young Gloucestershire (YG) offers preventative services including youth clubs, outreach programs for schools, advocacy services to young people and one-to-one targeted mentoring and emotional support for at-risk individuals (Young Gloucestershire, 2023). When young people are identified as being at risk of or already involved in CCE, youth work can offer vital support in a non-judgmental, youth-centred approach which helps re-engage young people who may distrust authorities. For instance, youth workers often act as advocates, liaising between young people, families, and statutory services to ensure their voices are heard in

safeguarding decisions (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021). In Gloucestershire, several VCS

organisations deliver this bridging role:

- **Young Gloucestershire (YG) (Countywide)**: Supports young people (11–25 years old) particularly at risk of exclusion, disengagement, or offending through mental health issues, family breakdown, risk of exploitation and other challenges. YGs work focuses on providing positive role models, raising awareness of CCE risks, fostering confidence and resilience in young people, and working closely with families to ensure a holistic approach to care and safeguarding (Young Gloucestershire, 2023). They offer youth work, counselling, mentoring, family support services and ensure that the voices of young people are represented and amplified in policy discussions, local safeguarding meetings and education and practice reviews. Young Gloucestershire also delivers restorative justice services and particularly in work focusing on supporting young people who have committed low-level offences.
- **Talk Well (previously known as Tic+ (Teens in Crisis)) (Countywide)**: Offers confidential counselling and support for young people and their families to cope with issues such as depression, anxiety, bereavement, bullying, and self-harm. Talk Well plays a crucial role in early intervention, addressing mental health challenges that can be both a cause and consequence of exploitation.

- **WAM Youth (North Gloucestershire)**: provides open-access group work, one-to-one support, outdoor education, and wellbeing programs for young people (7–18 years old). Their commitment to creating a safe and caring environment is central to their approach, recognising the importance of providing accessible support to those who might not engage with statutory services

- **Winston's Wish (National but based in Cheltenham):** provides specialist support for bereaved children and young people. Their SWITCH program offers community outreach bereavement support for vulnerable children (8–14 years old), addressing the complex needs that arise from traumatic loss, which can increase susceptibility to exploitation.

For young people seeking to exit exploitative situations, youth workers are instrumental in

supporting rehabilitation and reintegration. This includes offering pathways into education,

employment, and training (EET) to reduce the likelihood of re-engagement with exploiters.).

Young Gloucestershire contributes to rehabilitation efforts by offering employability skills

workshops, access to training opportunities and personalised support plans aimed at fostering

independence and confidence (Young Gloucestershire, 2023). Additionally, schemes like the

Building Better Opportunities program provide tailored mentoring and vocational training, enabling young people to regain a sense of purpose and self-worth (Gloucestershire Local Enterprise Partnership, 2022

Initiatives like the Contextual Safeguarding Network advocate for multi-agency approaches which recognise the role of youth workers in addressing the broader social and environmental factors that perpetuate exploitation (Firmin, 2020). The effectiveness of youth work in addressing CCE is amplified through collaboration with other services through participating in multi-agency teams. Youth workers contribute unique insights about young peoples lived experiences, crucial for developing holistic safeguarding strategies (Firmin, 2020). In Gloucestershire, youth workers collaborate with local MASHs and Exploitation Hubs to share intelligence and coordinate timely interventions. YG actively collaborates with statutory agencies and community organisations to share insights and develop effective interventions tailored to local needs (Young Gloucestershire, 2023). Gloucestershire youth services are also an integral part of the local safeguarding strategy, emphasising early intervention and sustained support.

Local health services have also begun to integrate CCE awareness into their safeguarding training for frontline staff, with specific focus on the mental health needs of exploited children (Gloucestershire NHS CCG, 2021). However, the pressure on healthcare services, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, limits the extent to which these measures can be effectively implemented. Gloucestershire's Healthy Living and Learning (GHLL) program has implemented initiatives to improve schools' understanding of CCE and enhance their capacity to respond. Schools are encouraged to adopt a proactive approach to safeguarding by early identification of vulnerable pupils and work with social services and police to address

emerging risks (GHLL, 2021). However, there are still challenges in ensuring that all school

staff are sufficiently trained to recognise the signs of CCE, particularly in rural areas where

county lines exploitation is less visible but still prevalent.

6.1.4 Bridging the Trust Gap: VCS in Multi-Agency Safeguarding

The involvement of the VCS including charities, youth outreach organisations, and grassroots

collectives is often overlooked in formal safeguarding policy and practice. There is increasing

recognition that effective responses to CCE must involve the VCS as equal and empowered

partners. Reports such as *It Still Happens Here* (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

[IICSA], 2022). call for formal pathways for VCS organisations to contribute to safeguarding

decisions, information sharing, and strategic planning. However, implementation remains

uncertain, with considerable variation between local authorities despite these organisations

frequently serve as the first point of contact for children at risk of criminal exploitation,

particularly those who have disengaged from statutory services or experienced institutional

harm. VCS youth workers, such as those in YG, often operate in low-threshold, community-

based environments, making them more accessible and less intimidating than formal statutory

actors and are often perceived as a supportive rather than authoritative figure in children's

lives. They can build trust- and rapport-based relationships in which they hear more from the

child on a more frequent basis than statutory agencies. This is especially significant in cases

of CCE, where coercion, fear, and past negative experiences with professionals often prevent

children from disclosing abuse. Literature as previously discussed increasingly recognises the

VCS as essential actors in safeguarding ecosystems, providing relational continuity, cultural

competence, and non-stigmatised support. However, some voluntary practitioners report

feeling undervalued or tokenised when included in multi-agency processes expected to

provide intelligence or engagement access but rarely given influence over safeguarding

decisions. These dynamics can create hierarchies of trust and legitimacy, where statutory voices are prioritised even when they are more removed from a child's lived experience.

6.1.5 Victim Support Programs

Gloucestershire has been actively involved in restorative justice practices, aligning with national efforts to support young people in moving beyond the consequences of criminal behaviour by emphasising healing, accountability, and transformation. Nationally, the significance of integrating restorative practices that are not only effective in repairing harm but also culturally sensitive has been noted vital in empowering young offenders to understand the impact of their actions, rebuild relationships, and reduce re-traumatisation, offering them a genuine opportunity to turn their lives around (NYA, 2021). In Gloucestershire, this national vision is embodied through Gloucestershire Youth Justice Service' and Restorative Gloucestershire's (amongst other local community organisations) development of restorative frameworks addressing the unique needs of young people. Restorative justice in Gloucestershire often involves practices such as restorative circles bringing together offenders, victims, and community members to discuss the harm caused and work collaboratively towards healing. This method has shown significant success in encouraging offenders to take responsibility for their actions while providing victims with a platform to voice their experiences and begin the process of recovery. Furthermore, recognising the cultural diversity of young people in the area, Gloucestershire's restorative justice programme has been designed to be culturally sensitive, ensuring that interventions are inclusive and accessible to all young people, regardless of their ethnic, social, or cultural backgrounds. This is particularly evident in the tailored support provided to young offenders from minority communities, where the use of cultural mediators and interpreters ensures full participation in restorative processes and youth mentors who support young offenders through the restorative

process. Many of these mentors are individuals who have previously participated in restorative justice, bringing lived experience to the table and offering a valuable peer-to-peer perspective that fosters a sense of trust and understanding.

SkillZONE, a safety and education centre, contributes to CCE and CSE work by teaching young people life skills and raising awareness about risks. Its programs are particularly effective in helping children reintegrate into mainstream education and reducing the likelihood of re-engagement with exploitative networks (Skill ZONE, 2022). Access to specialist therapy and support for children affected by exploitation remains a significant challenge, particularly in rural parts of Gloucestershire, where mental health services are often stretched thin (NHS Gloucestershire CCG, 2021). This can leave children without the therapeutic interventions needed to recover from the trauma of exploitation. Trying to meet these needs are local organisations like Teens in Crisis (TIC+) which offers free and confidential counselling. Despite their efforts, the demand for these services outpaces supply, underscoring the need for sustained investment in mental health resources tailored to the needs of exploited children (TIC+, 2020).

6.1.6 The Effectiveness of Safeguarding Procedures

Failure to coordinate multi-agency responses can lead to significant gaps in safeguarding, where children are either not identified as being at risk or are treated as offenders rather than victims of exploitation. Local safeguarding protocols emphasise multi-agency collaboration through the Gloucestershire MASH (GSCP, 2021). But multi-agency coordination is recognised as a critical area for improvement, and although progress has been, reviews of the MASH suggest collaboration is not yet seamless. Challenges still remain to ensure all agencies share information and communicate effectively regarding at-risk children (GSCP,

2021?) and more needs to be done to streamline communication and ensure that all relevant agencies are included in safeguarding decisions. Police officers report delays in information sharing and confusion over roles and responsibilities that prevent early intervention or slow down investigations. Social workers report that they do not always receive critical police intelligence about known criminal gangs operating in the region. Additionally, schools may not be fully aware of a child's involvement with social services or the police (GSCP, 2021).

Gloucestershire has sought to address this issue through creating multi-agency "Exploitation Hubs," to enhance communication and cooperation among services addressing CCE and CSE. These hubs aim to ensure that all relevant agencies work collaboratively to identify at-risk children early and intervene appropriately. These Hubs are still in their preliminary stages but initial feedback suggests they have potential to provide more consistent and timely interventions. However, their overall effectiveness remains under review and comprehensive evaluation is needed to measure outcomes and identify areas for further improvement (Gloucestershire County Council, 2022). . Regular inspection and independent oversight of these Hubs will be critical to ensuring their long-term success in safeguarding vulnerable children.

In addition to direct services, safeguarding arrangements around CCE and CSE in Gloucestershire are subject to periodic inspection by regulatory bodies such as Ofsted and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) (Ofsted, 2020; HMICFRS, 2021). These inspections are vital for ensuring that multi-agency safeguarding protocols are implemented effectively and consistently. Recent inspections have highlighted areas for improvement, including the need for better data sharing and training for frontline professionals to recognise signs of exploitation more effectively (Ofsted, 2020;

HMICFRS, 2021). The findings from these inspections have led to action plans aimed at addressing systemic weaknesses and promoting a victim-centered approach to safeguarding (Ofsted, 2020; HMICFRS, 2021).

However, like much of the UK, Gloucestershire relies on time-limited funding which poses significant challenges in maintaining and expanding these services across the county to ensure equity of access. This uncertainty is particularly concerning for children requiring ongoing support after initial interventions as continuity of care is crucial for their long-term recovery and well-being (Robinson et al., 2019). Ensuring sustainable funding models for safeguarding initiatives is imperative to prevent the disruption of critical services and to provide exploited children with the comprehensive support they need.

6.2 Findings from the Thematic Analysis of the Data

This section outlines the key findings from the thematic analysis of the data, which revealed a complex and multifaceted understanding of CCE. The analysis identified seven central themes that reflect both the structural and practical dimensions of the participants' experiences and insights. These themes are: definition and challenges, which explores how the issue is conceptualised and the obstacles encountered in addressing it; prevention and early identification, focusing on strategies to recognise and respond to risks at the earliest stage; adaptable responses, highlighting the importance of flexibility and innovation in practice; multi-agency collaboration, which underscores the need for coordinated efforts across sectors; intelligence and investigation, addressing the role of data, information-sharing, and investigative processes; prosecutions and convictions, examining the legal and judicial aspects; and victim support and communities, which considers both immediate and

long-term support mechanisms for those affected. Each theme is explored in detail below,

illustrated with representative data extracts that bring the findings to life.

6.2.1 Definition of & Challenges in Addressing CCE

The interviews identified the multiple ways in which children can be exploited and the holistic

way in which cases should be responded to. As discussed above, the UK's lack of a single,

standardised definition of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) poses significant challenges in

managing cases effectively that and a shared understanding across agencies is crucial for the

effective management and prevention of child exploitation (Beckett et al. 2017). Respondents

highlighted the varying understandings of CCE during the interviews:

> There is pretty much three areas of Child Exploitation... child sexual exploitation, modern day slavery... and criminal exploitation... mainly revolves around Burglary, Car theft, Drug distribution (P1)

> [It is] basically adults... getting people, vulnerable children, people who haven't got much support around them, getting them to commit crimes on their behalf (P5).

> CCE "can include elements of coercion, manipulation, and providing material rewards to vulnerable children" (P4).

The absence of a uniform definition creates barriers in coordinating efforts between different

agencies who may interpret CCE differently, leading to inconsistent risk assessments,

prioritisation of CSE cases and variability in intervention strategies. These inconsistencies

hinder the development of cohesive and comprehensive support systems for exploited

children. Despite possible positive aspects to this lack of definition, allowing for flexibility and

adaptation to evolving exploitation tactics and to the context of individual cases, the overall

impact is to complicating collaboration, fragmented services and, ultimately, less effective

interventions to protect vulnerable children.

Effective multi-agency collaboration is essential, yet fraught with challenges as it requires consistent communication, shared goals, and an integrated approach (Firmin et al. 2018) making it challenging for all the professionals involved. Coordinated efforts between police, social services, and community organisations are crucial for identifying and intervening early in potential cases of exploitation (Hickle & Hallett, 2016; Beckett, 2011).

Exploited children experience both fear and coercion which hampers their willingness to cooperate with 'authorities' to leave the criminal environment.

> Children often fear repercussions from criminal gangs, which is a significant barrier to their cooperation with authorities and exiting the criminal environment (P4)

High staff turnover exacerbates these challenges by disrupting the continuity of care and support, making it difficult to build the necessary trust and develop effective intervention strategies.

> Frequent changes in [personnel] disrupts the continuity of care and support for exploited children, making it difficult to build trust and effective intervention strategies (P4)

This lack of stability can hinder the progress of interventions, and the overall effectiveness of support provided. Throughout this project, I observed that while the challenges posed by high staff turnover are often associated with social services, they are equally prevalent within the constabulary. During my time working on this project, the team I was collaborating with experienced multiple personnel changes. At one point, the constabulary underwent a significant reshuffle, resulting in several officers being uncertain about the scope and responsibilities of their roles. Additionally, officers who had been involved in long-standing cases were abruptly reassigned, often without a clear indication that a formal handover would take place.

This lack of continuity introduced substantial challenges. High staff turnover disrupts the consistency of care and support, which is crucial when working with vulnerable and exploited children. As highlighted in relevant literature, the trust needed to engage effectively with these children is built over time and requires stable relationships, which were often interrupted by frequent personnel changes.

The instability caused by these reshuffles not only hindered the progress of ongoing interventions but also negatively impacted the overall effectiveness of the support provided. In many cases, it became evident that the lack of formal handover processes led to delays in addressing critical issues and left gaps in knowledge and continuity. Furthermore, the uncertainty faced by officers about their roles further compounded the problem, as it created an environment where planning and strategic interventions were difficult to implement effectively.

These challenges underscore the importance of ensuring stability and continuity in teams working on such sensitive and impactful cases. Addressing staff turnover and implementing robust handover procedures are essential steps toward mitigating the negative effects on vulnerable individuals and improving the overall quality of interventions and support.

Moreover, it makes coordinating efforts among the various agencies more difficult leading to inconsistent approaches and gaps in services and affecting the outcomes for exploited children.

> Coordinating efforts among various agencies, such as police, social services, and educational institutions, is complex and often hindered by jurisdictional boundaries and varying priorities (SI; P4).

Therefore, addressing these challenges is crucial for improving the support and protection provided to vulnerable children. Effective multiagency work ensures children receive comprehensive, holistic, child-centred care tailored to their individual needs, reducing the likelihood of re-engagement in criminal activities (Coffey, 2018; Pearce, 2014).

6.2.2 Prevention & Early Identification

Education and community outreach programs play a pivotal role in preventing CCE involvement by raising awareness, building resilience, and providing support networks for vulnerable children and their families. These initiatives are designed to engage children at risk of exploitation, families, schools, and local communities to help identify early signs of grooming and offer support before children are drawn into criminal activities. The Home Office's Serious Violence Strategy (2018) emphasises the importance of early intervention through education, suggesting that children who are informed about exploitation from an early age are less likely to be manipulated by criminal gangs. School-based education programs educate young people about the risks and tactics used by exploiters to help them recognise grooming behaviours and equip them with the knowledge to seek help are a key preventive measure (Turner et al. 2020). Community outreach initiatives help reach at-risk youth who may be disengaged from formal education (Ellis 2018). Outreach workers, often based within local charities or youth services, can build trust with young people who are marginalised or disconnected from traditional support systems. Programs like The Children's Society's Disrupting Exploitation initiative provide targeted outreach, focusing on preventing exploitation through mentoring, peer support, and offering safe spaces for children to discuss their experiences. Such programs often extend to families, educating parents on how to spot signs of exploitation and providing them with resources to protect their children (The Children's Society, 2020). In Manchester and London, local authorities have partnered with community

organisations to implement violence reduction units (VRUs), which combine educational programs with broader community engagement to reduce gang involvement. These units operate across schools, youth clubs, and community centres, offering preventative education and interventions before young people are targeted by gangs.

However, these programs require sustainable funding and must be tailored to the specific needs of communities to be effective (Casey and Robinson, 2021). Generic approaches miss key cultural, socioeconomic, or geographical factors that influence the risk of exploitation, especially in disadvantaged urban areas or rural communities where county lines operations are prevalent.

Addressing the environmental factors that contribute to exploitation and timely interventions can disrupt the pathways leading to deeper criminal involvement (Firmin 2020; Early Intervention Foundation 2020). Proactive multi-agency preventative education, early identification (Early Intervention Foundation 2020) and community engagement and are consistently identified as vital components in combating CCE (Beckett and Walker 2017). Within the UK, multi-agency operations are increasingly focused on improving prevention efforts and early identification in response to CCE, typically involving collaboration between various stakeholders including social services, police, education, and health, to ensure that early signs of exploitation are promptly identified, risk-assessed, and addressed (HM Government, 2018).

Increasing media coverage and public awareness campaigns, such as those by theatre group Loudmouth Education and Training and Theatre for Schools Chelsea's Story, have made CCE more visible to the general public and professionals (P6). Education and awareness

initiatives were deemed crucial. Participants detailed efforts to conduct workshops in schools and with communities, saying,

> We conduct workshops in schools to educate teachers and students about the signs of exploitation (SI)

> This includes working with schools and local organisations to raise awareness (P3)

> Engaging with the community helps us identify potential cases early on (DJ)

However, awareness alone is insufficient. Effective prevention requires early identification, which relies on professionals being trained in recognising the nuanced signs of exploitation (Smith 2022). Participants also stressed the need for comprehensive training of professionals to recognise the early, often subtle, signs of exploitation.

The interview findings align with the preventative and early intervention approach, participants highlighted that identifying signs of exploitation early significantly increases the likelihood of preventing children from becoming too deeply embedded in exploitative situations and diverting children away from criminal activities. The need for early intervention was intricately linked to the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies.

> The key is early identification...knowing what signs to look for (P6)[1]

> We're trying to get in there early...before they get too embedded (P2)

> One officer commented, "Often, we focus too much on protecting kids after the harm has already happened, instead of being ahead of it" (Field Note 5.

P2 indicates a proactive approach to addressing exploitation at its inception and this sentiment was echoed across numerous interviews (P1,P5), with respondents underscoring the importance of a preventative rather than reactive approaches.

> Early identification through intelligence-sharing, vulnerability screenings, and multi-agency coordination should be integral to the framework, allowing for a proactive rather than reactive approach (Field Note 7)

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[1] Interviewees are identified here as (P(olice)1-7; S(argeant) 1 and D(etective)J. All were conducted in 2023).

This is particularly important as the manipulation and coercion of children into CCE involvement may mean they do not recognise their exploitation.

Schools play a vital role in identification of early signs of children being exploited, such as episodes of being missing, whilst community outreach was similarly highlighted as a preventative measure, in line with the research evidence on the significant reduction of risk of harm to children through early engagement in schools and communities (Early Intervention Foundation 2020). Such educational initiatives are vital as frontline practitioners frequently lack the nuanced understanding necessary to recognise subtle signs of grooming and coercion, particularly in cases that fall outside traditional gendered expectations of victimisation (CJI, 2021). These initiatives aim to equip educators, students, and community members with the required knowledge to recognise and report signs of exploitation.

The interviews suggested that, whilst the MASH structures are theoretically sound, their effectiveness is often hampered by resource constraints and varying levels of engagement from different agencies.

> Resources are stretched thin, and often, by the time we get involved, the situation has already escalated (P2)

This reflects the challenges of implementing consistent early intervention. The interviews also revealed that, in practice some agencies only step in once a child is already at elevated risk of harm.

> Individuals are allocated when the 'risk is high,' suggesting we do not support individuals at multi-agency until a threshold has been met. The challenge this poses is that children involved in exploitation become more entrained with time to the longer we wait to support children the less successful we will be in our attempts. (P2)

This reactive approach was identified as a significant barrier to effective prevention, as waiting until the risk is high often means that children are already deeply embedded in exploitative situations, making successful intervention more difficult.

Early identification is particularly challenging for female victims, as they often present subtler signs of CCE and may be exploited in less overt ways such as through coercive relationships (Hales & Gelsthorpe, 2012). As a result, they may be overlooked by professionals, further perpetuating their victimisation.

> Identifying females who are involved in child criminal exploitation is harder than identifying the males (P6)

This underscores the need for more nuanced, gender-sensitive approaches in early identification and intervention efforts. There is a recognised need for specialised training within multi-agency teams, such as YOTs, social services and police, to enhance their ability to identify the early signs of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) for girls.

The resources and staffing required to implement proactive, preventative approaches are often insufficient, leading to a predominantly reactive response. This challenge is particularly acute in areas where high caseloads and immediate high-risk cases demand urgent attention, limiting opportunities for early intervention. A report by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP, 2021) highlighted that although established frameworks for early intervention, such as the Early Help strategy, exist, operational realities often hinder their consistent application. The report identified that practitioners frequently face a conflict between addressing immediate safeguarding crises and proactively working with young people exhibiting early indicators of vulnerability.

Such gaps in operational capacity result in missed opportunities to prevent exploitation. For example, a study by The Children's Society (2019) found that young people exhibiting early warning signs of involvement in county lines drug trafficking were often overlooked until their exploitation became entrenched. Similarly, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) has emphasised that early intervention initiatives need to be underpinned by sustained funding and a commitment to embedding these practices within all agencies working with vulnerable children (ADCS, 2020).

In conclusion, prevention efforts and early identification were thematically highlighted in the frameworks for managing multi-disciplinary work on CCE. The interviews and supporting documents underscore the critical importance of these strategies in disrupting exploitation before it takes root. However, both operational challenges and research insights indicate that more work is needed to ensure that these efforts are effectively implemented across all agencies involved in safeguarding children from criminal exploitation and there is a need for more specialised training and awareness among professionals to ensure that prevention efforts are inclusive and effective for all at-risk groups.

6.2.3 Adaptable Responses

Rigid adherence to pre-established plans can be detrimental in dynamic situations, such as CCE (Early Intervention Foundation, 2019). Instead, flexible, adaptable, and responsive strategies, including clear communication, shared goals, and the ability to integrate added information and changing circumstances, are needed to address the evolving threats in CCE (Gower & Hovey 2021). Multi-agency adaptability, where agencies can quickly adjust their approaches in response to emerging threats or new evidence, are more successful in

preventing harm and supporting recovery leads to better outcomes for children at risk of

exploitation (Early Intervention Foundation, 2019). Adaptability was discussed in interviews:

> It took a while to find our feet [...] we know where we are within the realms of CCE because [...] we come under the umbrella of CSE. When we first started, we were just a little branch off, then they made us the full whack (P1)

> It's an ongoing thing [...] adapting our strategies as we learn more (P4)

One fieldnote observation was that Gloucestershire Constabulary officers and other

professionals were continuously adapting their approach to meet the needs of individual

cases.

> One conversation with an ex-officer emphasised, "CCE is not something we can get rid of, we need to be ahead of it and adaptable to its changes. It's an ongoing battle, and being flexible in our response is critical" (Fieldnote 3)

Operation Bluebird, a police operation targeting drugs county lines networks in the UK,

highlighted the need for adaptable policing approaches, including using undercover officers

and advanced surveillance techniques, to dismantle sophisticated networks (National Crime

Agency, 2021). Being context-aware means emphasising the context in which exploitation

occurs, including the relationship dynamics between victims and perpetrators (Firmin 2018),

for instance, using "bespoke plans" tailored to individual cases as discussed here. This ability

to tailor interventions allows for more effective responses that consider the individual context

of each case, whether it involves shifting resources, altering intervention strategies, or

collaborating with different agencies in innovative ways. As children involved in Child Criminal

Exploitation (CCE) often do not see themselves as victims and may be reluctant to cooperate

with authorities, organisations need to adopt trauma-informed and context-aware approaches

that effectively engage with, and support exploited children (Firmin, 2020). Such approaches

are crucial for fostering trust and ensuring the safety and recovery of affected children (Smith

et al., 2023).

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in their

approaches to the case management of safeguarding children, due to the complex and

evolving nature of CCE and to accommodate the individual circumstances of victims both of

which require strategies that can be quickly adjusted to meet changing circumstances.

> Every case is different, and our responses need to reflect that. We can't just apply the same solution to every child (P7)

> We have to be very adaptable in our responses because each case of child exploitation is unique. Our approach often involves creating bespoke plans to address the specific needs of each child. (P3)

> Additionally, the practice of officers meeting with victims outside of uniform was noted as a flexible, child-centred approach to minimise intimidation (Fieldnote 6)

CCE networks quickly and fluidly shift their methods (Kelly & Regan 2000), which means that

agencies and multi-agency collaboration must be equally agile in their responses to pivot

strategies based on current information or emerging threats (Beckett & Warrington 2015).

This was clearly articulated by some interviewees:

> We need to be adaptable...the situations we encounter can change rapidly, and what worked last week might not be effective today (P4)

> The perpetrators adapt their tactics constantly, so we must be prepared to adapt our responses just as quickly (DJ)

This highlights the need for continuous assessment and adjustment of strategies to remain

effective in protecting vulnerable children.

In the UK, multi-agency operations are designed to facilitate adaptable responses, but the

effectiveness of these operations often depends on the ability of agencies to collaborate

effectively and share information in real time. MASHs are a key component of this framework

intending to provide coordination and adaptability by allowing agencies to pool resources and

expertise. However, the interviews revealed that while MASH structures provide a platform for adaptable responses, their effectiveness can be hindered by variation in how different agencies prioritise and respond to CCE.

> Different agencies have different thresholds and priorities, which can make it difficult to respond adaptively as a unified front (P5)

Examples of adaptable practices within UK multi-agency operations were discussed including the development of cross-disciplinary rapid response intervention teams that can be deployed to high-risk situations (HMICFRS, 2021) and real-time data-sharing platforms enabling agencies to adjust their strategies based on the latest information (Home Office, 2020; Webster et al., 2022). These innovations have shown promise in enhancing the speed and effectiveness of responses to complex cases (Smith et al., 2023)

The ability to adapt quickly was reported as being constrained by resource availability, in a context of budget cuts and staffing shortages which forces them to stick to rigid protocols. As one interviewee noted:

> We want to be more adaptable, but the resources just aren't there to support it (P2)

> Officers voiced concerns over personnel reshuffling, with one officer commenting, "The reshuffling of staff is a huge problem. It breaks continuity and makes it harder to build relationships with victims" (Fieldnote 16)

> Sometimes our hands are tied by the procedures we have to follow, which can slow down our response when we need to act quickly (SI)

> We needed to reallocate resources as latest trends emerged (P7)

This points to a broader issue within the UK's safeguarding framework, where the intention to provide adaptable responses is often undermined by practical limitations.

However, the interviews also revealed challenges in maintaining adaptability, particularly within the constraints of bureaucratic systems. As one participant noted:

> The systems we work within are often rigid, and it can be difficult to implement changes quickly (P3)

This paradox between the need for flexible responses and the realities of working within structured frameworks was a recurring theme, pointing to the need for systemic changes that allow for greater adaptability.

Incorporating adaptable responses into the framework for managing multidisciplinary work is therefore essential to enable professionals to respond swiftly and appropriately to the diverse and changing needs of exploited children effectively and with resilience. By embedding adaptability into the framework, agencies can ensure that their strategies remain relevant and effective, even as the complex landscape of child exploitation evolves. While UK multi-agency operations should be structured to support adaptability, practical challenges often hinder the full realisation of this goal. Research indicates that differing organisational priorities, cultural differences, and resource disparities frequently create barriers to seamless coordination (Laming, 2003; Munro, 2011). For example, the structure of information sharing between agencies, a cornerstone of effective multi-agency working, is often impeded by data protection concerns or inconsistent protocols. Additionally, operational challenges, such as unclear role delineation and insufficient training, can exacerbate misunderstandings and reduce adaptability. These issues underscore the need for continuous review and improvement of multi-agency frameworks to ensure that adaptability is not just an aspiration but a functional reality.

6.2.4 Multi-agency Collaboration

Successful intervention in CCE cases depends on the ability of different agencies to work together in a coordinated and cohesive manner. When agencies collaborate effectively, they are better able to pool their resources, share critical information and provide a more comprehensive response to the needs of exploited children (National Crime Agency, 2021; Early Intervention Foundation, 2019). Interagency collaboration not only improves the effectiveness of interventions but also enhances the overall efficiency of the collaboration process avoiding duplication of efforts and ensuring resources are used optimally (Early Intervention Foundation, 2019). Furthermore, it builds trust among agencies and with the communities they serve creating a unified front against CCE (Centre for Social Justice 2020).

The interviews underscored the importance of effective collaboration between different agencies to provide a comprehensive and coordinated response to the complex challenges posed by CCE. Practical examples of interagency collaboration were offered:

> Working with multiple agencies allows for a more integrated approach, ensuring that all aspects of the child's needs are addressed (P6)

> We conduct joint operations with other agencies to tackle exploitation, which has proven to be highly effective (DJ)

> Regular coordination meetings help us stay aligned and ensure that everyone is on the same page (SI)

> Effective information sharing between agencies is crucial for coordinated and timely interventions (P7)

These joint efforts not only enhance the efficiency of interventions but also ensure that all relevant agencies are aligned in their objectives and strategies. Regular coordination meetings provide a forum for agencies to discuss ongoing cases, share updates, and refine their collaborative strategies. The ability to share information effectively enables agencies to respond more rapidly to emerging threats and to ensure that all stakeholders are fully informed about the latest developments in a case.

However, the interviews revealed challenges that hinder the effectiveness of interagency collaboration.

> One officer stated, "Although the social work team sits right across from us, we hardly have any real integration or coordinated efforts on cases" (Fieldnote 4)

> Sometimes there's confusion about who should take the lead on certain aspects of a case, which can slow down our response (P3)

> Different agencies often have different priorities, which can lead to conflicting agendas. It's important that we find common ground to ensure that we're all working towards the same goal (P5)

Another challenge to interagency collaboration, noted in fieldnotes, was the inconsistent attendance of key personnel in multi-agency meetings.

> During one multi-agency meeting, several key professionals were absent, leading to incomplete discussions and suboptimal decision-making. One professional noted, "When key people don't show up to meetings, it really slows down the process and we're unable to make decisions effectively" (Fieldnote 14)

> The coordination of multiple agencies—including police, social services, health professionals, and schools—is essential for ensuring that all aspects of a child's safety and well-being are addressed. The framework must highlight the importance of commitment and consistent attendance from all relevant professionals to ensure that multi-agency approaches are robust and effective (Field Note 15, Appendix A).

Despite these challenges, there was strong consensus among professionals about the value of interagency collaboration, and ongoing efforts are being made to overcome these barriers. Given these insights, it is evident that interagency collaboration should be fundamental to facilitate a coordinated and comprehensive response which enhances the ability of agencies to adapt to the complex and evolving nature of child exploitation. By embedding interagency collaboration into the framework, agencies can ensure that they are working together effectively to protect vulnerable children and to bring perpetrators to justice.

6.2.5 Intelligence and Investigation

In the UK, intelligence and investigation are fundamental components of multi-agency operations to combat CCE, with MASHs and LSPs helping facilitate the exchange of intelligence among stakeholders (Home Office, 2020; National Crime Agency NCA, 2021) to create a more comprehensive view of the risks facing children and support coordinated investigative efforts (Firmin, 2020). Intelligence-led policing involves continuous intelligence gathering, even in the absence of immediate criminal activity, to allow agencies to build a comprehensive picture of exploitation networks and anticipate potential threats before they fully materialise (Webb and Gray 2018). Some regions have instigated integrated intelligence units, bringing together specialists from various agencies, with advanced data analysis tools to analyse data, identify patterns and trends in exploitation and coordinate investigations (Webster et al., 2022). Such units facilitate more targeted interventions and joint collaborative operations which enhance the quality and depth of intelligence and lead to more successful outcomes (HM Government, 2021; Smith et al., 2023)

The importance of intelligence-led investigations was a recurring topic in the interviews.

> Without solid intelligence, we're often just reacting to incidents after they've occurred. We need to be ahead of the game (P2)

> We have limited resources, so it's crucial that we use intelligence to prioritise our investigations and focus on the most dangerous individuals and networks (P6)

This aligns with the broader strategic objectives of police in tackling CCE, where the focus is on actionable intelligence to effectively disrupt criminal networks, dismantle the structures that facilitate exploitation and protect vulnerable children. Participants discussed how the complexity of CCE cases often requires deep, multi-faceted investigations that are driven by robust intelligence-gathering processes.

> These cases are never straightforward. We need to pull together information from multiple sources to really understand what's happening and who is involved (DJ).

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This illustrates the need for a comprehensive approach to intelligence that involves cross-agency collaboration and the synthesis of data from various channels.

But intelligence and information sharing are often challenging in multi-agency settings and the fragmentation of intelligence across different organisations can significantly hinder investigative efforts (Gough 2020). While the framework for intelligence-sharing exists, its implementation is not always consistent or effective. Participants highlighted several challenges, including the reluctance of some agencies to share sensitive information, the lack of standardised procedures for intelligence dissemination, and the disparities in technological capabilities between different organisations.

> We still have issues with information not being shared properly between agencies, and that can really hamper our investigations (P4)

> One safeguarding officer noted, "VISTs [Vulnerability Identification Screening Tools] often aren't completed properly or logged in a timely manner, which delays responses and hampers investigations (Fieldnote 8)

> There's a real need for better integration of our intelligence systems. Right now, we're often working in silos, which is not ideal when we're trying to tackle something as complex as CCE (P5)

> We're seeing more and more cases where technology is being used to groom and exploit children. We have to stay ahead of these developments and use technology to our advantage (P7).

Successful intelligence sharing relationships are based on trust, open communication between agencies, standardised protocols to prioritise information and the use of integrated technology platforms to facilitate seamless information-sharing (Gough, 2020). When used effectively, advanced data analytics and artificial intelligence enables agencies to process large volumes of data quickly and accurately which can enhance the capacity to identify and disrupt exploitation networks (Lavis and Hoggett, 2019). This highlights the ongoing challenge

of ensuring that intelligence flows seamlessly across the multi-agency landscape, enabling

innovative and persistent investigative techniques and a coordinated and timely response to

CCE.

> A well-coordinated and timely intelligence-sharing system is essential to the swift investigation and prevention of CCE. Officers and teams must be trained and held accountable for maintaining accurate records to ensure smooth intelligence flow and timely interventions (Field Note 9)

> Innovative practices are essential in staying ahead of exploiters (SI)

Participants called for more investment in technology and training to enhance the capabilities

of frontline staff, as well as for greater emphasis on building trust and cooperation between

agencies. The overall sentiment was that while progress has been made, the current system

is not yet fully optimised to meet the demands of CCE investigations.

In conclusion, intelligence and investigation are essential components of any effective

strategy to combat CCE, as reflected in both the thematic analysis of interviews and existing

research. While UK multi-agency operations are structured to support intelligence-led

investigations, challenges remain in terms of information sharing and technological

integration. However, the emphasis on continuous intelligence gathering, proactive

investigation, and the use of advanced technology provides a solid foundation for improving

the effectiveness of these operations in the fight against CCE.

6.2.6 Prosecutions and Convictions

Typically, when thinking about successful management of crime, the public thinks of

prosecutions and convictions and this theme of prosecutions and convictions emerged in the

data highlighting both progress and ongoing challenges. Prosecutions are crucial not only for

securing justice but also for deterring future exploitation, disrupting criminal networks, and

sending a strong message to potential exploiters that such activities will not be tolerated (Centre for Social Justice 2020). Successful prosecutions in CCE cases are often dependent on the quality of evidence collected, the level of interagency cooperation and the ability to build trust with victims (Brown & Taylor 2020). Cases are more likely to result in convictions when there is a clear understanding of CCE among legal professionals, coupled with robust support from the judicial system (Early Intervention Foundation 2019).

Prosecuting CCE cases is difficult due to their complexity (Brown & Taylor 2020) which requires improved evidence-gathering techniques and greater judicial support to enhance conviction rates. However, there was an emphasis on the importance of bringing perpetrators to justice while simultaneously protecting and supporting victims.

> Prosecution rates have improved, but it's still a long road (DJ)

> We face difficulties in getting convictions due to the complexity of cases and the lack of trust from victims (P6)

> A successful prosecution is ideal, but it often comes secondary to safeguarding the child due to the complex nature of these cases (P4)

Currently, the prosecution and conviction process in CCE cases involves close collaboration between police, social services, legal professionals, and other relevant agencies to gather evidence, build cases and support victims throughout the legal process. However, the interviews revealed that the effectiveness of this collaboration can be hindered by including difficulty in collecting sufficient evidence to support a prosecution, inconsistent communication, differing priorities, and a lack of specialised knowledge in handling CCE cases.

> Not all agencies fully understand the intricacies of CCE, which can sometimes result in missed opportunities for securing a conviction (P5)

> One officer, reflecting on the challenge of working in CCE cases and barriers within the system that hinder successful prosecutions, stated "The challenge is not just catching

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the perpetrators but getting the evidence and having a consistent team to ensure everything lines up for court" (Field Note 10)

This points to the inherent challenges in gathering sufficient evidence and presenting compelling cases in court which includes the reluctance of victims to testify or provide evidence.

> Collecting solid evidence is critical but often challenging, especially when victims are reluctant to cooperate (P1)

> Building trust with victims is a significant barrier to successful prosecutions as many are scared to disclose information (P1)

This lack of trust is compounded by the trauma that victims experience and prior negative contact with CJS bodies which makes victims hesitant to engage with the legal process. This creates the need for a victim-centered prosecution process, where the safety and mental health of the child are paramount. This relies on stronger judicial support and specialised training for police and legal professionals in handling CCE cases.

> The framework needs to advocate for improved consistency across the force in case handling, so that investigations remain robust and able to withstand scrutiny in court (Fieldnote 11)

> We need more support from the judicial system to secure convictions (P7)

There have been efforts to improve the prosecution process through specialised training, enhanced interagency collaboration and the development of best practices such as multi-agency task forces and specialised police units which have the goal of improving the likelihood of successful prosecutions. Both the Early Intervention Foundation (2019) and Brown and Taylor (2020) advocate for the development of specialised training programs for police and legal professionals and guidelines to ensure that all parties involved in the prosecution process are equipped to handle the unique challenges of CCE cases alongside a

victim-centered approach that prioritises the safety and well-being of the child throughout the

legal process (Centre for Social Justice 2020).

Given these insights, it is clear that prosecutions and convictions warranted being a key

theme in the framework, not only emphasising the importance of holding perpetrators to

account but also the need for a coordinated, victim-centered approach that ensures the well-

being of the child is at the forefront of all efforts.

6.2.7 Victim Support & Community Engagement.
To be truly effective, victim support was discussed as needing to be more extensive than

'rescuing' them from exploitation:

> Providing holistic support is essential for victims' recovery. This includes not just
> immediate safety but also long-term emotional and psychological support. (P5)

> Building trust with victims takes time and consistent effort (P1)

Consistent engagement in education, employment or training serves as a protective factor

against exploitation by providing structure, support, and a pro-social environment (Early

Intervention Foundation, 2019) and a route to reintegration. Young people who are

disengaged from education or who lack meaningful employment opportunities are at higher

risk of being (re-)targeted by exploiters (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to

Children 2021). This was noted in the interviews:

> Because they're not at school, they're highly exposed to just congregating and
> developing their own affinity with others who are in similar situations. They have a lot of
> idle time, which increases their risk of being drawn into criminal activities (P1)

> When kids are excluded from school, they lose a critical structure in their lives. This
> lack of structure and support can push them toward criminal groups where they feel a
> sense of belonging (P5)

Moreover, the prospect of earning money from criminal activity can be a barrier to education or legitimate employment:

> A 15 or 16-year-old making £1,000 to £2,000 a week through criminal activities isn't going to want to sit in a classroom or take up an apprenticeship. They see the immediate financial rewards as outweighing the long-term benefits of education" (P6)

Programs aimed at re-engaging young people with education or vocational training significantly reduce the risk of exploitation (YEF, 2022) but there were several Fieldnotes about officers expressing a lack of knowledge about community-based projects that could support at-risk children.

> One officer mentioned, "I don't know about many of the local projects that could support kids in need. We don't seem to connect with these services very often" (Fieldnote 12)

However, one interviewee recounted a case where attempts to reintroduce a child to the school environment inadvertently triggered reminders of their traumatic experiences and exacerbated their distress.

To be effective victim and family support must be holistic (emotional, psychological, and practical), long-term (Barnardo's 2021) and trauma-informed, addressing the full range of victim's and families' needs and offering continuity in support. Successful prevention often involves education programs, community awareness campaigns and intelligence sharing among agencies to target and dismantle exploitation networks (Hickle & Hallett, 2016; Beckett, 2011). Community organisations are often more trusted than CJS organisations and can engage with children in ways that statutory services may not allowing more nuanced and effective victim support, particularly in communities where mistrust of authorities is prevalent (Children's Society 2020).

Currently, collaborative work with local community organisations and religious groups provides a support network beyond traditional services which are integral components of CCE work ensuring victims receive comprehensive care and helping build a sense of community resilience against exploitation (Home Office 2022). Engaged communities are better equipped to recognise the signs of exploitation and respond quickly to protect children and ongoing community programs that foster strong relationships and collective responsibility are particularly effective in preventing exploitation and supporting victims (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children 2021). Strong community ties and positive role models within a child's neighbourhood also serve as protective factors whereas communities which normalise criminal activity can reinforce exploitative behaviours and the experiences of exploitation (YJB, 2020).

Communities that are proactive in monitoring and supporting young people can significantly reduce the risk of exploitation (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children 2021). Community-based programs that foster strong relationships among neighbours and promote collective responsibility for child welfare (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children 2021) and which involve local leaders and institutions have been shown to effectively prevent exploitation by offering alternative pathways and social support systems for at-risk youth (YJB, 2020). The role of the community was also discussed in the interviews:

> A supportive community can make a stark difference. When schools, local organisations, and community leaders are engaged, they create a protective network around the child (DJ)

Comprehensive, multi-agency collaborative victim trust building and support, not just through direct services, but through community- and family- oriented engagement emerged as a theme in the interviews.

Partnerships enhance the reach and effectiveness of support services. Collaboration with local NGOs has been beneficial in providing comprehensive support to victims. These organisations often have the trust of the community and can engage with children in ways that statutory services sometimes cannot (P2)

Engaging community leaders helps us reach more victims and ensures that support extends beyond formal services (SI)

This approach leverages the influence and reaches of community leaders and organisations to create a network of support that can identify, protect, and assist victims more effectively. By involving the community, agencies can extend their reach and impact, making it easier to identify at-risk children and provide them with the necessary support before they become entrenched in exploitative situations.

However, the interviews also discussed challenges in effectively implementing these strategies such as the difficulty in maintaining consistent and meaningful engagement with communities, particularly in areas where trust in authorities is low, coordination between different agencies and community groups.

In some areas, gang culture is so entrenched that it becomes part of everyday life. Children grow up seeing it and are drawn into it because it is what they know (P1).

Sometimes there is a lack of coordination between agencies and community groups, which can result in either duplicating efforts or missing out on certain aspects of support (P7)

Despite these challenges, there was strong recognition among the interviewed professionals of the value of community engagement and collaboration underpinned by clear communication and collaboration protocols to ensure that all parties are working together effectively and efficiently to provide comprehensive and culturally sensitive victim support and care.

The lack of integration between social services and police and the unawareness of community support programs means that children's needs are not fully addressed. The

framework must prioritise collaboration across agencies, including social services, education, and community organisations, ensuring that victims receive a coordinated and holistic response to exploitation (Fieldnote 13)

6.2.8 Family Support

Family dynamics can either protect children or increase their risk of exploitation. Divided

families and unsupportive community environments were often cited in the interviews as

factors which increased a child's susceptibility to exploitation whereas strong familial bonds

and engaged communities were described as protective barriers that could reduce the risk of

exploitation.

> If you come from a broken family or if parents don't have time to invest in the child, the child will look for support and a sense of belonging elsewhere. Unfortunately, this is often found within criminal groups (P5; see also Early Intervention Foundation 2019)

> A lot of times parents have the blinkers on... they don't see their child's involvement with gangs or crime until it's too late. They say, 'my son wouldn't do that,' but we see them getting caught up in it" (P6)

Similarly, fear of child protective services can deter families from seeking help, complicating

intervention efforts (Eaton & Holmes 2017).

However, families are also identified as crucial to successful prevention and intervention.

Families who actively participate in the rehabilitation process can significantly reduce the risk

of re-exploitation and, conversely, family disengagement or denial of the child's involvement

in criminal activities can delay intervention and worsen outcomes (National Crime Agency

2021). This too was expressed in the interviews:

> If the family is stable and willing to work with us, we see much better outcomes. They can help reinforce the child's disengagement from criminal activities (P3)

> In some communities, there's a deep mistrust of authorities, which makes it hard to engage with families and provide the support that's needed (P3)

6.3 Indicators of Success

This section explores the indicators of success identified through the analysis, highlighting what effective outcomes look like at multiple levels. The findings point to a broad and interconnected understanding of success, encompassing the well-being and outcomes for the child, the effectiveness and accountability of organisations, and the importance of continuous learning and improvement across systems and practices.

6.3.1 Success for the Child

Successful interventions are those that provide consistent and holistic support whilst considering the broader social and environmental factors influencing the child (Firmin et al. 2018, 2020). A holistic approach means including not just the police and social services, but also mental health services, educational support, and family interventions (Coffey, 2018; Pearce, 2014). During the interviews, there was exploration of what success means for children and fundamental success indicators identified included both the CJS model of preventing children committing crimes and the Safeguarding model of removing them from exploitative situations.

> [It is about] successfully intervening in the lives of exploited children, helping them exit criminal activities, and providing support to avoid re-entrenchment in criminal behaviour (P5)

> Effective multiagency cooperation can disrupt the operations of those exploiting the children (P1)

What constituted success was also explained as being case-specific, following a personalised, child-centred approach.

> For some, it might mean complete disengagement from criminal activities, while for others, it could be a reduction in involvement or improved mental and emotional stability (P4).

One interviewee referred to a case where the success measure was engaging the child in playing rugby. The case study emphasised that successful interventions require a nuanced

understanding of each child's unique circumstances only achieved through sustained, and creative, multi-agency collaboration. In this case, success was not measured by conventional academic or behavioural outcomes but by the child's participation in a meaningful activity that built trust, provided a sense of belonging, and offered a safe outlet for emotions. This underscores the importance of trauma-informed practice involving recognizing the child's individual needs and tailoring interventions to promote healing and resilience in ways that resonate with their experiences and interests.

6.3.2 Organisational Success - data and evaluation

To achieve meaningful outcomes, multiagency frameworks must facilitate tailored responses, such as personalised action plans and continuous monitoring (Shuker, 2013; Harper & Scott, 2005). The use of data-driven approaches enhances agencies' ability to respond effectively to CCE (Early Intervention Foundation 2019; CJS 2020) and agencies that systematically collect, analyse, and reflect on data are better equipped to identify trends, predict risks, and develop targeted interventions (Green and Jones 2020). They are more also adaptable to changing circumstances and evaluation processes should be built into the framework of multi-agency work (Centre for Social Justice 2020). This approach creates an environment where agencies learn and refine their strategies based on what works and what does not. Additionally, regular evaluation meetings and the use of standardised performance metrics lead to better outcomes for at-risk children by ensuring that interventions are responsive to emerging needs and challenges (Early Intervention Foundation 2019).

Interviewees underscored the role that data collection, analysis and ongoing evaluation play in assessing the effectiveness of interventions against CCE and informing future strategies. Agencies typically rely on shared databases, performance dashboards and regular evaluation

meetings to monitor cases and assess the effectiveness of their interventions. The use of

performance metrics allows agencies to quantify their success, identify gaps in service

delivery, and ensure that resources are being allocated effectively. Effective data

management allows agencies to track the progress of cases, measure the impact of their

interventions and make evidence-based decisions.

> Accurate data collection is vital for evaluating our interventions and identifying areas for improvement (P6)

> Continuous monitoring and improvement based on data is essential for ensuring that our interventions remain effective (P7)

> We use specific performance metrics to track our progress and ensure that we are making a positive impact (DJ)

> Transparent reporting is crucial for accountability and improvement (P5)

This emphasis on data underscores the need for robust systems that can capture and

analyse information in real-time, enabling agencies to adapt their strategies as needed. The

dynamic nature of CCE demands agencies be open to new practices and modern

technologies that can enhance the ability to detect, prevent, and respond to CCE.

> We've started using new tools to analyse data more effectively, which helps us spot issues before they escalate (P6)

This adaptability in adopting modern technologies is vital to stay ahead of perpetrators who

use increasingly sophisticated means to exploit children.

However, interviewees revealed challenges in the implementation of data-driven approaches

such as data-quality variability and the challenges of integrating data from different agencies.

> The quality of data can vary significantly depending on the source, and integrating this data into a cohesive strategy can be challenging" (P5)

> Not all agencies collect data in the same way, which can make it difficult to compare and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions (P3)

The field notes highlighted concerns around data evaluation, particularly regarding the logging and tracking of vital information.

> Officers pointed out that VISTs and other key data were often incomplete or delayed, with one officer stating, "If the data isn't logged properly, we can't track the effectiveness of our interventions" (Fieldnote 18)

Despite these challenges, there is a clear recognition among professionals of the importance of data and evaluation in improving the effectiveness of multi-agency work. Embedding robust data collection and evaluation processes into the framework, means agencies can better understand the impact of their work, make informed decisions, and ultimately protect more children from exploitation.

> The framework must place a strong emphasis on data collection, monitoring, and evaluation to assess the success of CCE interventions over time. Ensuring that data is logged accurately and consistently will allow for evidence-based decision-making, ensuring that interventions are effective and that practices can be refined based on data insights (Fieldnote 19)

6.3.3 Continuous Learning

Adaptability also includes continuous learning and ongoing professional development training within multi-agency teams and institutional learning from robust child protection feedback mechanisms (Johnson and White 2019) both of which use, and embed a culture of, reflexivity (Beckett and Warrington 2015).

Participants stressed the importance of ongoing education and training to keep up with evolving trends in CCE.

> We are always learning and adapting our methods based on current information (P4)

> Regular training programs help us stay updated on the latest trends (P5)

> Ensuring that officers have the resources and skills to adapt to changing circumstances and evolving challenges will be critical for the ongoing success of CCE case management (Fieldnote 17)

> We incorporate feedback from various stakeholders to improve our approaches (P1)

6.4 Conclusion

Together, these themes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding improving strategies to combat CCE. The main finding emphasises that there is no single way to perceive success in addressing CCE but, rather, there are a multitude of things which could count as success. Based on these findings, a dual-framework approach, working at both the individual case level and broader multiagency level, was essential for accurately assessing success in the multiagency context ensuring that the complexities of cross-organisational work can be captured and analysed.

Chapter 7. The Development of the Framework

The major output of the research is two robust, evidence-based frameworks for evaluating success in multi-agency working which integrate findings from literature, policy review, observation and interviews. The frameworks includes both quantitative and qualitative measures recognising the complexity of multi-agency dynamics and the importance of context-sensitive evaluations. Ultimately, the frameworks are a tool for assessing the success and effectiveness of collaborative multi-agency practices, ensuring they are informed by best practice and lead to improved outcomes for children and young people at risk of exploitation.

7.1 Definition

CCE refers to the involvement of children in criminal activities, often orchestrated by older individuals or organised criminal groups. Beyond this, defining CCE is difficult due to its complex and multifaceted nature, the diverse circumstances in which exploitation occurs, ranging from street-level crimes to more sophisticated forms of manipulation, and the evolving technological landscape which has introduced new dimensions to CCE, such as online grooming and cyber-enabled crimes. The lack of a universally agreed-upon definition hampers efforts to combat this issue effectively, as different jurisdictions interpret and address CCE in varying ways. Additionally, there is a fine line between a child being coerced into criminal behaviour and being a victim of circumstance, making it challenging to distinguish between exploitation and voluntary participation. To address these difficulties, a nuanced approach that considers cultural, social, and technological contexts, is essential in crafting a definition that captures the essence of child criminal exploitation.

For the purpose of these frameworks child criminal exploitation is defined as

where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 [into criminal activity]. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. (Serious Violence Strategy, 2018)

7.2 Success Matrix Frameworks

A success matrix framework is a structured approach to defining, implementing, and measuring success within an organisation. The two interlinking Success Matrix Frameworks developed here measure the success for the child's involvement with multi-agency working and inter-agency multi-agency working itself.

The development of the frameworks involved an iterative process of analysis, where each statement derived from systematic analysis of the data collected. After the thematic analysis identified patterns, themes and gaps in the data, these themes provided the foundation for delineating the key focus areas within the frameworks. Each theme was carefully examined in relation to the broader research literature and the lived experiences and insights shared by the participants. Precise measures of success were then crafted from the thematic analysis, so the Framework was anchored in a manner both academically robust and pragmatically applicable. For example, if a theme in the analysis were "collaborative engagement," specific success measures under this theme could range from "frequency of collaborative efforts" to "perceived effectiveness of team collaboration." Aligning each success measure with the thematic insights ensured that the framework accurately encapsulated the nuanced indicators of success pertinent to the field in question. To facilitate a clear and organised structure, each success measure was assigned to an appropriate section within the framework allowing for thematic coherence and enabling each measure to contribute to an overarching, structured view of success.

For the framework to function effectively, each success measure needed to allow for standardised assessment on a measurable scale. Thus, an audit tool was developed to accompany the Framework which introduced that each measure could be evaluated on a five-point scale, allowing for granular assessment:

0 - not at all/ never/ no evidence for this
1 - very little/ very infrequently/ very little evidence for this
2 - to some extent/ sometimes/ some evidence for this
3 - to fair extent/ frequently/ good evidence of this
4 - always/ to a great extent/ a wealth of extremely strong evidence for this.

This scale also provides clarity and consistency in measuring success, ensuring that the framework could be applied rigorously across various contexts. To ensure the scores awarded is justified within the framework, evidence is required that supports each assigned score. This evidentiary basis strengthens the credibility of each assessment and provides a reference point for ongoing learning and understanding. Embedding this requirement encourages transparency, enables others to gain insight into how scores were determined and fosters a shared understanding of success criteria. The structured documentation of evidence aligned with the scores also established a resource for future users, promoting consistency in interpretation and application across different evaluative contexts. This approach ensures that the framework can be rigorously applied while serving as a tool for continuous learning and improvement.

7.3 Examples of Framework Content Development

When participants were asked to define CCE, the responses varied significantly. Some definitions focused on the coercion and manipulation involved, while others highlighted the socioeconomic conditions that make children vulnerable. This variability was reflective of the

broader research landscape, which consistently points to the lack of a universally agreed-upon definition of CCE. However, both the data and the literature strongly suggested that this definitional ambiguity has significant implications for practice, particularly in multi-agency settings where consistent understanding is crucial. This informed the development of a statement within the framework emphasizing the necessity of establishing a clear and universally accepted definition of CCE. The framework integrated this recommendation to align with evidence that a shared definition facilitates better communication and consistency across agencies.

The issue of consistent language emerged as another key area in both participant interviews and the researcher's Fieldnotes. Professionals reported that inconsistencies in language (differences in organisational jargon, varying interpretations of key terms), frequently led to misunderstandings that hindered effective collaboration. Terms like "vulnerability" or "risk" were interpreted differently depending on the professional background of the individual leading to fragmented responses to cases. The literature review found that clear, standardised language is essential for ensuring all professionals operate with a shared understanding, reducing the risk of miscommunication. As a result, a statement within the framework was crafted to prioritise the development and use of consistent terminology, supported by training and shared guidelines.

Participants frequently pointed to systemic barriers such as gaps in training, the siloed nature of some agencies and the lack of a cohesive framework for collaboration leading to challenges in identifying early warning signs of CCE and frustration about the absence of coordinated approaches for intervention. These insights directly shaped statements within the

framework, including the need for regular joint training sessions, shared tools for risk assessment and a standardise d protocol for information sharing.

The analysis also identified the importance of context and relational dynamics in shaping multi-agency collaboration. Several participants noted that successful partnerships were built on trust, clear communication, and shared goals; while failures were often attributed to a lack of these elements. Reviewing these responses in conjunction with existing research on multi-agency collaboration allowed the framework to incorporate statements that emphasised building relational trust and fostering open channels of communication as foundational elements.

In sum, the statements within the framework were developed from the evidence-base as a product of a rigorous and reflective process triangulating the data from the broader research evidence, interviews, and personal reflections to ensure that the framework was both grounded in real-world experiences and informed by best practice. Each statement was designed to address a specific challenge or gap identified during the research, ensuring that the framework offers practical and actionable guidance for improving multi-agency responses to CCE.

7.4 Why Two Frameworks Were Necessary

As the research evolved, it became evident that the initial plan to develop a single framework was insufficient to fully capture the complexities and nuances of the data. The thematic analysis revealed two distinct, yet deeply interconnected, focal points central to understanding success: the impact on the child and the effectiveness of multi-agency collaboration. During

the interviews, whether discussing interventions, safeguarding measures or collaboration between agencies, participants emphasised that the ultimate measure of success in addressing CCE was the positive impact on the well-being, safety, and recovery journey of the child. This highlighted the need for a dedicated framework focused solely on the child's journey that could assess success from the child's perspective, including their sense of safety, stability and overall well-being and ensure practitioners remain child-centered in their approaches. At the same time, the research also demonstrated that the effectiveness of multi-agency working was a critical determinant of achieving positive outcomes for the child. Participants pointed to the systemic barriers faced in collaboration which could undermine the most well-intentioned efforts. This highlighting the need for a separate multi-agency framework to evaluate the processes, effectiveness and dynamics of multi-agency working and information sharing. The decision to create two, complimentary frameworks was rooted in the realisation that while the child's outcomes and multi-agency effectiveness are interdependent, they require distinct measures of success, although as a toolkit, the two Frameworks do articulate.

The Child-Focused Framework is flexible to allow for the evolving, highly variable nature of CCE whilst still providing a tailored assessment aligned with the unique aspects, and success objectives, of each case. By facilitating this level of granularity, the framework both respects the diverse trajectories of individual cases and ensures that evolving exploitation tactics and patterns can be effectively responded to. The outcomes from this Child-Focused assessment are then synthesised into the second, larger framework to measure success from a multiagency perspective. The Multi-Agency Framework aggregates findings from individual Child cases and translates them into indicators of collective success across the entire

multiagency collaboration to assess coordination effectiveness, resource allocation and strategic alignment across agencies.

The decision to create two frameworks was rooted in the realisation that while the child's outcomes and multi-agency effectiveness are interdependent, they require distinct measures of success. The dual-framework approach reflects the complex nature of CCE and the need for both systemic and individual-level evaluations. It ensures that the success of multi-agency working is not conflated with child outcomes, recognising that a well-functioning system does not automatically guarantee positive results for every child. Similarly, it acknowledges that while the child's outcomes are paramount, they cannot be sustainably achieved without addressing systemic issues in multi-agency working. By separating these dimensions, the frameworks provide clearer guidance for practitioners and policymakers. Each framework serves as a practical tool tailored to its focus area: one to ensure that all efforts are ultimately child-centred and another to enhance the processes that enable those efforts. Together, they offer a comprehensive approach to evaluating and improving responses to CCE, ensuring that the needs of children remain central while addressing the systemic changes required for long-term success.

7.5 Intended use of the Frameworks

The Frameworks are intended to be used to ensure a consistent, collaborative and evidence-based approach to addressing the needs of children and improving multiagency efforts in CCE cases. To support their effective use, separate audit tools and User Guides were designed. The Child-Focused Framework enables practitioners to systematically and consistently evaluate case outcomes, while the Multi-Agency Framework audit tool

aggregates this data allowing for overarching review of cross-agency performance. The User

Guides provide structured instructions outlining both general, specific, and interpretative

procedures to ensure that assessments are consistent and reliable. Implementing this dual

approach framework establishes a robust foundation for evaluating success in complex

multiagency contexts, fostering both accountability and continuous improvement. Both

Frameworks have clear (and consistent) timings and responsible professionals identified.

		Child-Focused Framework	Multi-Agency Framework
Completion			Quarterly during multiagency meetings or independent completion by professionals from each agency, with collective review in a quarterly meeting.
	Initial	At the start of engagement with services	
	Follow-Up	At the point of discharge or transition from services	
Responsible Professional		A single professional working directly with the child, such as a social worker or caseworker at both points although if not possible, the follow-up could be completed by another professional with a direct relationship with the child.	Representatives from police, social care, healthcare, education, and other relevant agencies.
Considerations			Scoring should incorporate insights from the child-focused frameworks and follow the audit tool for consistency.

Figure 3 Intended Timing and Professional Involvement in administering the Frameworks

In conclusion, the development of these two frameworks provides a crucial tool for evaluating

multi-agency success in addressing child criminal exploitation (CCE). By integrating insights

from literature, policy, and practitioner experiences, the frameworks offer a structured

approach to assess both child outcomes and the effectiveness of inter-agency collaboration.

The Child-Focused and Multi-Agency Frameworks address the unique needs of each aspect,

ensuring that evaluations are context-sensitive, transparent, and evidence-based.

These frameworks, supported by audit tools and user guides, enable consistent and practical

implementation, promoting continuous improvement in collaborative practices. By focusing on

both the child's journey and the efficiency of multi-agency efforts, the frameworks offer a

comprehensive approach to combating CCE, ensuring child-centered interventions and systemic effectiveness. These frameworks provide a valuable resource for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers working to safeguard children and improve responses to exploitation.

7.6 Acknowledging limitations and local context

In presenting the proposed frameworks, it is important to acknowledge its limitations and to situate it within the local context of Gloucestershire, where this study is grounded.

First, the framework is conceptual in nature and based on a synthesis of national policy, academic literature, and professional guidance, rather than on primary empirical testing. While designed to be adaptable for use by local partnerships, it has not been applied or evaluated in real-world settings. Additionally, the covert and evolving nature of child criminal exploitation (CCE), compounded by historical under-reporting and inconsistent data-sharing across agencies, limits the ability of any single framework to offer a definitive measure of success (HMICFRS, 2023)

Second, the framework does not claim to fully capture informal safeguarding activity or unreported exploitation, which often elude formal monitoring tools. As such, the evaluation approach should be viewed as a structured guide to reflection and improvement, rather than a definitive measure of success .

In Gloucestershire, CCE presents a significant and growing challenge. Between February 2021 and January 2022, local data indicated that 94.1% of children identified as at risk of criminal exploitation were male, with the highest risk concentrated among 15–16-year-olds. Around 40% of those flagged for exploitation had gone missing at least once, 22.8% were in care, and 21.3% had learning difficulties or disabilities. Drug or alcohol misuse was a concern in over 27% of cases (GSCP, 2022). These statistics, drawn from the Gloucestershire

Chapter 8: Child-Focused Framework User Guide

The framework for assessing child outcomes was designed to prioritise individualised, qualitative indicators evaluated in terms of tangible benefits for the child, such as the child's sense of empowerment or reduction in risk and to ensure that the child's voice is central. The statements in the framework are rooted in research findings and require concrete evidence to substantiate each score. They are deliberately challenging to stimulate critical debate, reflection, and improvement.

The framework is designed to be completed at key points in the child's journey through services, specifically at the beginning of their engagement and again at the point of discharge. The scoring of this framework at multiple stages of the child's engagement with services is essential for ensuring the child's voice remains central but also helps identify any ongoing needs or areas where further support may be necessary. This collaboration is a vital opportunity to reflect on the child's journey and ensure that any remaining challenges are acknowledged, paving the way for appropriate follow-up care. The initial completion should take place as soon as the child is referred or begins receiving services. It is recommended that a single person be assigned responsibility for coordinating the completion of the tool on

behalf of local safeguarding partners and this should be a key individual, a professional with an established or emerging rapport with the child such as a caseworker, social worker, or designated lead professional, and have an in-depth knowledge of CCE.

This initial assessment sets a foundation for understanding the child's circumstances, risks, and protective factors in a safe and supportive environment where the child feels comfortable sharing their experiences, needs, and aspirations, ensuring services are tailored to their unique situation and creates a holistic, individualised plan for each child.

The framework should be completed again when the child's engagement with the service ends, such as when they are discharged, transferred to another service or their case is closed. When completing the Child-Focused Framework, it is crucial to ensure that the child's perspective is central to the scoring process. The scoring should be conducted in close consultation with the child, allowing them to actively participate in reflecting on their experiences, progress, and the support they have received. At the second completion stage, the professional and the child should collaborate to evaluate progress, discuss outcomes, and document the child's feedback on the support they received. This process ensures the child's voice remains central and helps to identify any ongoing needs or areas where additional support might be required.

Following the second evaluation, the outcomes of the framework should be shared with all relevant professionals involved in the child's care. This will provide valuable insights that can inform their ongoing practice, ensuring continuity of care, and facilitating coordinated efforts for the child's future wellbeing. Sharing this information across agencies is essential in

promoting a seamless transition for the child, preventing gaps in their care or risk of re-exploitation.

The scoring process should consider not only professional assessments but also how the child perceives their journey, the impact of interventions, and any residual challenges. When determining scores for each section of the framework, both the professional's observations and the child's input should be incorporated. For example, if the child expresses feeling very supported and safe in their current environment, this could directly inform a higher score in areas related to safety and support. On the other hand, if the child identifies areas where they still feel unsure or unsupported, these concerns should be reflected in the scores as well, indicating areas for improvement. This collaborative approach ensures that the child's experiences are acknowledged and that the final scores are an accurate reflection of both professional perspectives and the child's own voice.

Additionally, it is important to periodically revisit the child's feedback as their engagement with services evolves. If there are any changes in the child's circumstances or if new challenges arise, it is essential to check in with the child again to update their scoring and ensure that their current needs are accurately captured, it is suggested that both old and new scores are kept to ensure learning and development can be reviewed.

The framework promotes eight domains (areas of focus) covering the essential elements of measuring success of the multiagency approach for children, young people, and their families presented as statements provided in no particular order but which closely interrelate. A score between 0 and 4 should be assigned for each statement based on the following scale:

- **4**: Always / A wealth of extremely strong evidence for this
- **3**: To a good extent / Frequently / Good evidence of this
- **2**: To some extent / Sometimes / Some evidence for this
- **1:** Very little / Infrequently / Little evidence for this
- **0:** Not at all / Never / No evidence for this

Below is an overview of how the scoring could be reflected for the child-focused framework.

8.1 Prevention and Early Identification (Table 1)

Early intervention not only protects children from immediate harm but also plays a vital role in building long-term resilience, reducing the likelihood of re-exploitation, and promoting recovery. Prevention requires a proactive, coordinated, and child-centred approach, involving timely risk recognition, effective engagement with children and families, and sustained multi-agency efforts. In a rapidly changing landscape, where exploitation tactics continue to evolve, embedding prevention and early identification into all safeguarding practice is essential. This table explores how well agencies are embedding preventative approaches, how early vulnerabilities are recognised, and how interventions are tailored and adapted to protect children effectively.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
1a	We have prevention initiatives in place, and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted. Are agencies investing in proactive, strategic initiatives aimed at safeguarding vulnerable children before exploitation occurs?	4	Prevention work is always data-informed, targeted according to risk and evaluated for impact (e.g., reductions in exploitation rates, increased engagement in education).
		3	Prevention work is frequently targeted according to risk although may be general or not consistently targeted or evaluated
		2	Prevention work is sometimes targeted but lacks evidence of impact
		1	Limited prevention work or work lacked timeliness.
		0	No prevention work

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
Notes for improvement			
1b	The child was identified at an early stage of exploitation, leading to proactive intervention. Are vulnerabilities and indicators recognised early enough to allow for timely, meaningful action?	4	Early signs were spotted and acted upon through swift, proportionate safeguarding measures, preventing escalation.
		3	Some early signs were missed but interventions were still relatively timely.
		2	Delays in identification leading to more entrenched exploitation before intervention occurred.
		1	Significant delays in identification leading to serious harm.
		0	Vulnerabilities and/or indicators not identified.
Notes for improvement			
1c	Risk factors specific to this child (e.g., peer influence, family dynamics) were identified early on. Are assessments individualised or generic?	4	Early recognition of personal risk factors (e.g. peer exploitation networks or family vulnerabilities), supported by clear documentation and a bespoke intervention plan.
		3	Generic risk assessment with little attention to the child's unique context.
		2	Incomplete risk assessment with generic intervention plans.
		1	Risk assessment and/or intervention plan extremely generic.
		0	Risk assessment and/or intervention plan absent.
Notes for improvement			
1d	Primary preventative measures were put in place to reduce the child's risk of further exploitation. Was a strong safety plan implemented quickly? Did it focus on actions taken to mitigate identified risks?	4	Evidence of focused actions taken to mitigate identified risks.
		3	Evidence of some focused actions taken to mitigate identified risks.
		2	Risks identified but little or no effective preventative action taken.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
		1	Risks not identified, generic preventative action taken, little or no evidence of impact.
		0	Risks not identified and preventative action not taken.
Notes for improvement			
1e	The child's participation in risk-reduction programs (e.g., education or diversionary activities) has had a positive impact.

Were interventions meaningful for the child offered? | 4 | The child actively engaged in programs which built protective factors (e.g., improved school attendance, peer relationships, confidence). |
		3	Some engagement with some programs but incomplete or little evidence of effectiveness.
		2	Poor engagement, lack of access, or interventions that did not demonstrably reduce risk.
		1	Planned interventions or activities unavailable or effectiveness not measured.
		0	No planning for participation in risk reduction programmes.
Notes for improvement			
1f	The family or caregivers were engaged early in preventative measures to support the child.

How was the family engaged in safeguarding and support of the child? | 4 | Proactive, early engagement with family/child's support network, offering them support and education to help safeguard the child (e.g. family mediation, parenting support, or safety planning). |
		3	Delayed engagement with family/ child's support network or lack of repeat engagement to ensure effectiveness.
		2	Reactive engagement with family/ child's support network.
		1	Little meaningful engagement with child's family/ support network.
		0	No meaningful engagement with child's family/ support network
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
1g	The child reports feeling safer and more supported since early intervention efforts began. How has the child's voice been included in decision-making and evaluation of intervention effectiveness?	4	Direct feedback from the child indicating increased feelings of safety and support.
		3	Indirect feedback on child's feelings of safety and support. Some evaluation and/or evidence of impact.
		2	Limited feedback on child's feelings of safety and support. Little evaluation and/or evidence of impact on the child's sense of wellbeing.
		1	Little meaningful feedback on child's feelings of safety and support. Reliance on professional's judgements. Interventions did not significantly improve the child's sense of wellbeing.
		0	Child's feedback not sought. Overreliance on professional's judgements. Interventions did not improve, or worsened, the child's sense of wellbeing.
Notes for improvement			
1h	We have identified and mitigated new risks that arose as the child's situation evolved. Did professionals remain vigilant and responsive as circumstances changed?	4	Ongoing review processes, continuous risk assessment and timely adaptation to emerging threats.
		3	Attempt at ongoing review process but lacked timeliness or did not update risk assessment or actions.
		2	Significant delays to risk assessment or adaptations not made after new information.
		1	Static approach to risk assessment.
		0	No ongoing risk assessment or adaptation.
Notes for improvement			
1i	Multi-agency interventions have helped prevent the child from re-entering exploitative environments. How effective were collaborative (e.g., police, education, health, youth services, VCS) safeguarding measures?	4	Examples of coordinated multi-agency work successfully disrupting exploitative networks or preventing further harm.
		3	Attempts at coordinated multi-agency work but with limited success or significant barriers.
		2	Siloed working or failure to sustain protective environments over time.
		1	Little attempt to coordinate multi-agency work. Protective environment not joined up (duplication or gaps).

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
		0	No coordinated multi-agency work. Further harm resulted.
Notes for improvement			
1j	Prevention efforts have been tailored to the child's specific situation (e.g., targeted interventions, mentoring). Have one-size-fits-all approaches been avoided? Did prevention efforts respond to the risks, needs and strengths of the child?	4	Highly individualised, flexible prevention work that responded to the child's personal risks, needs, and strengths
		3	Some tailoring of prevention work based on risks and needs but some reliance on generic measures.
		2	Response was too generic and did not resonate with the child leading to limited engagement.
		1	Response was generic resulting in disengagement.
		0	Response was generic leading to disengagement and further harm.
Notes for improvement			
1k	Early identification led to successful interventions that have reduced the likelihood of the child becoming re-exploited. Overall, how effective was the prevention work?	4	Sustained improvements in child's safety and wellbeing evidenced through case closure, disengagement from exploitative networks, or positive life changes.
		3	Some improvements in child's safety and wellbeing evidenced through at least partial disengagement from exploitative networks or positive life changes.
		2	Despite early identification, interventions were insufficiently impactful to significantly reduce risk.
		1	Little early identification of risks or delayed implementation of interventions meant risks were only marginally impactful.
		0	Insufficient early identification or intervention meant risks were barely reduced or further harm was experienced.
Notes for improvement			

Table 1: Early Identification & Prevention

8.2 Intelligence and Investigations (Table 2)

Investigations must balance enforcement with a trauma-informed, child-centered approach. Intelligence must be gathered ethically, effectively, and in a way that actively protects and supports the child's safety. Investigations should not merely focus on criminality but also contribute meaningfully to the child's safeguarding plan. This table explores how well agencies are embedding intelligence-led safeguarding practices, how effectively investigations link to care planning, and whether multi-agency approaches remain focused on the child's best interests.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
2a	We have intelligence and investigations initiatives in place and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted: Are agencies investing in intelligence and investigation initiatives aimed at identifying vulnerable children before exploitation occurs?	4	Established systems for gathering, sharing, and acting on intelligence, leading to real-world safeguarding outcomes.
		3	Processes exist but inconsistently applied.
		2	Intelligence efforts minimal, uncoordinated, or ineffective.
		1	Intelligence efforts minimal or uncoordinated.
		0	No intelligence initiatives.
Notes for improvement			
2b	Can we identify any links to other vulnerable children. Have we been able to identify other children since supporting this child? Are wider patterns being considered beyond individual cases?	4	Clear evidence of mapping connections between children, leading to wider safeguarding action.
		3	Some exploration of linked vulnerabilities
		2	Limited exploration of links to other children.
		1	Isolated case management without wider consideration.
		0	No consideration of links.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
2c	We have identified if this young person has been known to agencies for other reasons Have we explored our databases to identify this child? Has the child's broader history with services (e.g., previous safeguarding concerns, missing episodes, family interventions) been reviewed and integrated into the investigation?	4 3 2 1 0	Thorough multi-agency information check informing investigation and safeguarding. Some information gathering but incomplete. Limited review of child's history with agencies. Fragmented response due to gaps in information. No review of previous agency involvement.
Notes for improvement			
2d	Relevant intelligence has been gathered that directly impacts the safety and well-being of the child Is our intelligence individualised and focused on the immediate safety?	4 3 2 1 0	Intelligence gathering leads directly to protective actions (e.g., removal from danger). Intelligence partially linked to safeguarding. Intelligence gathered but disconnected from safeguarding actions. Intelligence primarily for criminal cases, little safeguarding impact. No relevant intelligence gathered.
Notes for improvement			
2e	The child has been kept informed, as appropriate, about the investigation and how it relates to their safety Has the child been consulted during the investigations? Is the communication transparent and child focused?	4 3 2 1 0	Child sensitively updated, feels involved and reassured. Child informed but inconsistently or partially. Limited child communication, some confusion. Child left out of key information. No communication with child.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
2f	Intelligence has been used to adapt the child's care plan and reduce their risk of further exploitation. Have we taken into consideration individual needs when developing this care plan? Are safeguarding plans dynamic and responsive to new intelligence?	4 3 2 1 0	Care plans updated clearly based on new intelligence. Some adaptations made to care plans. Care plans mostly static with limited updates. Care plans not responsive to new intelligence. No updates to care plans based on intelligence.
Notes for improvement			
2g	The child has been protected from any potential retaliation as a result of investigations Has a safety plan been implemented quickly? Have risk assessments been undertaken to explore potential outcomes from investigaetion?	4 3 2 1 0	Proactive safety planning to prevent retaliation (e.g., relocation). Some safety measures in place. Limited consideration of retaliation risks. Risks identified but poorly managed. No protection from retaliation.
Notes for improvement			
2h	Families have been consulted to gather intelligence Have we included families in the investigation and at early stages? Are we taking their opinions into consideration?	4 3 2 1 0	Early, sensitive engagement with families to inform protective planning. Some family engagement but inconsistent. Family engagement limited or tokenistic. Adversarial or ineffective family contact. No family engagement.
Notes for improvement			
2i	If the child is engaging with support services they have been included in Multi-agency meetings.	4 3 2	Consistent, active involvement of support services in safeguarding discussions. Some inclusion of support services. Limited coordination across services.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	Has the childs voice been heard? Are all services contributing?	1	Siloed working.
		0	No involvement of support services.
Notes for improvement			
2j	The investigation has led to actionable outcomes that have disrupted the exploitation network. Have we been able to gather data which gives us more information on the wider network?	4	Tangible outcomes such as arrests or disruption tactics.
		3	Some progress in disrupting networks.
		2	Limited impact on networks.
		1	Investigation without meaningful disruption.
		0	No disruption; exploitation continues.
Notes for improvement			
2k	Intelligence gathered has been used to prevent further exploitation of the child or others. What actions have been taken to prevent exploitation from this investigation? How much disruption has been caused to the criminal network?	4	Intelligence anticipates risks and puts proactive protections in place.
		3	Some preventative measures based on intelligence.
		2	Reactive rather than preventative use of intelligence.
		1	Missed opportunities to prevent harm.
		0	No preventative action based on intelligence.
Notes for improvement			
2l	Multi-agency efforts have ensured that the investigation and intelligence activities are child-centered and trauma-informed. Overall, how effective was the investigation work? Has the intelligence contributed to prevention?	4	Trauma-informed techniques, safeguarding-focused information sharing, prioritising wellbeing.
		3	Some evidence of child-centered approach.
		2	Limited trauma-informed practice.
		1	Investigation retraumatises child or treats child mainly as evidence.
		0	No child-centered or trauma-informed approach.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score

Table 2 Intelligence and Investigations

8.3 Prosecution and convictions (Table 3)

Prosecution and conviction processes play a vital role in disrupting networks that exploit children, deterring future exploitation, and securing justice for young victims. However, this must be achieved through an approach that protects, supports, and empowers children, recognising the complex trauma they may have experienced. This table explores how effectively agencies are identifying key offenders, pursuing legal outcomes, and ensuring that prosecutions lead to tangible improvements in the child's safety and wellbeing. It also examines whether the child's journey throughout the legal system has been child centred and safeguarded against further harm. Success is determined not just by achieving convictions but by ensuring that legal actions reduce the child's vulnerability, maintain their safety, and are conducted in a way that prioritises their psychological and emotional needs.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
3a	We have prosecution and conviction initiatives in place and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted: Are there clear strategies for securing legal action against exploiters?	4 3 2 1 0	Structured, targeted efforts leading to successful disruption of exploiters. Initiatives exist but vary in effectiveness or consistency. Fragmented, reactive, or largely ineffective legal interventions. Minimal or inconsistent initiatives. No prosecution initiatives
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
3b	Key offenders exploiting this child have been identified Have other individuals responsible for exploitation have been successfully pinpointed? What about the larger criminal network?	4 3 2 1 0	Clear identification and targeting of main exploiters. Some identification but incomplete. Main offenders remain unidentified or unaddressed. Limited or no offender identification. No offenders identified.
Notes for improvement			
3d	Conviction have been made against exploiters Have investigations successfully led to legal accountability? Can we identify what is needed in order to bring about convictions?	4 3 2 1 0	Secured convictions dismantling exploitation operations. Some convictions with partial impact. Failed prosecutions or no legal outcomes. Limited legal action. No convictions
Notes for improvement			
3e	Easy way to identify if this young person has been known to multiple agencies for other reasons Has multi-agency information sharing has supported legal strategies?	4 3 2 1 0	Consistent use of historical agency involvement to inform legal processes. Partial use of agency records. Fragmented or incomplete records hindering efforts. Limited review of agency history. No use of agency history.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
3f	Links to other vulnerable children have been found through this young person Systems are set up to join links between vulnerable children	4 3 2 1 0	Identification and safeguarding of other at-risk young people through this child. Some identification of linked children. Missed opportunities to widen protection. Limited consideration of wider vulnerabilities. No links identified.
Notes for improvement			
3g	Legal actions (e.g., arrests or prosecutions) have directly contributed to the child's safety. Have legal interventions practically improved the child's protection?	4 3 2 1 0	Arrests, bail conditions, or convictions have tangibly reduced risks. Some evidence of improved safety. Little real impact on safeguarding. Legal actions ineffective for protection. No impact on child's safety.
Notes for improvement			
3h	The child has been protected from retaliation or harm as a result of legal proceedings. What risk management has been undertaken?	4 3 2 1 0	Pre-emptive safety planning shielding child from backlash. Some safety measures implemented. Risks underestimated or poorly managed. Limited protection from retaliation. No protection from retaliation.
Notes for improvement			
3i	The child was supported through the legal process and felt secure in giving evidence, if applicable.	4 3 2	Strong advocacy enabling safe and confident evidence giving. Some support but inconsistent. Limited preparation causing distress or withdrawal Inadequate support leading to re-traumatisation.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	Has the children voiced this? Is there adequate support in place?	1 0	No support provided.
Notes for improvement			
3j	The prosecution or conviction has resulted in the child experiencing a reduced level of risk. Does the child feel safe? Is there a long term impact as a result of legal measures?	4 3 2 1 0	Clear link between legal outcomes and reduced vulnerability. Some evidence of reduced risk. Little to no change in risk status. Risk remains high despite legal actions. No reduction in risk.
Notes for improvement			
3k	The child's participation in legal processes has been facilitated with trauma-informed care. Has the childs experience of the legal process been dealt with sensitively?	4 3 2 1 0	Trauma informed approach taken Some trauma-informed elements present Child treated mainly as witness Limited consideration of trauma. No trauma-informed care.
Notes for improvement			

Table 3 Prosecution and convictions

8.4 Victim Support and Community Engagement (Table 4)

Recovery and resilience-building depend not just on removing immediate threats but also on

rebuilding safe, trusting environments around the child. This table explores how agencies

work together to create holistic, long-term support structures that meet the developmental,

emotional, and social needs of exploited children. It also examines whether services empower

the child to actively participate in their own recovery and community reintegration.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
4a	We have victim support and community engagement initiatives in place and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted. Children are supported by charities and other community support services? Is there awareness on the services available?	4 3 2 1 0	Well-resourced, partners like youth services and mental health teams, evaluated for effectiveness Initiatives in place but with varied quality or impact. Fragmented, ad-hoc, or inconsistently applied support. Minimal or uncoordinated activity with poor outcomes. No initiatives evident.
Notes for improvement			
4b	Alternative provisions have been identified for this young person Our agency has worked with local communities to create safer environments for the child. Have education, care placements, or positive activities been adapted to the child's needs	4 3 2 1 0	Supportive alternatives to mainstream provision aligned with need Some attempts to find alternatives but limited alignment Minimal efforts or inappropriate alternatives No alternatives considered or actioned Child remains in high-risk environment
Notes for improvement			
4c	The child is encouraged to re-engage with school or other educational settings with adequate support. What engagement effort have been attempted? Are these personal to the child and has the child been	4 3 2 1	Strong collaboration with community groups or local resources Some evidence of community engagement Limited engagement beyond professional settings. Ineffective community involvement

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	included in the decision making?	0	No community engagement
Notes for improvement			
4d	Support is tailored to the young person's developmental needs Have we explored the child's age, maturity, and emotional development when making decisions on support?	4 3 2 1 0	Interventions are developmentally appropriate Partial tailoring with some age-appropriate elements Generic services with limited sensitivity to developmental stage One-size-fits-all support No consideration of developmental needs.
Notes for improvement			
4e	Support for presenting problems and broad issues in the child or young person's early experience (unresolved trauma, experiences of abuse, family issues) emotional and psychological support services Are we looking at the childs full needs instead of focusing on criminal behaviours? Are underlying needs being met?	4 3 2 1 0	Specialist services involved (CAMHS) Some referrals or support beyond behaviour management. Limited focus on underlying needs Behaviour-focused only No emotional or psychological support evident
Notes for improvement			
4f	Support is strengths based and helps the child to understand their own behaviours Are we empowering young people? Are we navigating more positive choices?	4 3 2 1	Child supported to build self-awareness and resilience, recognising past coping strategies and building new skills Some strengths-based work but not embedded Focus mainly on deficits or fixing problems

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
		0	Child excluded from understanding own journey No strengths-based approach
Notes for improvement			
4g	Support is accessible and available for individuals with learning disabilities and SEN How inclusive is our approach? Have we screened for additional needs?	4 3 2 1 0	Specialist adaptations in place (e.g., accessible materials, SEN-trained workers, communication tools). Some accessibility provided. Occasional adaptations but not consistent. Needs of SEN learners overlooked. No accessibility or adaptations provided.
Notes for improvement			
4h	The child feels supported by multiple services involved in their care What's the childs perception of the support they have received?	4 3 2 1 0	Child experiences consistent, joined-up support across services (e.g., youth worker, therapist, and keyworker working together). Some coordination but with gaps. Services operate independently. Inconsistent support or confusion around roles. Child feels unsupported or isolated.
Notes for improvement			
4i	There is a clear care plan in place that addresses both immediate and long-term support needs. Do our efforts extend beyond crisis intervention?	4 3 2 1 0	Care plan includes crisis response and long-term goals (e.g., education, health, relationships). Plan includes some long-term thinking. Plan is focused only on immediate safety. Minimal or reactive planning. No care plan in place.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
4j	The child has been involved in selecting activities that promote their reintegration into a safe and supportive community. Is the child empowered to make positive choices ?	4 3 2 1 0	Child actively chooses reintegration options (e.g., clubs, arts, volunteering), with their preferences shaping support. Some choice offered but options are limited. Child participation is generalistic. Activities adult-led or not personalised. No reintegration planning or engagement
Notes for improvement			

Table 4 Victim Support and Community Engagement

8.5 Adaptable Responses (Table 5)

Due to the evolving forms of exploitation and the rapid changes to a young persons circumstance there is a hightened need for adaptability. The ability of agencies to flexibly and proactively adapt their responses is critical for keeping young people safe and engaged. This table explores whether interventions are dynamic tailored to the child's evolving needs, informed by multiple professional perspectives, and responsive to sudden changes in risk. True adaptability also means centring the child's voice and ensuring that any changes in their plan are timely, collaborative, and clearly communicated. Effective adaptive practice reflects a system that is child-centred and committed to continuous reflection and improvement.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
5a	We have Adaptable Reponses in place and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted do responses adjust to changing needs, and how	4 3	Responses are well-resourced, proactive, and tailored to individual needs, showing clear evidence of effectiveness. Some adaptability is present, but responses are inconsistent or limited in scope.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	confident are we that they are making a positive impact on the children involved?	2	Responses are reactive and generic, with limited impact.
		1	Support is rigid, poorly matched to needs, or lacks evidence of effectiveness.
		0	No adaptability in support provided.
Notes for improvement			
5b	Individual needs of the child have been identified Has there been a thorough and ongoing assessment of the young person's specific risks, strengths, vulnerabilities, and preferences	4	Detailed, ongoing assessments are in place that inform personalised interventions considering strengths, vulnerabilities, and preferences.
		3	Needs are identified, but assessment lacks depth or personalisation.
		2	Basic understanding of needs; plan is generic.
		1	Surface-level or outdated information used.
		0	No clear identification of individual needs.
Notes for improvement			
5c	The young person has a key individual to liaise with Does the young person have a consistent, trusted adult coordinating their support?	4	A consistent, trusted adult is in place, regularly engaging with the young person and providing stable support.
		3	A key contact exists but changes frequently or lacks meaningful engagement.
		2	Inconsistent adult relationships; unclear support structure.
		1	Young person doesn't know who to turn to.
		0	No key adult identified.
Notes for improvement			
5d	The young person has been consulted on their views	4	Regular, meaningful consultation takes place; their views influence planning and decision-making.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	Has the child's voice genuinely shaped planning? Is there opportunities for the child to offer their opinion?	3	Some evidence of consultation, but limited influence on plans.
		2	Consultation is irregular or superficial.
		1	Child's views are collected but not used.
		0	No evidence of consultation.
Notes for improvement			
5e	The intervention plan for the child is regularly reviewed and adapted to their changing needs. Are risk assessments taking place often?	4	Frequent, responsive reviews result in changes to support based on new risks or progress.
		3	Reviews take place but lack responsiveness or timeliness.
		2	Infrequent reviews with minor adjustments.
		1	Plans are stagnant and outdated.
		0	No review process in place
Notes for improvement			
5f	Our responses have been flexible enough to address sudden changes in the child's risk factors. During the intervention with the child have plans changed in response to evolving information? How quickly are professionals responding?	4	Rapid and effective responses are implemented in urgent situations (e.g., emergency placements, increased supervision).
		3	Response is timely in some cases but inconsistent.
		2	Delayed action with partial response.
		1	Risk persists due to slow or rigid systems.
		0	No system for responding to sudden risk changes.
Notes for improvement			
5g	Intervention plans have been adjusted based on input from multiple agencies, including	4	Strong multi-agency collaboration with clear influence on evolving care plans.
		3	Some agencies contribute but input is uneven.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	health, education, and law enforcement.	2	Agency involvement is limited or isolated.
	How well are agencies sharing new information? Is new information being acknowledged?	1	Collaboration is minimal and informal.
		0	No agency input evident.
Notes for improvement			
5h	The child reports that the support they are receiving feels relevant to their current situation. What is the child experience? Has the child offered information to agencies reporting on safety?	4	Feedback shows the child feels supported and that services match their present needs and context.
		3	Some relevance but gaps in support from the child's perspective.
		2	Child reports that support is only partially helpful.
		1	Support feels outdated or off-target to the child.
		0	Child feels misunderstood or unsupported.
Notes for improvement			
5i	The child's support network (family, guardians, caregivers) is actively engaged in adapting responses. What is the childs family involvement like?	4	Family/guardians are engaged in planning, supported themselves, and contribute to decisions.
		3	Some engagement with limited support or influence.
		2	Family involvement is irregular or passive.
		1	Family disengaged or uninvolved.
		0	No attempt to include family in planning.
Notes for improvement			
5j	The interventions have evolved over time to be more effective for this specific child. Has the support developed over time with this child? What is the long-term responsiveness?	4	Interventions show a clear trajectory from crisis management to long-term development, shaped by ongoing learning.
		3	Some adaptation is visible, with limited strategic development.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
		2	Plans show minor changes but lack focus on long-term outcomes.
		1	
		0	Interventions remain unchanged over time.
			No evolution or learning evident in interventions
Notes for improvement			

Table 5 Adaptable Responses

8.6 Interagency Collaboration (Table 6)

Effective interagency collaboration is fundamental in responding to the complex and multifaceted needs of children at risk of or experiencing exploitation. No single agency holds all the expertise or capacity to safeguard a child in isolation; a holistic, coordinated, and child-centred approach is critical. This table explores whether agencies are communicating effectively, sharing information appropriately, and working together to ensure that interventions are timely, consistent, and impactful.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
6a	We have interagency collaboration initiatives in place and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted: Do initiatives foster coordinated efforts, and how confident are we that they are achieving meaningful outcomes for the children involved?	4	Collaboration is structured, strategic, and demonstrably effective in supporting vulnerable children.
		3	Some collaborative work is in place, but practice varies in quality or impact.
		2	Collaboration is informal or inconsistent, with limited measurable outcomes.
		1	Efforts are poorly coordinated.
		0	No meaningful interagency collaboration.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
6b	Assessments include a holistic view of the child or young person, including consideration of harmful behaviours, development, family, and environment. Did multi-agency assessments go beyond presenting issues to provide a comprehensive understanding of the child's world?	4 3 2 1 0	Assessments reflect a comprehensive understanding of the child's full context and are informed by multi-agency perspectives. Assessments are broad but lack detail or multi-agency input. Focus is narrow or reactive, missing wider context. Assessments are incomplete or superficial. No holistic assessment evident.
Notes for improvement			
6c	Information sharing between agencies has been timely, appropriate, and effective in addressing the child's needs. What is the quality of information sharing?	4 3 2 1 0	Information is shared quickly, lawfully, and in ways that directly influence support. Sharing occurs but with occasional delays or gaps. Communication is inconsistent or lacks follow-up. Information is withheld or shared inappropriately. No effective information-sharing process.
Notes for improvement			
6d	Agencies able to support this young child have been identified Have services suitable to this young child been mapped and engaged? Are they individualised?	4 3 2 1 0	A full range of statutory and specialist services has been identified and engaged. Key agencies are involved, but some gaps exist. Awareness of support options is limited. Few agencies identified or used. No clear understanding of who could help.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
6e	Agencies are receiving regular updates regarding this individual Have measures been introduced for live updates regarding this child? What is the continuity?	4 3 2 1 0	Scheduled, structured updates ensure all agencies stay informed of changes. Updates are shared but not consistently or proactively. Communication is ad hoc and varies between services. Agencies are frequently out of date. No update mechanism in place.
Notes for improvement			
6f	Key individuals are present at interagency meetings regarding this child Are the same critical professionals present at meetings?	4 3 2 1 0	Meetings include all critical professionals to ensure joined-up planning. Most key staff attend, though some roles are occasionally missing. Representation is inconsistent or lacks seniority. Important partners are often absent. Meetings occur with minimal or no relevant attendees.
Notes for improvement			
6g	The family of the young person has been included in meetings with professionals Have families been engaged to work with professionals?	4 3 2 1 0	Families are supported to attend and contribute meaningfully to planning meetings. Families are invited but may not be fully supported or engaged. Family involvement is inconsistent or limited to updates. Family participation is uncertain and ineffective. Families are excluded from planning processes.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
6i	All relevant agencies have actively participated in the child's care plan development and review. Is there shared ownership of safety planning to support the childs wider needs?	4 3 2 1 0	Care plans reflect shared ownership, with clear contributions from all relevant agencies. Some agencies contribute, but others are less engaged. Care plan largely developed by one lead agency. Collaboration in planning is minimal or superficial. No evidence of joint planning.
Notes for improvement			
6j	Agencies have collaborated to provide a coordinated response that the child has found helpful. What is the childs response to the agency collaboration?	4 3 2 1 0	The child reports that support is consistent, predictable, and well-coordinated across services. Some cohesion is felt, but inconsistencies exist. Support is disjointed, with mixed messages or duplication. The child feels unsupported or confused by the system. The child experiences fragmented or unhelpful services.
Notes for improvement			
6k	Each agency understands and executes its specific role in supporting the child. Were roles of the professionals made clear? Were professionals held accountable?	4 3 2 1 0	Roles are clearly defined and carried out efficiently, with no duplication or gaps. Most agencies understand their roles, though overlap or confusion sometimes occurs. Roles are unclear, leading to inefficiency. Some responsibilities are neglected or poorly executed. No clarity around agency roles.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
6l	Interagency collaboration has directly contributed to reducing the child's risk of further exploitation What are the tangible outcomes for this child?	4 3 2 1 0	Evidence shows risk has reduced due to coordinated interventions and disruption activity. Some risk reduction is evident, but link to collaboration is unclear. Risk remains high despite some multi-agency activity. Efforts have little measurable impact. No evidence of collaboration reducing risk.
Notes for improvement			
6m	Agencies have adapted their approaches based on shared information to better meet the child's needs. Has the collaboration between agencies been dynamic and responsive?	4 3 2 1 0	Shared intelligence leads to dynamic adjustments in practice across agencies. Some changes occur following shared information, but not consistently. Agencies are slow to adapt or rely on outdated plans. Practice is rigid and unresponsive. Information is not used to drive any change.
Notes for improvement			

Table 6 Interagency Collaboration

8.7 Data and evaluation (Table 7)

The effective collection, use, and evaluation of data is fundamental to delivering responsive and evidence-informed care. Data should not only document the child's journey but actively drive improvements in practice, helping agencies to better meet evolving needs, identify gaps, and refine interventions. Continuous evaluation ensures that services are not static but remain attuned to the child's changing circumstances, promoting safety, wellbeing, and long-

term positive outcomes. This section explores how data is gathered, shared, and used, and whether evaluation processes are meaningful, timely, and child-centred.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
7a	We have data and evaluation initiatives in place and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted: Do initiatives support accurate monitoring and assessment, and are they are driving improvements in practice and outcomes?	4 3 2 1 0	Comprehensive, well-embedded initiatives consistently guide effective practice. Mostly established and effective initiatives, with minor gaps. Some initiatives exist but lack consistency or focus. Limited initiatives that are rarely effective or targeted. No data or evaluation initiatives in place.
Notes for improvement			
7b	We regularly collect and review data on the child's progress and outcomes Is data collection been a standard practice? Is the data being collected helpful?	4 3 2 1 0	Data collection and review are systematic, frequent, and documented clearly. Regular data collection with some structured review, but occasional gaps. Data collected inconsistently or with limited review. ad hoc data collection, rarely reviewed. No data collection or review processes evident.
Notes for improvement			
7c	Data collection has helped identify areas where the child needs additional support. Has the data been useful at identifying individual needs?	4 3 2	Data analysis regularly leads to early identification of unmet needs and timely interventions. Data sometimes identifies needs but interventions may be delayed or inconsistent.

	Is the data being used effectively?	1	Data collected but rarely used to identify or address needs.
		0	Data collected but not analysed or used meaningfully.
			No evidence of data collection or use to identify additional support needs.
	Notes for improvement		
7d	We track the effectiveness of interventions in improving the child's safety and well-being. Were outcome-focused measures evaluated?	4	Clear evidence that interventions are regularly evaluated and linked to improved outcomes.
		3	Some evaluation of interventions with positive outcomes noted, but not consistent.
		2	Interventions tracked occasionally but without clear evidence of impact.
		1	Interventions implemented with little or no monitoring.
		0	No tracking or evaluation of intervention effectiveness.
	Notes for improvement		
7e	The child's case data has been used to inform decision-making and strategy adjustments. Were changes made to intervention data-driven?	4	Decisions consistently data-driven and responsive to real-time changes.
		3	Data informs some decisions but adjustments may be reactive or inconsistent.
		2	Limited use of data in decision-making.
		1	Decisions mostly anecdotal or assumption-based.
		0	No evidence of data-informed decision-making.
	Notes for improvement		

7f	The child's input is considered in the evaluation of their progress and the effectiveness of interventions. Has the child had an opportunity to offer their opinion?	4 3 2 1 0	Child's views routinely collected through structured methods and meaningfully used. Child input sought occasionally, some influence on evaluation or planning. Child's views rarely sought or only informally collected. Little or no consideration of child's input. No evidence of child involvement in evaluation.
Notes for improvement			
7g	Data from this case has been shared with partner agencies to improve overall outcomes. Has the data been shared with other agencies ?	4 3 2 1 0	Regular, appropriate data sharing with partners under clear protocols supporting joint work. Data shared but inconsistently or with some limitations. Occasional or informal data sharing without clear agreements. Rare or ineffective data sharing limiting joint working. No sharing of data with partners.
Notes for improvement			
7h	Data analysis has highlighted trends or changes in the child's situation that led to better interventions. Has the data from this case been used to inform ongoing intervention?	4 3 2 1 0	Proactive, ongoing analysis detects shifts early and informs timely interventions. Trends identified but sometimes too late or inconsistently acted upon. Limited analysis of data trends or reactive responses. Changes often unnoticed or addressed only after escalation. No analysis of trends or changes.
Notes for improvement			

Table 7 Data and evaluation

8.8 Continuous Learning (Table 8)

Continuous learning and reflection are critical components in ensuring that interventions are effective, responsive, and child-centred. This section explores whether agencies and individuals working with the child actively engage in learning from their experiences, adapt their approaches based on feedback, and adjust interventions to better meet the evolving needs of the child. The ability to reflect, incorporate lessons learned, and adapt care plans is central to achieving positive outcomes and ensuring that the support provided is both relevant and impactful.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
8a	We have learning initiatives in place and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted:	4	Comprehensive, well-embedded learning initiatives consistently guide effective practice.
		3	Mostly established and effective initiatives, with minor gaps.
		2	Some initiatives exist but lack consistency or clear focus.
		1	Limited learning initiatives that are rarely effective or targeted.
		0	No learning initiatives in place.
Notes for improvement			
8b	Individuals working with the child have adapted their approaches based on feedback from the child. Has the childs feedback been taken on to adapt approaches ?	4	Professionals actively seek and implement the child's input, adapting approaches to align with the child's needs.
		3	

	Are approaches tailored to the childs needs?	2	Child feedback is regularly considered and sometimes acted upon.
		1	Child feedback is occasionally sought but inconsistently applied.
		0	Child feedback is rarely sought or acted upon, limiting effectiveness of interventions.
			No evidence that child's feedback is sought or used.
Notes for improvement			
8c	We have used lessons learned from this case to adapt our practice and improve the child's outcomes. Have we learnt anything from this case which will amend our ongoing practice?	4	Reflections are systematically captured and applied to improve practice and develop new protocols or interventions.
		3	Some lessons are learned and occasionally applied to improve practice.
		2	Limited reflection on the case, with inconsistent application of lessons learned.
		1	Little or no reflection on the case or integration of lessons into practice.
		0	No evidence of learning from the case.
Notes for improvement			
8d	Changes in the child's circumstances have led to adjusted interventions and care plans. How quickly were adaptations made then the childs needs changed?	4	Care plans are dynamic and regularly updated in response to changing needs and new information.
		3	Care plans are updated sometimes but not consistently or comprehensively.
		2	Care plans are rarely adjusted despite changes in circumstances.
		1	Care plans remain rigid and unresponsive to evolving needs.
		0	

			No adjustments made to care plans despite changing circumstances.
Notes for improvement			
8e	Agencies involved have demonstrated flexibility and adaptability in responding to new information in the case. How well have agencies collaborated and adjust to new insights?	4 3 2 1 0	Agencies promptly adjust their approaches based on new information and case developments. Agencies adjust approaches occasionally, but not consistently or quickly. Agencies are slow to respond or adapt to new information. Agencies largely stick to pre-established plans despite new relevant information. No evidence of agency flexibility or adaptability.
Notes for improvement			
8f	We have adapted our interventions based on past successes and challenges in this case. Were any approaches used in this case learnt from previous experiences?	4 3 2 1 0	Successful strategies are built upon, and challenges are critically reviewed to improve future actions. Some adaptations are made based on past experiences, with mixed consistency. Limited reflection on successes or challenges, resulting in few adaptations. Past experiences are rarely reviewed or used to inform future interventions. No evidence of learning from past successes or challenges.
Notes for improvement			
8g	The child's outcomes have improved as a result of our	4	Clear improvements in wellbeing, safety, or engagement linked to targeted adjustments made during the case.

	learning and adaptation throughout the case. Has the child experienced positive changes directly linked to adaptive practice?	3 2 1 0	Some improvements noted, but impact of learning and adaptation is inconsistent. Little noticeable progress or improvement despite some learning efforts. No meaningful improvements evident as a result of learning and adaptation. Outcomes have worsened or remained static without benefit from learning.
Notes for improvement			
8h	We actively monitor progress and adjust our approaches to ensure that the child's needs continue to be met. Is there ongoing commitment to adjusting interventions as the child's needs evolve.	4 3 2 1 0	Strong, continuous monitoring with regular reviews and timely adjustments to interventions. Monitoring and adjustments occur but may be irregular or delayed. Sporadic monitoring with limited evidence of adaptation. Monitoring is minimal or absent, with interventions rarely adjusted. No monitoring or adjustment of approaches based on the child's needs.
Notes for improvement			

Table 8 Continuous Learning

Chapter 9: Multiagency Collaboration Framework User Guide

The framework for measuring multiagency working is designed to facilitate effective collaboration among professionals from various agencies involved in CCE cases. It focuses on the structural and operational aspects of collaboration including assessing communication pathways, shared decision-making processes and the alignment of agency priorities. It should be completed on a quarterly basis during a multiagency meeting or, alternatively, completed independently by professionals from each agency prior to the meeting which allows individual perspectives to be captured and then brought together for a comprehensive review. In either case, the quarterly meeting should collectively assess the success of joint working efforts, discuss specific cases, including case outcomes and barriers to collaboration, evaluate the effectiveness of shared strategies and identify areas where collaboration can be strengthened.

The framework follows the structure of the previous multi agency framework, including the same eight domains.

Each domain includes an audit exercise to enable Multi-Agency Forums to assess their practice, processes, and leadership against the eight key areas. Although the audit can be completed by a single agency to good effect to review its responses to CCE, the audit is best undertaken as a multi-agency exercise with partners working together to reflect and respond to the statements. We suggest you carry out the audit exercise to establish a baseline, from which scores can be combined to provide an overview of local practice. This audit provides 10 statements, in no particular order, against which a score between 0 and 4 should be given, as follows:

0 - Not at all/ never/ no evidence for this

1 - Very little/ very infrequently/ very little evidence for this
2 - To some extent/ sometimes/ some evidence for this
3 - To fair extent/ frequently/ good evidence of this
4 - Always/ to a great extent/ a wealth of extremely strong evidence for this

A single, preferably senior, person should be delegated responsibility on behalf of local safeguarding partners to coordinate completion of the audit tool. The statements are directly linked to research findings, require evidence to underpin each score, and are deliberately challenging and designed to stimulate debate. The audit exercise should be a catalyst for learning and improvement. If differences across agencies (for example in the quality of data recorded or the approaches to assessment, etc.) make it difficult to reach an agreed score, we suggest using the lower score. Statements that employ subjective terms such as 'high quality' or 'confident' may also highlight differences of opinion between professionals and again, we recommend applying the lower score and considering what action would be necessary for all groups to feel confident or assured of quality.

The scoring of the Multi-Agency Framework should be guided by the Audit Tool to ensure consistency and accuracy. This tool provides a standardised approach for evaluating collaboration, enabling professionals from different agencies to use a common, reliable, and comparable framework for assessment. The completion of the Multi-Agency Framework should take into consideration the scoring provided on the Child-Focused Frameworks completed in that quarter to ensure the progress, needs and outcomes identified in the child's individual assessments are reflected in the evaluation of multiagency efforts. This alignment helps to ensure that collaborative working is effectively supporting the child's development and addressing identified risks.

A framework scoring tool is provided to collate the findings into a radar graph. This will enable Multi-Agency Forums to focus efforts on the areas in need of most improvement. You can then use the examples and resources provided to draft an action plan that reflects local needs and priorities. The outcomes of the quarterly meeting should be disseminated among all participating agencies to ensure transparency and shared accountability. These outcomes can also serve as a foundation for action plans aimed at improving joint efforts, addressing gaps in service delivery, and fostering better communication across agencies. By establishing shared ideas on the success of their collaborative working and integrating the findings from the Child-Focused Frameworks, professionals can ensure that their collective efforts are both effective and responsive to the needs of children involved in CCE cases.

9.1 Prevention and Early Identification (Table 9)

To minimise instances of CCE, it is crucial to adopt a collaborative, uniform, and multi-agency strategy for deterrence. This approach should encompass support, interventions for offenders, and, notably, preventive measures. When addressing children and young individuals vulnerable to child criminal exploitation, the emphasis on prevention becomes especially significant. The theme of *Prevention and Early Identification* emerged as a critical factor in successfully addressing CCE, emphasising the importance of proactive and coordinated interventions before risks escalate.

Each statement in the table reflects a core principle of effective practice in this area. For instance, the inclusion of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention draws from a public health model, where primary prevention aims to stop exploitation before it begins (e.g., through community-wide education or public awareness campaigns), secondary prevention

focuses on vulnerable individuals at risk (e.g., providing early support for those identified as showing signs of exploitation), and tertiary prevention deals with those already exploited, aiming to reduce harm and prevent further victimisation (e.g., tailored recovery support for exploited young people). Scoring these areas encourages agencies to assess whether they are providing interventions at all these levels and whether there are any gaps in addressing the full spectrum of prevention.

For example:

- In primary prevention, an agency might consider whether there are community outreach programmes that educate parents, young people, and local businesses about the risks of CCE. A score of 4 could be given if there are comprehensive, regular workshops delivered in schools and community settings, with positive feedback from the community. If these sessions are occasional or not regularly evaluated, a score of 1 or 2 might be more appropriate.

- For secondary prevention, a practitioner might reflect on whether early-warning indicators (e.g., missing episodes, unexplained absences, change in peer group) are being consistently monitored and if appropriate interventions (e.g., mentoring, referrals to support services) are provided. A score of 3 might be given if early interventions are made but only when signs of exploitation are more apparent, whereas a 4 could reflect a practice where concerns are identified and addressed proactively as soon as the first signs of vulnerability are detected.

- Tertiary prevention may focus on the effectiveness of services for young people already affected by CCE. Agencies might consider if specialised recovery programmes are available that address both the psychological and social consequences of exploitation. A score of 4 could be awarded if these services are tailored to the individual and well-coordinated between agencies, while a 1 might indicate that recovery support is fragmented, inadequate or standardised in its delivery.

The Evidence to support the score given in the column encourages practitioners to back up their scores with specific, concrete examples (e.g., reports, meeting minutes, data on service uptake, young people's feedback), while the Notes for Improvement column provides space to highlight any areas where practice can be enhanced. This reflective approach ensures that

the table not only measures current practices but also promotes continuous improvement and the development of tailored interventions.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
9a	We have prevention initiatives in place, and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted: Primary prevention Secondary prevention Tertiary prevention		Primary prevention: Comprehensive, regular community outreach and education programs with positive community feedback. Secondary prevention: Early warning indicators consistently monitored and proactive early interventions implemented. Tertiary prevention: Well-coordinated, tailored recovery programs addressing psychological and social consequences of exploitation. Primary prevention: Outreach programs exist but are occasional or not regularly evaluated. Secondary prevention: Early interventions made mainly when exploitation signs become more obvious. Tertiary prevention: Recovery services are fragmented, inadequate, or standardised in delivery. No prevention initiatives evident or effectively targeted across these levels.
Notes for improvement			
9b	Educational facilities in this area provide education on criminal activity, vulnerability, and risk Does local school curricula included targeted lessons on criminal exploitation, risk factors, and how to seek help? Is this up to date?	4 3 2 1	Education on exploitation and risk is regularly integrated into the curriculum, supported by staff training, and positively evaluated by students. Education occurs occasionally but is not consistently embedded or systematically evaluated. Education sessions are sporadic or provided mainly in response to incidents.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
		0	Little or no education on these topics within local educational settings. No evidence of education on criminal exploitation or risk
Notes for improvement			
9c	Information is available to young people in the area for where to seek support Locally, are there clearly advertised helplines or youth-friendly websites that provide guidance on what to do if someone is concerned about CCE? Is this information accessible?	4 3 2 1 0	Young people have easy access to information via multiple formats (posters, websites, social media) and report knowing where to seek help. Information is available but not widely disseminated or not well known among young people. Information exists but is outdated, limited, or difficult to access. Information is rarely available or promoted to young people. No accessible information on support services for young people.
Notes for improvement			
9d	There are consistent thresholds amongst multiagency partners for assessing risk of exploitation Is there a standardised risk assessment tool used across all partners, and are these tools consistently applied and updated?	4 3 2 1 0	All partners use standardised risk assessment tools consistently, with regular cross-agency review and understanding among practitioners. Risk assessment tools are used but inconsistently applied or updated across agencies. Some agencies use different tools or thresholds, causing inconsistency. Risk thresholds vary significantly between agencies with communication delays or gaps. No consistent risk assessment criteria or thresholds across partners.

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	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
Notes for improvement			
9e	Young people been identified prior to risk being high. Are we identifying and engaging children early? Are we proactive in identifying vulnerable young people?	4 3 2 1 0	Young people are identified early, before risks escalate, and receive prompt, coordinated support from a key worker. Identification occurs with some delay, but initial contact is made and support provided. Identification happens late or is inconsistent, with limited initial engagement. Identification and initial contact are sporadic or ineffective. No early identification or initial engagement evident.
Notes for improvement			
9f	The young person has received contact from one member. Are key individuals being assigned to engage and build rapport with vulnerable children?	4 3 2 1 0	Young people are allocated and contacted by a key contact to liase with Young people are contact by one person but contact is delayed Contact to the young person is limited or lacking cohesion Initial contact is inefficient No Initial engagement
Notes for improvement			

Table 9 Prevention and Early Identification

9.2 Intelligence and Investigations (Table 10)

Table 10 evaluates the effectiveness of multi-agency collaboration in relation to intelligence-sharing and investigative practices aimed at tackling Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). The statements in this table were developed following research into existing practices and

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challenges within the sector, highlighting the importance of robust intelligence mechanisms and comprehensive investigative strategies. This section focuses on intelligence-gathering and investigation procedures that help identify patterns of exploitation, track links between individuals, and ensure that interventions are timely and targeted.

Each statement reflects a critical aspect of effective investigative work and intelligence-sharing in the context of CCE. Scoring these areas encourages practitioners to evaluate the availability of necessary tools, processes, and systems for identifying children at risk and ensuring that cross-agency intelligence is being used to inform timely interventions.

Each statement is followed by the Evidence to support this score column, where practitioners should document the concrete examples or data that led to the score they have assigned. This could include meeting notes, case files, feedback from key stakeholders, data about the number of intelligence reports filed, or specific cases of successful identification of linked vulnerable children. The Notes for Improvement column provides space to reflect on areas where improvements can be made, promoting a forward-looking approach. For instance, if agencies identify challenges with data-sharing, the Notes for Improvement section might suggest developing a more integrated case management system. Similarly, if links between vulnerable children are not consistently identified, the section could propose improved peer group monitoring or expanded use of social media monitoring tools.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
10a	We have intelligence and investigations initiatives in place, and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted	4	Intelligence gathering is coordinated through a dedicated multi-agency task force that meets regularly, shares updates, and acts quickly and effectively.
		3	

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	Have processes for gathering and sharing intelligence about young people at risk of CCE been established?		Intelligence systems are functional but may experience occasional delays or resource limitations affecting response scope.
		2	
			Intelligence gathering is sporadic or poorly coordinated, leading to fragmented communication and missed timely interventions.
		1	
			No developments have been made to improve intelligence sharing
		0	
			No structured intelligence initiatives or coordination evident.
Notes for improvement			
10b	We have easy ways to identify if any young person has been known to agencies for other reasons Can systems link new information easily with previous history? Is there a place to quickly and easily access information across agencies?	4	Agencies use a centralised database or integrated case management system enabling quick cross-referencing of information about young people's previous interactions with services.
		3	Agencies have a centralised system however this is not always used effectively
		2	Agencies have separate systems that are not fully integrated, requiring manual checks that cause occasional delays or missed connections.
		1	Professionals rely on case-by-case manual searches with frequent delays or incomplete information.
		0	No integrated systems exist, making it difficult to track young people's involvement with multiple agencies.
Notes for improvement			

10c	We have ways to identify any links to other vulnerable children	4	Formal systems are in place (e.g., social media monitoring, multi-agency risk assessments) to identify group vulnerabilities, peer networks, or family links.
		3	Some structured approaches exist, like informal info-sharing or occasional multi-agency meetings, but these are inconsistent.
		2	Links are mostly identified through manual reviews or ad hoc investigations, with some connections likely missed.
		1	Link identification is rare or inconsistent, often due to poor cross-agency communication or limited resources.
		0	No mechanisms exist to identify connections between vulnerable children.
Notes for improvement			

Table 10 Intelligence and Investigations

9.3 Prosecution and convictions (Table 11)

Katz, Shapiro, and Welty (2020) highlight the role of coordinated investigative efforts in identifying and prosecuting offenders involved in exploiting children for criminal purposes. Through collaborative endeavours, agencies can pool resources, expertise, and evidence, leading to more robust legal cases and successful convictions. This section examines whether agencies are identifying key offenders, making the connections to larger criminal networks, and securing convictions that deter future exploitation.

Each statement in the table addresses a different aspect of the prosecution process. Scoring these areas encourages agencies to evaluate whether their efforts in identifying offenders and

pursuing legal action are both timely and targeted. This section is essential for ensuring that the criminal justice system responds effectively to CCE, both in holding offenders accountable and disrupting criminal networks.

Each statement is followed by the Evidence to support this score column, where practitioners should document specific examples or data that led to their score. This could include case records, court outcomes, feedback from legal teams, or reports on the outcomes of investigations. The Notes for Improvement column allows agencies to reflect on areas where prosecution practices can be enhanced. For example, if key offenders have not been identified, the notes might suggest improving information-sharing between agencies or increasing the use of undercover operations or surveillance. If links to wider gangs are not fully established, the notes might recommend investing in more advanced intelligence-gathering techniques or strengthening collaboration with anti-gang units.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
11a	We have prosecution and conviction initiatives in place, and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted: Are there structured initiatives in place to pursue prosecutions for those responsible for exploiting children.	4	There is a dedicated legal task force or multi-agency partnership that coordinates efforts to build strong cases against offenders involved in exploitation, with regular reviews ensuring focus on key perpetrators.
		3	A dedicated team or informal partnership exists to support prosecution, but coordination is limited and reviews are infrequent
		2	Prosecution efforts exist but may occasionally lack coordination or experience delays due to resource constraints.
		1	Prosecution efforts are sporadic, underfunded, or insufficiently coordinated to target significant offenders effectively.
		0	

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
			No structured prosecution initiatives or coordinated efforts are evident.
Notes for improvement			
11b	**Key offenders exploiting children have been identified** Have we successfully identified key offenders in recent working? Are investigative teams successful in linking offenders to specific victims and have these offenders been targeted as part of broader criminal investigations?	4	Investigations have clearly identified specific offenders involved with the child, with documented evidence linking them and active pursuit for prosecution.
		3	Offenders have been identified and some cases have progressed, but few result in conviction due to evidential gaps or case-building challenges
		2	Identification of offenders is underway but not fully resolved due to challenges like evidence gathering or tracing networks.
		1	Key offenders remain unidentified or identification efforts are limited or ineffective, possibly due to poor inter-agency cooperation or investigative issues.
		0	No offender identification efforts are apparent.
Notes for improvement			
11c	**Links to wider members of gang have been identified** Have connections between individual offenders and wider gang or criminal networks that may be exploiting multiple children. Agencies should evaluate whether the investigation into a specific cases has uncovered links to a wider group of offenders, such as gang members,	4	Investigators have uncovered connections between offenders and wider criminal networks, enabling broader investigations targeting multiple perpetrators.
		3	Some links to wider networks have been identified, but further work is needed to understand the full scope.
		2	Initial signs of wider network involvement are emerging, but these are not yet being actively pursued or mapped.
		1	Investigations focus mainly on individual offenders without identifying links to broader gangs or criminal groups.

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	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	organised crime groups, or traffickers	0	No efforts to identify links to wider gangs or networks.
Notes for improvement			
11d	Conviction have been made against exploiters Have prosecutions lead to convictions ?	4	Several offenders involved in exploitation have been convicted and sentenced, with evidence these convictions have deterred others.
		3	Convictions have been secured in multiple cases, though impact on wider offender behavior is unclear
		2	Some convictions have been achieved, but they are limited or slowed by legal or evidentiary challenges.
		1	Few or no convictions have been obtained due to systemic barriers, insufficient evidence, or poor agency cooperation.
		0	No convictions have been made.
Notes for improvement			

Table 11 Prosecutions & Convictions

9.4 Victim Support and Community Engagement (Table 12)

The statements in this table focus on the extent to which agencies are working together to provide a comprehensive, holistic response to children's needs, including addressing harmful behaviours, developmental issues, and environmental factors. It also examines whether support services are tailored to the individual's needs and whether there is ongoing training to help professionals recognise risks and respond effectively.

Each statement in this section helps practitioners assess the quality of collaboration, the coordination of services, and the extent to which a multi-agency approach ensures that

children are provided with the support they need. This includes everything from education and mental health services to specialised support for those facing trauma, abuse, or learning difficulties. The goal is to ensure that agencies are not only identifying risks early but also intervening in a way that takes into account the whole child, their past experiences, and their future potential.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
12a	We have interagency collaboration initiatives in place, and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted: Do initiatives facilitate effective partnership working, are they are achieving positive outcomes for children	4 3 2 1 0	There are clear, well-coordinated multi-agency initiatives that effectively support children at risk of exploitation, with regular communication and shared goals. Collaboration exists but sometimes lacks consistency or is affected by resource or communication issues. Multi-agency collaboration is in place with agreed roles, but joint working is reactive and not consistently proactive or strategic Collaboration is sporadic, with limited joint working or coordination between agencies. No meaningful interagency collaboration initiatives are in place.
Notes for improvement			
12b	Assessments include a holistic view of the child or young person, including consideration of harmful behaviours, development, family, and environment. Are agencies gathering information to look at children's full needs and situation? Is the approach to working with children comprehensive?	4 3 2 1	Assessments consistently use a multi-disciplinary approach, addressing safety, family dynamics, mental health, and behaviour comprehensively. Assessments are somewhat comprehensive but occasionally miss input from relevant professionals or factors. Assessments involve multiple agencies and consider some wider factors, but integration across disciplines is limited or uneven

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
		0	Assessments are narrow in scope and do not fully consider the child's wider context. Assessments lack a holistic approach altogether.
Notes for improvement			
12c	There are shared definitions between agencies Is there common understanding around key terms and issues related to CCER ? Are all agencies aligned in their understanding and actions?	4 3 2 1 0	Agencies have clear, shared definitions of key terms related to exploitation and risk, applied consistently in assessments and interventions. Definitions are mostly aligned, though occasional inconsistencies lead to varied interpretations or practice. Some shared understanding exists, but differences between agencies often result in confusion or inconsistent responses. Definitions vary widely, with frequent misunderstandings that hinder effective multi-agency work. No shared definitions are in place, leading to fragmented or ineffective responses.
Notes for improvement			
12d	Information is being shared by parties involved with the child How effective is the information sharing amongst agencies? Are there key examples where information sharing has impacted the outcome for a child?	4 3 2 1	A strong, secure, and regular information-sharing culture exists, supported by integrated systems for timely access to relevant data. Information-sharing is generally consistent but occasionally delayed or incomplete due to system or process gaps. Some information-sharing takes place, but it is often fragmented, informal, or hindered by confidentiality concerns.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
		0	Information-sharing is rare, inconsistent, or limited by poor systems and lack of trust between agencies. No effective information-sharing practices are in place.
Notes for improvement			
12e	Additional agencies able to support young people have been identified Are additional services identified early? Are the additional agencies tailored to the needs of the child? Are professionals aware of additional agencies that can support young children?	4 3 2 1 0	Agencies have strong awareness of support services and coordinate timely, appropriate referrals across mental health, education, and social care. Agencies are generally aware of support options, though delays or uncertainty sometimes affect referral timeliness. Awareness of support services is inconsistent, leading to occasional delays or gaps in referrals. Support services are poorly understood or unclear to most agencies, causing frequent delays or missed referrals. No clear identification or coordination of support services takes place.
Notes for improvement			
12f	Alternative provisions have been identified for young people Are alternative educational or care provisions being considered for you children? Are alternative provision being considered to benefit children?	4 3 2	Alternative education, care, or support provisions tailored to the child's needs have been identified and are accessible. Alternative provisions exist and are sometimes linked to the child's needs but not consistently. Some alternative provisions have been identified, though they are limited or not well matched to the child's needs.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
		1	Few alternative provisions are identified, with minimal consideration of the child's specific needs.
		0	No consideration or identification of alternative provisions has taken place.
Notes for improvement			
12g	Children have been reintroduced to education/ or an alternative educational programme Where appropriate have professionals supported young people back into educational facilities? Is the individual need being considered when looking to reintegrate into education?	4	Successful reintegration into education, specialist programs, or alternatives occurs, with ongoing support provided.
		3	Education engagement exists but faces challenges or delays in full reintegration.
		2	Efforts to support reintegration into education are underway but not yet successful.
		1	Reintegration into education has not been achieved.
		0	No efforts to support reintegration into education are evident
Notes for improvement			
12h	Support is tailored to young person's developmental needs Are the services provided responsive to the children's unique stage of development?	4	Support services provide targeted, developmentally appropriate interventions addressing the child's specific needs.
		3	Support is mostly tailored to developmental needs but may lack full responsiveness or consistency.
		2	Support shows some consideration of developmental factors but is limited or inconsistent.
		1	Support does not adequately address developmental needs.
		0	

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
			No tailored developmental support is provided.
Notes for improvement			
12i	Support is offered for presenting problems and broad issues in the child or young person's early experience (unresolved trauma, experiences of abuse, family issues) Is the support being provided to young people empowering them?	4 3 2 1 0	Interventions comprehensively address both immediate concerns and underlying trauma or family difficulties. Some broader issues are considered in interventions, though inconsistently or superficially. Interventions primarily focus on immediate problems, with limited attention to underlying factors. Interventions do not address underlying or broader issues. No interventions targeting either immediate or underlying issues are evident.
Notes for improvement			
12j	Support is strengths based and helps the child to understand their own behaviours Is the support agencies are providing enabling young people to reflect on their actions and build coping strategies?	4 3 2 1 0	Support empowers reflection on behaviour, builds coping skills, and fosters resilience. Some strengths-based elements are included, though inconsistently or partially. Support is mainly directive or problem-focused, with little emphasis on strengths or behaviour understanding. Support lacks a strengths-based approach. No strengths-based support is provided.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
12k	Support is accessible and available for individuals with learning disabilities and SEN Have children with additional needs been identified and therefore provided with appropriate resources and interventions	4	Services are inclusive and consistently tailored to meet the needs of children with learning disabilities and SEN.
		3	Some accessible and tailored support exists, though it may be inconsistent or limited.
		2	Support for learning disabilities and SEN is insufficient or poorly coordinated.
		1	Support for learning disabilities and SEN is largely unavailable or ineffective.
		0	No appropriate support for learning disabilities or SEN is provided.
Notes for improvement			

Table 12 Victim Support and Community Engagement

9.5 Adaptable Responses (Table 13)

Research identifies that CCE victims may be involved in complex and varies circumstances and therefore cannot be addressed by an inflexible framework and interventions need to be person centred. Table 13 evaluates the adaptability of responses to children at risk of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). The statements focus on whether agencies are providing personalised and flexible support to meet the unique needs of each young person, and whether those interventions can be adjusted as the child's situation changes. It also examines the degree to which young people are actively involved in the process, with their views being sought and integrated into the development of their support plans. The effectiveness of these responses is crucial for ensuring that interventions are timely, appropriate, and tailored to the child's evolving needs.

Each statement is followed by the Evidence to support this score column, where practitioners are asked to provide concrete examples or data that led to their score. This could include case records, feedback from the child and family, or documentation of meetings where the child's views were discussed. In the Notes for Improvement section, agencies can reflect on areas where the process can be improved. For instance, if the child is not consistently consulted, the notes might suggest adopting structured feedback mechanisms such as regular surveys, child-friendly consultation tools, or increasing the frequency of one-on-one meetings with the key worker.

The purpose of Table 13: Adaptable Responses is to assess whether the services provided to children at risk of CCE are responsive, individualised, and flexible enough to meet their changing needs. The table encourages practitioners to reflect on the extent to which support is personalised and tailored to the specific circumstances of each child, and whether the child's voice is integrated into the process. By scoring each statement and documenting evidence and improvements, agencies can ensure that they are providing effective, child-centered interventions that evolve alongside the young person's journey, providing the best possible support at each stage

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
13a	We have Adaptable Reponses in place, and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted:	4	Adaptable responses are well-established, timely, and clearly tailored to each child's changing needs; agencies work collaboratively and adjust support flexibly as circumstances evolve.
		3	Adaptable responses exist but may not be consistently applied or fully responsive to all changes in the child's situation.
		2	

		1	Adaptable responses are limited or reactive rather than proactive and flexible.
		0	Little evidence of adaptable responses; support tends to be rigid or one-size-fits-all.

No adaptable responses in place. |
| Notes for improvement | | | |
| 13b | Individual needs of the child are identified

Are agencies taking a child-centered approach by thoroughly identifying and understanding the unique needs of the young person | 4 | Comprehensive, multi-disciplinary assessments consistently identify all relevant individual needs; support plans are personalised and regularly updated. |
		3	Needs assessments are generally good but sometimes lack depth, regular updates, or full professional involvement.
		2	Needs assessments are superficial or inconsistent, missing key areas impacting the child's vulnerability or well-being.
		1	Individual needs are poorly identified or mostly overlooked.
		0	No needs assessment conducted.
Notes for improvement			
13c	Decision-making processes allows for quick adaptation to urgent changes in cases.

How effective is decision-making across agencies, including the ability to coordinate, adapt plans swiftly, and maintain clear communication to ensure timely and appropriate actions. | 4 | Decision-making processes are agile, allowing rapid and effective adaptation to urgent changes in cases. |
		3	Adaptation to urgent changes is generally timely, though occasional delays or procedural barriers exist.
		2	Some flexibility exists, but responses to urgent changes are often slowed by unclear processes or coordination issues.
		1	

| | | 0 | Decision-making is rigid or slow, making timely responses to urgent changes difficult.

No processes are in place to adapt decision-making in response to urgent changes. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Notes for improvement | | | |
| 13d | Interventions incorporate feedback from the child and their family to adjust our response.

To what extent is feedback from the child and their family actively used to shape and adapt the multi-agency response in a timely and meaningful way | 4

3

2

1

0 | The child is regularly consulted through methods that suit them; their views actively shape support plans and decisions.

The child is sometimes consulted but with limited opportunities or partial integration of their views.

The child is rarely consulted or their input is seldom considered.

The child's views are not sought or ignored.

No consultation with the child. |
| Notes for improvement | | | |
| 13e | Our agency consistently adapts interventions to meet the specific needs of children involved in CCE.

How effectively are agencies tailoring the interventions to respond to the individual circumstances, risks, and evolving needs of children affected by child criminal exploitation | 4

3

2

1

0 | Interventions are consistently adapted to meet the specific and evolving needs of children affected by CCE.

Interventions are often tailored, though not always fully responsive to individual or changing needs.

Some attempts are made to adapt interventions, but they are limited or inconsistently applied.

Interventions are mostly standardised, with little adaptation to individual CCE-related needs.

No adaptation of interventions to meet the needs of children involved in CCE is evident. |

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Notes for improvement			
13f	There is a formal process in place for regularly reviewing and adjusting case plans based on new information. How well does this process ensure that case plans remain current, responsive, and aligned with the child's changing needs and circumstances?	4	A formal process is in place for regularly reviewing and updating case plans in response to new information or changes in circumstances.
		3	Case plans are reviewed and adjusted periodically, though the process may lack consistency or timeliness.
		2	Reviews of case plans occur occasionally, but they are informal or not clearly linked to new information.
		1	Case plans are rarely reviewed or adjusted, even when new information emerges.
		0	No process exists for reviewing or adjusting case plans based on new information.
Notes for improvement			

Table 13 Adaptable Responses

9.6 Interagency Collaboration (Table 14)

Establishing an interagency framework that outlines the procedures for referral, assessment, intervention, and case management is a crucial component for efficiently handling CCE cases. This collaborative approach is essential for addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of CCE which requires a coordinated response from multiple agencies and organisations. Addressing CCE is not the exclusive domain of any one agency, when agencies work in isolation, the likelihood of duplicated efforts, missed opportunities for sharing information, and a failure to recognise the value of contributions from other agencies leading to a blame culture. This situation can lead to "territorial" practices, with some authorities

having established policies while others follow a more *ad hoc* approach. The latter hinders the fair and consistent sharing of skills, knowledge, and ideas, reducing the likelihood of appropriate responses for the young person and their family. In the absence of a statutory framework, much work relies on the (variable) goodwill and commitment of individual professionals.

Integrating policies within existing values, knowledge and good practice frameworks is essential to demystify the work, reduce fear and anxiety around intervention and enable practitioners to understand the issues and the processes more clearly and be more open to addressing the "problem." To better collaborate, systems and organisations need clarity on risk, responsibility and their respective roles and tasks. The historical lack of clarity on these has led to varying levels of resource allocation and commitment between agencies and geographic areas. Data sharing and joint evaluations establish a shared understanding of the problem, foster collaboration among various stakeholders, allow for more effective coordination of responses and maximise the impact of interventions. Wood (2017) emphasises interagency collaboration's role in leveraging resources, expertise, and information to achieve common goals. Regular meetings among representatives from different systems and multi-disciplinary training are essential to promote multi-agency collaboration, create a common language and understanding and foster mutual appreciation for each other's roles. Training should involve key disciplines, including social workers, health workers (e.g., CAMHS staff, GPs, health visitors, and school nurses), youth offending team workers, child and adolescent mental health professionals, education professionals, residential staff, and foster carers, tailored to the local context and relevant to individuals' work.

The statements examine whether the agencies involved are working together in a coordinated, consistent, and child-centered manner. It evaluates whether there is a shared understanding of the young person's needs, regular communication between involved parties, and whether agencies are providing complementary support to ensure the child receives the best possible care and protection.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
14a	We have interagency collaboration initiatives in place, and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted:	4	Strong, consistent interagency collaboration is embedded in practice, with clearly defined roles, shared goals, and evidence of joint decision-making and action.
		3	Collaboration is in place and often effective, but may not always include all relevant partners or be sustained over time.
		2	Collaboration exists but is limited, inconsistent, or informal, impacting effectiveness.
		1	Little evidence of interagency collaboration or coordination.
		0	No interagency collaboration in place.
Notes for improvement			
14b	Assessments include a holistic view of the child or young person, including consideration of harmful behaviours, development, family, and environment. How thoroughly does the assessment process capture the full range	4	Multi-disciplinary assessments consistently take into account the full range of influences on the child's life, including behaviour, development, family, and environment.
		3	Assessments are generally good but may lack contributions from some professionals or omit certain contextual factors.
		2	Assessments are narrow or incomplete, missing key aspects of the child's circumstances.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	of factors influencing the child's situation, and how well is this understanding used to inform support and intervention?	1 0	Holistic assessment is poor or absent. No holistic assessment conducted.
Notes for improvement			
14c	Information sharing between agencies is consistent, timely, and secure. How effectively do agencies share information to ensure collaboration while maintaining confidentiality and meeting urgent needs?	4 3 2 1 0	Information is shared regularly and systematically among all relevant agencies, ensuring decisions are well-informed and timely. Information is shared but with occasional delays or inconsistencies. Information sharing is fragmented or infrequent, causing gaps in knowledge. Agencies are not sharing information effectively. No information sharing is evident.
Notes for improvement			
14d	Agencies able to support children are identified Are relevant agencies recognised and engaged to provide the necessary support for children's needs?	4 3 2 1 0	All relevant services have been identified and are engaged in supporting the young person with clear roles and responsibilities. Most relevant services are identified but engagement may be delayed or inconsistent. Some key services are missing or not engaged effectively. Few or no relevant services identified. No services identified or engaged.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
14e	Agencies are receiving regular updates regarding individuals How consistently and effectively are agencies kept informed to ensure coordinated and timely support for individuals	4 3 2 1 0	Regular updates from all involved agencies are shared through structured meetings or systems, ensuring coordinated and responsive care. Updates occur but may not always be timely or cover all relevant areas. Updates are sporadic or incomplete, leading to potential service gaps. Agencies are often working with outdated or incomplete information. No regular updates shared among agencies.
Notes for improvement			
14f	All agencies participate in regular multi-agency meetings to discuss CCE cases. Are all agencies actively and effectively engaging in these meetings to share information, coordinate actions, and improve outcomes for children	4 3 2 1 0	All relevant professionals attend meetings consistently, contributing to holistic and informed planning. Most key individuals attend, but participation may be inconsistent or incomplete. Important representatives are often missing, limiting the effectiveness of discussions. Limited or poor attendance from key agencies. No key individuals attend meetings.
Notes for improvement			
14g	Families of young people have been included in meetings with professionals what extent are families actively involved in these meetings, ensuring	4 3 2	Families regularly involved in meetings, and their views are sought and reflected in the child's support plan. Families are sometimes involved, but this may be inconsistent or limited to specific agencies. Family involvement is rare.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	their voices are heard and their perspectives shape the support provided?	1 0	The family is excluded from the process. No family involvement at all.
Notes for improvement			

Table 14 Interagency Collaboration

9.7 Data and evaluation (Table 15)

Previous studies by Sherman et al. (1997) emphasise the importance of rigorous evaluation methodologies in assessing the impact of crime prevention strategies. By systematically collecting and analysing data on aspects such as the demographics of victims, types of exploitation, and interventions employed, agencies can gain valuable insights into the dynamics of criminal exploitation and the efficacy of collaborative efforts.

Exploitation is a developing crime whereby the means in which offenders recruit and use victims is constantly changing robust data collection and evaluation mechanisms facilitate the identification of trends and patterns in criminal exploitation cases, enabling agencies to tailor their strategies accordingly. Research by Humphreys and Thiara (2003) highlights the significance of data in identifying gaps in services and barriers to accessing support for victims of exploitation. By analysing data, agencies can pinpoint areas of need and develop targeted interventions to address specific challenges faced by victims. This data-driven approach enhances the responsiveness and effectiveness of multiagency initiatives in safeguarding vulnerable individuals from exploitation.

Additionally, data and evaluation initiatives promote accountability and transparency in multiagency work. Lum, Koper, and Telep (2011) stress the importance of transparent reporting of data and evaluation findings to stakeholders, including the public, funders, and policymakers. By providing evidence of the effectiveness of interventions and the use of resources, agencies can demonstrate accountability for their actions and decisions. This transparency ensures that resources are allocated efficiently to address the root causes of criminal exploitation.

This table emphasises the need for systematic approaches to gather and analyse data on CCE cases, as well as using this data to evaluate the impact of interventions and to guide decision-making. It also stresses the importance of using evidence to inform strategic planning, ensure that resources are used efficiently, and adjust services to better meet the needs of vulnerable young people.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
15a	We have data and evaluation initiatives in place, and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted:	4	Strong, well-embedded data and evaluation processes guide our understanding and strategic response to CCE.
		3	Data and evaluation are present but may not always be systematically used or consistently applied across the agency.
		2	Data and evaluation efforts exist but are inconsistent, limited in scope, or poorly coordinated.
		1	Minimal data or evaluation processes in place, with little impact on planning or decision-making.
		0	No data or evaluation efforts in place.
Notes for improvement			

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
15b	We collect comprehensive data on CCE cases, including demographic and outcome data How thoroughly is data gathered and used to inform understanding, monitor progress, and improve responses to CCE cases?	4 3 2 1 0	Detailed and consistent data is collected on all cases, including demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status) and outcome measures (e.g., changes in risk, successful interventions). Data is collected regularly but may lack some detail or consistency. Data collection is incomplete, with significant gaps or irregularities. Very limited data is collected, affecting the ability to evaluate trends or interventions. No relevant data is collected.
Notes for improvement			
15c	Agencies have a systematic process for evaluating the impact of our interventions How consistently and effectively is this process used to assess outcomes and inform improvements in practice?	4 3 2 1 0	Evaluation is built into practice, with regular reviews of intervention outcomes using structured tools and feedback mechanisms. Some evaluation takes place, but it may be inconsistent or focused on selected cases or interventions. Evaluation processes exist but are informal or rarely used. Very limited or ad-hoc evaluation, with no clear process. No evaluation process in place.
Notes for improvement			
15d	Outcome data has been used to improve service provision and resource allocation How effectively is outcome data analysed and applied to	4 3	Data is regularly analysed and used to inform changes in services, target interventions, and allocate resources effectively.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	enhance services and ensure resources are directed where they are most needed?	2	Data is sometimes used for decision-making, but its influence may be limited or delayed.
		1	Outcome data is collected but rarely used to drive improvements.
		0	Data use is minimal or disconnected from service planning.
			Outcome data is not used in any decision-making process.
Notes for improvement			
15e	Evaluation processes are integrated into our agency's ongoing work on CCE.

Are evaluation activities embedded in routine practice to continuously inform and improve our approach to CCE | 4 | Evaluation is part of the agency's routine work, with regular collection and analysis of data informing ongoing practice. |
		3	Evaluation takes place but may not be consistently integrated or sustained across all work areas.
		2	Evaluation is occasional or reactive, rather than planned and continuous.
		1	Little evidence of evaluation being built into routine work.
		0	Evaluation is not integrated at all.
Notes for improvement			
15f	Data has been used identify emerging trends and inform strategy adjustments.

Is data analysed and applied to detect patterns and guide timely updates to strategy | 4 | Data analysis is routinely conducted to identify new patterns in CCE and adjust strategies accordingly. |
		3	Trends are sometimes identified, but changes in strategy are reactive or delayed.
		2	Trend analysis happens occasionally but is not linked to strategic decisions.
		1	Little use of data to identify or act on trends.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
		0	Data is not used to inform strategic direction.
Notes for improvement			
15g	Regular data reviews lead to informed decision-making and strategic planning Do data reviews contribute to making well-informed decisions and shaping effective strategies?	4 3 2 1 0	Data is reviewed regularly and used to shape strategic plans, improve interventions, and guide policy. Data reviews occur but do not always lead to action or strategy changes. Data is reviewed infrequently, with minimal impact on decision-making. Reviews are rare or informal, with no link to planning. No regular data review process in place.
Notes for improvement			

Table 15 Data & Evaluation

9.8 Continuous Learning (Table 16)

In the past decade, our understanding of young people involved in CCE has significantly advanced. However, there is still a lack of a comprehensive strategy or guidance to advance interventions in a coordinated manner. Children and young people presenting with CCE often have multiple and complex needs. Changing their behaviour and safeguarding children and young people requires the involvement of multiple agencies and effective risk management necessitates this is collaborative.

This table explores the theme of continuous learning, whether organisations are open to reflective practice, actively learning from experience, staying up to date with emerging research, and making use of feedback loops to inform and improve service delivery. In the fast-evolving landscape of CCE, where exploitative tactics and the risks young people face are constantly changing, maintaining a strong commitment to learning is essential to ensure responses remain relevant, evidence-informed, and child-centred. Ensuring that agencies evolve with the evolving trends of CCE.

The section also addresses ongoing interagency training and multi-disciplinary training for professionals. Regular training ensures that professionals are equipped with the knowledge to identify risk, respond appropriately, and engage with children who may be facing multiple vulnerabilities.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
16a	We have learning initiatives in place and we are confident that these are effective and appropriately targeted:	4 3 2 1 0	Comprehensive learning structures are embedded across agencies, with clear links to improved outcomes. Learning initiatives are present but may vary in focus or reach. Learning is encouraged but happens inconsistently or lacks coordination. Few structured learning initiatives in place. No effective learning systems or strategies in place.
Notes for improvement			
16b	We have mechanisms in place for learning from case reviews and audits.	4	Case reviews and audits are routinely conducted, with learning documented and applied to improve practice.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	Do agencies have formal systems to extract learning from both internal and multi-agency reviews of CCE cases?	3	Reviews occur regularly, but follow-up or application of learning may be inconsistent.
		2	Case reviews happen occasionally but are not systematically used to drive learning.
		1	Learning from reviews is rare or superficial.
		0	No clear process exists for learning from case reviews or audits.
Notes for improvement			
16d	Continuous professional development on CCE is encouraged for all agencies

How actively are agencies supported and motivated to engage in ongoing learning to enhance their knowledge and skills on CCE? | 4 | Ongoing, high-quality CPD is routinely available across agencies, reflecting the evolving nature of CCE. |
		3	CPD is available but may lack consistency in delivery or accessibility.
		2	Professional development is sporadic or not clearly linked to current challenges in CCE.
		1	Little access to relevant CPD.
		0	No professional development related to CCE is in place.
Notes for improvement			
16e	Feedback from frontline staff is used to refine our approaches to CCE.

Is input from frontline staff gathered and incorporated to improve practices and interventions related to CCE | 4 | Frontline feedback is actively sought, documented, and used to shape practices and policies. |
		3	Some mechanisms exist for gathering feedback, but use in decision-making may be inconsistent.
		2	Feedback is occasionally collected but rarely used meaningfully.
		1	Very limited opportunities for staff input.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
		0	No system for using staff feedback in practice improvement.
Notes for improvement			
16f	Our policies are regularly reviewed and updated based on emerging trends. Are policies evaluated and revised to reflect new insights and changing circumstances?	4 3 2 1 0	Policies are consistently reviewed and updated using data, reviews, staff feedback, and current research. Policy review happens but may lag behind emerging issues or be inconsistently applied. Policies are reviewed infrequently, and not clearly tied to evidence or trends. Policies are outdated or do not reflect current CCE risks. No routine review of policies occurs.
Notes for improvement			
16g	We encourage cross-agency learning to improve outcomes for exploited children. How actively do agencies share knowledge and best practices to enhance collaboration and support for exploited children?	4 3 2 1 0	Agencies regularly engage in joint learning, shared training, and collaborative forums. Cross-agency learning occurs occasionally but is not embedded. Limited shared learning between agencies. A siloed approach is dominant, with few opportunities to learn from others. No cross-agency learning occurs.
Notes for improvement			
16h	Practices have been developed based on new research and evidence	4 3	Agencies routinely use new research to guide practice development. Research is considered but may not consistently influence practice.

	Statement	Score	Evidence to support this score
	How well are agencies incorporating up-to-date knowledge into their practices	2	Some attention to evidence, but uptake is inconsistent or unclear.
		1	Practice is largely uninformed by research or current evidence.
		0	No connection between practice and research evidence.
Notes for improvement			

Table 16 Continuous Learning

Chapter 10: Operationalising the Frameworks: Implementation, Scenarios and Barriers

The proposed frameworks are intended to support more coherent, relational, and child-centred multi-agency responses to CCE. This section provides a practical analysis of how the framework could be implemented across key sectors, with illustrative case scenarios to demonstrate application in practice. It also reflects on barriers to implementation, drawing on both field evidence and practitioner discourse.

10.1 Embedding the Framework in Sector Pathways

For the framework to have a meaningful and sustained impact on practice, it must be embedded not only through policy and procedure, but through a fundamental shift in organisational culture and inter-agency collaboration. Central to this process should be the establishment of a dedicated multi-agency CCE team, composed of professionals from across statutory and voluntary sectors. Evidence from multi-agency safeguarding models suggests that dedicated, co-located teams improve communication, reduce duplication, and enhance outcomes for vulnerable children by fostering a shared ethos and collective responsibility (HM Government, 2023; Holmes et al., 2019). This team would act as a hub for the framework's implementation, ensuring consistency in practice, shared learning, and mutual accountability across sectors.

Ultimately, the successful embedding of the framework will depend on strong leadership at every level, a willingness to challenge entrenched practices, and a commitment to centring the voices and experiences of children. Evaluation methods must extend beyond service-level metrics to include participatory feedback from young people, ensuring that the framework is

not only operationalised effectively, but remains grounded in the realities of those it aims to serve.

10.1.1 Social Services

In social care, the framework would guide caseworkers to assess both *procedural adequacy* (e.g. timeliness of referrals, adherence to safeguarding thresholds) and *relational dynamics* (e.g. quality of child engagement, continuity of contact). Key indicators would include:

- Presence of trusted adult relationships.

- Use of trauma-informed, non-punitive language in assessments.

- Consistency of engagement plans across agencies.

Implementation Example: The framework could be embedded into a local authority's case review cycle. For example, alongside existing safeguarding checklists, social workers would complete a "relational audit" of their contact with the child reflecting on engagement history, moments of rupture or breakthrough, and the child's expressed views on safety. This audit would form part of multi-agency planning, ensuring *how* support is delivered is as central as *what* support is offered.

10.1.2 Policing

For police, the framework would help reorient safeguarding responses away from solely risk-led or enforcement models. Indicators for police might include:

- Evidence of engagement with the child as a victim rather than offender.
- Disruption tactics that minimise further trauma (e.g. debriefing young people post-incident).
- Interagency information sharing that prioritises welfare, not just intelligence.

Implementation Example: A young person seen frequenting known drug houses is stopped and found with a burner phone and cash. Under the framework, the officer's report would include not just evidence collected but contextual observations (e.g. fear responses, coercion indicators). A joint strategy meeting would then review both enforcement and support options. Police leads would be scored not on arrest metrics, but on their use of welfare-first safeguarding tools, such as referring the young person to a local youth mentor.

10.1.2 Education

Schools can apply the framework to shift away from reactive exclusion policies toward preventative relational safeguarding. Key indicators could include:

- The number of proactive early help interventions made before considering exclusion.
- Student-reported trust in pastoral staff or safeguarding leads.
- Integration of CCE awareness into curriculum or wellbeing provision.

Implementation Example: A pupil repeatedly arrives late, disengaged and visibly anxious. Rather than escalating through behaviour points, the school uses the framework's relational flags to trigger a staff-led reflective meeting. A learning mentor consults with both the young person and voluntary sector contacts, leading to a support plan that includes in-school counselling and protected mentoring time. The child remains engaged, and school exclusion is avoided.

10.2 Success and Failure Case Scenarios

To demonstrate how the framework may shape outcomes, this section outlines two contrasting case scenarios.

10.2.1 Success Scenario – Integrated, Relational Intervention

Context: A 15-year-old girl (Leila) is referred to social care after being found in a car with older men known to police.

Application:

- The framework prompts early multi-agency collaboration, including the girl's school, a local VCS worker she trusts, and police.
- A trauma-informed meeting is held with Leila where she is not asked to repeat her story multiple times.
- The VCS lead is given formal status within the safeguarding team, ensuring consistency and relational depth.
- A contextual safeguarding plan is developed with her involvement, mapping peer influence and unsafe areas.

Outcome: Leila remains in school, builds a trusting relationship with the youth worker, and disclosures follow. A prevention order is issued against the adult males. The success is attributed to relational consistency, non-criminalising language, and multi-agency trust all core elements of the framework.

10.2.2 Failure Scenario – Procedural but Disconnected Response

Context: A 14-year-old boy (Tyrese) is excluded after being caught with cannabis and suspected of "running" for a local gang.

Application:

- The school follows behavioural policy and excludes Tyrese without engaging his keyworker or checking recent social care updates.
- Police intervene, but treat Tyrese as an offender, focusing on intelligence-gathering.
- Voluntary sector staff who have built a relationship with Tyrese are not invited to the MASH strategy meeting.

Outcome: Tyrese disengages entirely from services. Within weeks, he is hospitalised after being attacked in a suspected turf dispute. The safeguarding review later identifies

breakdowns in communication, exclusionary practice, and failure to apply a trauma lens elements that the framework explicitly aims to prevent.

10.3 Anticipated Barriers to Framework Adoption

Although the proposed framework has the potential to improve outcomes for children affected by CCE and CSE, its adoption may be hindered by several structural and cultural barriers. One of the most prominent challenges is resistance to cultural change within statutory services. Organisational cultures in sectors such as social care and policing often prioritise procedural compliance and risk management over relational practice. Frontline professionals are frequently incentivised to focus on evidencing risk and safeguarding thresholds, rather than building meaningful, trust-based relationships with children and families (Featherstone et al., 2014). This emphasis on performance indicators and accountability metrics can undermine the relational ethos that underpins the framework.

Resource constraints represent another major impediment. Schools, children's services, and VCS organisations consistently report limited staffing and high caseloads, which reduce the feasibility of time-intensive relational work. Without protected time or additional investment, reflective practice and relationship-building can be perceived as impractical or even indulgent within high-pressure environments (Munro, 2011). These pressures are exacerbated by austerity measures and ongoing workforce shortages, both of which have led to a narrowing of professional discretion and a more transactional approach to support.

In addition, issues related to information governance frequently inhibit collaborative working. Voluntary sector practitioners, who often have the most consistent and trusting relationships

with children at risk of exploitation, are commonly excluded from strategic and operational decision-making due to restrictive data-sharing protocols and their lack of formal authority within safeguarding structures (Lloyd & Firmin, 2020). This exclusion limits the holistic understanding of a child's experience and can result in fragmented or inconsistent interventions.

Finally, the absence of robust accountability structures poses a challenge to the framework's adoption. In the absence of policy mandates or inspection requirements, relational indicators may be viewed as "soft" outcomes and deprioritised in favour of more easily measurable targets. This risks relegating relational practice to the periphery of safeguarding work, dependent on individual champions rather than embedded organisational commitment. To mitigate these challenges, it is essential that implementation strategies explicitly address these barriers and are underpinned by both policy support and structural mechanisms for accountability.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

11.1 Achieving the Research Aims

This thesis has explored the complexities of CCE as an entrenched, multifaceted issue demanding urgent attention from policymakers, practitioners, and society. It has focused specifically on the role of multi-agency collaboration in addressing CCE and understanding the barriers that hinder effective partnerships, identifying what success looks like in multi-agency responses and proposing a practical framework for improving and measuring collaborative efforts. Drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives and employing qualitative research methods, this research aimed to bridge the gap between policy intentions and the realities faced by those working to protect vulnerable children. From the outset, it was driven by a recognition of the challenges in addressing CCE including the lack of a statutory definition leading to inconsistencies in how cases are identified, understood and managed; the covert nature of CCE, which makes it difficult to detect and respond to, structural factors that exacerbate children's vulnerability, including socio-economic deprivation, school exclusion and systemic failings including the absence of trauma-informed approaches within and across agencies. These challenges are compounded by the fragmented nature of responses, where differing priorities, a lack of communication and limited resources often undermine the best intentions of those on the front line.

In conducting this exploration, the research addressed three aims:

A1: To establish the context of multi-agency responses to CCE in Gloucestershire

The study began by situating CCE within its broader historical and societal context, demonstrating how the exploitation of children has evolved over time and longstanding

safeguarding failures that have allowed exploitation to persist in various forms. It then

examined contemporary trends, including the mechanisms through which organised crime

groups exploit children in operations such as county lines, grooming processes, the role of

technology and the systemic vulnerabilities that perpetrators exploit. Factors such as socio-

economic deprivation, school exclusion, and family dysfunction were identified as critical

drivers of vulnerability, creating fertile ground for exploitation. The research also explored the

impact of these factors on the child, emphasising the importance of recognising their

intersectionality in tailoring effective responses. Further, this thesis examined the operational

realities of the agencies tasked with responding to CCE, highlighting the structural and

systemic challenges they face. Through interviews and policy analysis, the research

illuminated how resource constraints, inconsistent training, and differing priorities among

agencies often hinder effective collaboration. These findings provided a crucial backdrop for

understanding why multi-agency working is both necessary and challenging, setting the stage

for the subsequent objectives.

A2: To understand professionals' perceptions of success

This thesis adopted a qualitative approach to explore the diverse and often conflicting

definitions of success, effective multi-agency working and organisational imperatives.

Through interviews with frontline professionals and strategic decision-makers, the study found

that perceptions of success are shaped by a variety of factors, including organisational goals,

personal values, and the constraints of the systems within which they operate. For some,

success was defined in terms of measurable outcomes, such as the number of disrupted

county lines or the successful prosecution of offenders whereas for others, success was more

nuanced, encompassing qualitative dimensions such as improved trust between agencies,

the development of child-centred safeguarding practices or the long-term rehabilitation of

exploited children. The tensions between these differing perceptions of success were also highlighted, for instance, CJS agencies often prioritise the disruption of criminal networks, while social services focus on the welfare and recovery of the child. This divergence can lead to conflicts in decision-making and resource allocation, underscoring the need for a shared understanding of success in multi-agency working.

The thesis demonstrates that traditional metrics, such as case closures or referral rates, are insufficient for capturing the complexity of CCE and responses to it. Success must also be measured in terms of relational and systemic factors, such as the quality of communication between agencies, the integration of trauma-informed practices and the extent to which children's voices are heard and acted upon. By synthesising these insights, the research provided a more holistic understanding of what success looks like in the context of CCE, paving the way for the development of a new framework.

A3 - To Develop a Comprehensive Framework for Assessing Impact and Success

Building on the findings of the first two objectives, this thesis proposes two distinct but interrelated frameworks for assessing success in responses to CCE designed to address the limitations of existing evaluation methods and offer a comprehensive and complementary approach to measuring success in multi-agency working and in terms of outcomes for the child. The frameworks were developed through an iterative process, combining insights from the literature, policy analysis and empirical data. It is designed to be flexible and adaptable, allowing practitioners to tailor its application to the specific contexts in which they work. One framework is specifically designed to measure success from the perspective of the child, ensuring that their experiences, safety, and long-term well-being remain central to all

interventions. Child-Centred Outcomes ensure that the framework recognises that the

ultimate aim of multi-agency working is to safeguard and support children and young people.

Key criteria include:

- The extent to which children feel safe, supported, and empowered throughout the intervention process.

- The degree to which interventions address the child's immediate needs and long-term recovery.

- The incorporation of children's perspectives into decision-making and service design.

- The reduction of stigma and criminalisation experienced by exploited children.

This focus on child-centred outcomes aligns with trauma-informed and rights-based

approaches, ensuring that responses to CCE prioritise the well-being and agency of children.

The second framework evaluates the operational and systemic dimensions of collaboration,

recognising that effective partnership working is fundamental to safeguarding children and

preventing exploitation. Together, these frameworks are intended to be used in conjunction,

creating a holistic tool that balances organisational objectives with the needs and rights of

children. This framework focuses on the operational and relational aspects of multi-agency

ollaboration. It includes criteria such as:

- The quality of communication and information-sharing between agencies.
- The consistency of training and understanding of CCE across sectors.
- The ability to build and maintain trust among professionals from different disciplines.
- The presence of clear leadership and accountability structures to guide collaborative efforts.

By prioritising these factors, the framework recognises that effective collaboration is a

prerequisite for achieving positive outcomes for children. It also acknowledges the importance

of addressing systemic barriers, such as resource constraints and organisational silos, to enhance the overall efficacy of responses.

The strength of these frameworks lies in their interconnection. While the first framework ensures meaningful and measurable improvements in the child's life, the second ensures that systemic aspects of multi-agency working are effective. Together, they provide a balanced and holistic tool for evaluation, allowing practitioners and policymakers to assess both the efficacy of collaborative processes and the impact of these processes on the children they aim to protect. By adopting these dual frameworks, agencies can identify areas for improvement in their internal practices while ensuring that their interventions remain firmly grounded in the best interests of the child. This approach not only enhances accountability and transparency but also fosters a culture of continuous learning and adaptation in the face of evolving challenges.

11.2 Significance of the Thesis & Contribution to knowledge

Through achieving the three research aims, this thesis makes contributions to both the theoretical understanding and practical response to CCE. By establishing the context of CCE, exploring diverse perceptions of success, and developing a framework for evaluation, this research not only deepens understanding of the issue but also provides actionable solutions to enhance multi-agency working.

This thesis stands out for adopting a comprehensive approach to understanding CCE and the need for more cohesive responses. Integration of multiple theoretical frameworks provides a rich lens through which to examine the structural, gendered, and societal dimensions of exploitation and underscores the importance of viewing CCE not just as a series of isolated incidents, but as the product of wider socio-economic inequalities and systemic failings. The voices of frontline professionals as a central pillar of this research offers invaluable insights into the lived realities of collaboration, barriers, and innovative practices. Foregrounding these experiences provides a grounded understanding of what is working, what is not, and why. Tackling CCE is not simply a matter of improving policy or enhancing individual agency practices; it requires a cultural shift in how agencies work together, prioritise children's needs and share responsibility for safeguarding. Perhaps most critically, this research moves beyond critique to propose a practical, adaptable framework for measuring success in multi-agency working. This dual framework accounts for both the individual outcomes that matter most to the children who experience CCE and the systemic dimensions of collaboration, such as communication, trust, and accountability. In addition to the frameworks, this thesis provides practical recommendations for improving multi-agency collaboration (see below) to bridge the gap between policy and practice, empowering professionals to deliver more effective and compassionate care. By offering actionable trauma-informed, child-centred solutions, this thesis aspires to contribute to meaningful change and help create a future where children are not just protected from exploitation but empowered to rebuild their lives and reach their full potential.

11.4 Concluding Comments

This research has highlighted that there are significant challenges and controversies in dealing with CCE in England and Wales at the local level. The continued criminal exploitation of children and young people remains it requires a national response in the form of policy, legislation, and operational practice. This research recognises that drug dealing, and drug abuse have become entrenched in our society. However, CCE in county lines is not about that, it is a dangerous world of exploitation, violence and coercion that is severely impacting the youth of today and thereby both their and our future. The results of this research show that identifying and responding to CCE needs to be everyone's responsibility, not just that of the police or the statutory and non-statutory organisations. It is a societal problem that requires a societal response.

11.5 Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings and the theoretical frameworks developed, the following recommendations are proposed to inform future multi-agency practice and systemic change.

11.5.1 Recommendations for the Police

11.5.1.a: Mandatory, trauma-informed professional development for Police officers should be introduced covering:

i. adopting a child-first, safeguarding-led approach that positions children as victims rather than offenders, moves away from deficit-based narratives that frame exploited children as "gang members" or "criminals" and prioritises protective interventions that build trust and avoid criminalisation.

ii. the specific dynamics of CCE encompassing covert grooming strategies, including the manipulation of digital platforms, early indicators of exploitation, and the role of

intersectional vulnerabilities such as race, gender identity, neurodivergence, disability, and immigration status in increasing a child's risk of exploitation. Sessions should be co-developed with CCE survivors to ensure that the content is relatable, grounded in lived experience, and culturally competent.

iii. Ongoing refresher modules should be implemented to ensure training keeps pace with legislative changes and evolving tactics of exploitation.

11.5.1.b: Trauma-Informed Practice should be institutionalised across all police departments, especially those that interact with children, with an emphasis on reducing re-traumatisation during police procedures (e.g. stop-and-search, interviews, custody). This training must go beyond theory to include understanding behavioural expressions of trauma, use of calming strategies during interactions, creating environments of psychological safety for children who have experienced exploitation and embedding trauma-informed practice throughout operational policies, frontline practices, and officer supervision. Training must include practical application through case studies, scenario-based learning, and role-play exercises that help professionals understand the neurobiological and behavioural impacts of trauma on children. Frameworks should be co-developed with trauma experts and individuals with lived experience to enhance cultural relevance and ensure alignment with children's realities.

11.5.1.c: Restorative justice principles should be systematically integrated into policing responses to CCE. Officers should be encouraged to signpost to or facilitate (where safe and appropriate) restorative practices such as victim-offender conferencing, family group conferencing, or restorative circles. These approaches should aim to support the recovery of the child, rebuild community trust, and hold exploiters accountable in a way that centres the child's needs, voice, and sense of justice.

11.5.1.d: Policing responses to CCE must move to a proactive, prevention-oriented approach. Rather than a reactive model which often only intervenes once harm has escalated, a proactive approach means engaging with schools, communities, and families to build trust and gather intelligence, actively identifying children at risk before exploitation occurs, and intervening early through multi-agency partnerships. Officers should be resourced

and incentivised to participate in multi-agency early help initiatives, with performance measures that reward prevention outcomes rather than solely enforcement metrics.

11.5.1.e: Guidance on how to work collaboratively with other agencies should be provided to Officers to ensure that children are diverted into support systems rather than punitive pathways.

11.5.2 Recommendations for Multi-Agency Practice

11.5.2.a: A statutory framework should be introduced to standardise and enforce inter-agency information-sharing protocols in CCE cases. This framework must clarify the legal parameters for sharing data between professionals, address concerns about consent and confidentiality, and mandate the prioritisation of child welfare over institutional risk aversion. It should be accompanied by national guidance that includes case study examples, ethical safeguards, and practitioner toolkits to promote consistent and confident practice.

11.5.2.b: MASHs must be resourced with sufficient staffing, training, and technological infrastructure to enable real-time, cross-sector information-sharing and decision-making. Interoperable digital systems must be implemented to allow seamless data access across social care, health, education, and policing. Funding should be ring-fenced to support ongoing training in digital literacy, child protection law, and trauma-informed assessment to ensure all partners are equipped to contribute effectively.

11.5.2.c: All multi-agency teams should be required to adopt Trauma-Informed Practice (TIP) as a shared operating framework. This includes the joint use of validated trauma screening tools, shared training on trauma recovery, and collaborative safeguarding plans rooted in relational and restorative practice. Agencies must develop cross-sector protocols for identifying trauma symptoms, tailoring interventions accordingly, and supporting children through consistent, compassionate, and predictable responses.

11.5.2.d: Reflective supervision should be embedded across all agencies working with children at risk of or affected by CCE. These supervision models should be relational, structured, and prioritise practitioner wellbeing and allow for emotional processing, critical reflection, and skill development. Evidence shows that reflective spaces help reduce burnout,

strengthen trauma-sensitive engagement, and improve decision-making in high-stakes safeguarding contexts. Multi-agency supervision forums would provide reflective spaces where cases can be explored not solely in terms of outcomes, but through the lens of relationship quality and the child's lived experience. These spaces would encourage shared responsibility, reduce the risk of siloed working, and support the professional development of staff by creating opportunities for critical reflection and peer learning.

11.5.2.e: The dual-framework model developed in this study integrating both professional and child-centred metrics of success should be adopted nationally to evaluate multi-agency responses to CCE. This approach balances traditional indicators (e.g., case resolution, service access) with relational and experiential measures such as the child's sense of safety, agency, and trust in professionals. Evaluation should be iterative and participatory, involving children, families, and frontline practitioners in shaping what "success" looks like.

11.5.2.f: Mandatory training across all relevant professional domains on embedding the framework. This would ensure that all practitioners develop a shared language and understanding of relational safeguarding. Additionally, the integration of the framework's relational indicators into local authority audits, inspection frameworks, and strategic needs assessments would help institutionalise its principles and demonstrate their relevance to service effectiveness and child protection outcomes.

11.5.2.g: Mandatory training programs across all youth sectors which cover TIP principles, recognition of trauma symptoms and skills to engage with trauma-affected individuals in ways that minimise re-traumatisation (Howard League for Penal Reform 2021; Choi 2015). Such training could be integrated into existing professional development frameworks, ensuring that trauma-informed responses are embedded in everyday interactions and decision-making processes. Training must include practical application through case studies, scenario-based learning, and role-play exercises that help professionals understand the neurobiological and behavioural impacts of trauma on children. Frameworks should be co-developed with trauma experts and individuals with lived experience to enhance cultural relevance and ensure alignment with children's realities.

11.5.2.h: Mandatory TIP protocols with MASPs when addressing cases of exploitation or abuse, including the use of TIP screening tools and embedding Restorative Justice approaches focusing on rehabilitation and healing are needed.

11.5.3 Recommendations for National Development

11.5.3.a: Introduce a National CCE Safeguarding Strategy, mandating data-sharing agreements across police, social services, and education providers to improve inter-agency collaboration. The Hackney Contextual Safeguarding model, which integrates place-based risk assessments and multi-agency intervention panels, provides an effective blueprint for enhancing inter-agency responses to exploitation (Firmin, 2020).

11.5.3.b: Establish an Independent CCE Commissioner/ or dedicated officer under the children's commissioner to provide oversight, accountability, and national coordination to ensure that multi-agency safeguarding duties are effectively implemented across all local authorities.

11.5.3.c: Integrate TIP into all national child protection and criminal justice training frameworks as a foundational, not optional, component. TIP should be codified in statutory guidance to ensure consistent application across all sectors. Training must include practical application through case studies, scenario-based learning, and role-play exercises that help professionals understand the neurobiological and behavioural impacts of trauma on children. Frameworks should be co-developed with trauma experts and individuals with lived experience to enhance cultural relevance and ensure alignment with children's realities.

11.5.3.d: Embed a public health approach to tackling CCE within national safeguarding strategies and this should be resourced accordingly. This model should shift the policy focus from reactive responses to early intervention by addressing upstream structural determinants such as poverty, housing instability, school exclusion, community disinvestment, and mental health inequality. National guidance should support local authorities in implementing multi-tiered prevention models, drawing on evidence from initiatives such as the Glasgow Violence Reduction Unit, and include targets for reducing environmental risk factors that contribute to exploitation.

11.5.3.e: Have experts-by-experience as mandated partners in the design, delivery, and evaluation of training and intervention programmes related to CCE across all statutory sectors. Survivors of exploitation should be supported to contribute to national initiatives in ways that are ethical, trauma-informed, and sustainable and compensated for their work. Guidance should be developed to safeguard contributors while ensuring their voices inform systems change, fostering more credible, context-sensitive, and engaging learning experiences for professionals.

11.5.3.f: National leadership must drive a cultural shift from reactive to preventative safeguarding responses, underpinned by sustained investment in early help and community resilience infrastructure. This includes expanding access to youth work, family support services, mentoring schemes, and trusted adult programmes. Such investments must be framed not as optional extras but as core public health strategies to prevent harm before it occurs. Government should lead public awareness campaigns that reframe societal understanding of CCE, challenge stigma, and promote child-centred narratives.

11.5.3.g: Statutory agencies must adopt and be held accountable for embedding TIP approaches already exemplified by leading VCS sector organisations. This includes reframing children's behaviour as potential indicators of unmet needs and trauma, implementing relational engagement strategies, and reducing reliance on punitive or compliance-based models. National inspectorates should include TIP implementation as a key performance indicator, and professional bodies should incorporate TIP principles into accreditation and licensing standards to ensure systemic, rather than discretionary, adoption.

11.5.3.h: National frameworks must recognise and respond to the individual differences and diverse experiences of each child affected by exploitation. Safeguarding strategies should move away from one-size-fits-all models and instead adopt flexible, needs-led approaches that account for variation in children's backgrounds, identities, and developmental trajectories. This includes understanding how factors such as neurodiversity, trauma history, cultural context, family dynamics, and experiences of racism or discrimination shape a child's vulnerability, behaviour, and support needs. Training, assessments, and interventions should be tailored accordingly, with professionals equipped to recognise that no two children experience exploitation in the same way.

11.5.3.i: Ensure a multi-pronged UK legal and policy strategy to CCE that ensures definitional consistency across agencies, strengthens multi-agency collaboration and balances prioritisation of safeguarding and prosecution. By drawing on international best practices, including models from Sweden, Portugal, and Canada, the UK could develop a more robust, child-centred framework that prioritises protection, prevention, and legal accountability in responses to CCE. Central to this would be to establish a clearer statutory definition of CCE to aid victim identification and application of legal protections. Strengthened statutory duties for multi-agency cooperation and improving data-sharing mechanisms would enhance early intervention and safeguarding and reform of the youth justice system would ensure children coerced into criminal activity are recognised as victims rather than offenders.

11.5.4 Recommendations for Research

11.5.4.a: Children and young people with lived experience of exploitation as co-researchers where ethically appropriate based on a participatory, rights-based research

approach. Research institutions must develop ethical frameworks and practical toolkits to safely support youth co-researchers, including safeguarding plans, debriefing processes, and capacity-building resources. Funding bodies should prioritise and incentivise participatory methodologies in future grant calls.

11.5.4.b: Examine the protective factors and resilience mechanisms that prevent exploitation among children living in high-risk environments. This includes longitudinal and comparative studies exploring the roles of trusted adult relationships, peer networks, school inclusion, community belonging, and internal coping strategies. Findings should inform upstream intervention design and provide evidence for preventative policy initiatives that shift the focus from deficit to strength-based models of safeguarding.

11.5.4.c: Urgent research into the exploitation of children below the age of criminal responsibility is needed, including the methods by which organised criminal groups recruit and control very young children. This population is currently under-recognised in statutory frameworks despite their extreme vulnerability and strategic use by offenders. Research must inform child-centred safeguarding responses tailored to the cognitive, emotional, and communicative development of children under 10, and should contribute to policy debates around reforming the age of criminal responsibility to reflect the complexities of coercion and victimhood.

11.5.4.d: Robust, multi-year studies to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of trauma-informed and public health approaches in reducing the incidence and impact of CCE should be conducted. Research should measure outcomes such as children's safety, mental health recovery, relational trust with professionals, and re-engagement with education and community life. Methodologies must be interdisciplinary and include mixed methods to capture both quantitative trends and rich, qualitative insights from children, families, and practitioners.

11.5.4.e:. Translated research findings on CCE into national and local policy, with clear mechanisms for knowledge mobilisation. This includes using evidence to revise safeguarding protocols, inform national guidance on the age of criminal responsibility, and embed a more child-centred understanding of victimhood in criminal justice settings. Policymakers should be required to consult current research findings when developing statutory instruments and to work in partnership with academic institutions to ensure evidence-based practice becomes the norm rather than the exception.

11.5.4.f:. The dual-framework model developed in this PhD should be expanded into a typology of success and failure to provide a more detailed and actionable guide for evaluating multi-agency responses to CCE. This typology should categorise responses along key relational, procedural, and outcome-based dimensions and highlight both enabling and obstructive systemic factors. Success indicators might include: child-reported improvements in safety and trust, sustained engagement with services, reduced

criminalisation, and consistent application of trauma-informed principles. Conversely, failure typologies might identify patterns such as misrecognition of victimhood, fragmented inter-agency working, racialised or deficit-based narratives, and re-traumatisation through professional contact. This typology should be co-produced with frontline professionals, children with lived experience, and researchers to ensure its relevance and applicability across practice contexts.

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13. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Ethics Approval

Dear Angharrad,

Thank you for your application for ethical approval.

I am pleased to confirm ethical clearance for your research following ethical review by the University of Gloucestershire's Research Ethics Committee (REC).

Please keep a record of this letter as a confirmation of your ethical approval.

Project Title:	Evaluating multi-agency working of CCE cases (PHASE 1)
Start Date:	07 July 2022
Projected Completion Date:	30 January 2023
REC Approval Code:	▮▮▮▮▮

Appendix 2 - Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Researcher: Angharad Davies MSc. BSc. E: ██████████████████████

Title of Study: Evaluating multi-agency working of CCE cases (PHASE 1)

Dear participant,

I am a PhD researcher at the University of Gloucestershire. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. The study is voluntary, and you will only be included if you provide your permission.

The purpose of the study is to evaluate the impact of multi-agency working on tackling Child Criminal Exploitation. This research focuses on developing a strategy for impact and success evaluation for the new CCE work.

The intent of the study is to publish the research in the hope of highlighting the need of more research in to CCE. The intent of this research is to provide CCE team with a framework in which success and impact can be measured when tackling CCE cases in Gloucestershire.

I would like to invite you to take part in an interview with a duration of one hour. The interview will be audio recorded for the purposes of the researcher to transcribe and analyse the content.
All data will be securely held on a password protected computer and secured premises. Audio tape recordings will be destroyed after completion of the study. Interview transcripts will be held if the researcher requires to further analyse for future research projects for a maximum of 5 years. Participants will receive full anonymity and will not be made identifiable in the study. Participants will receive an individual ID number. Participants will receive a copy of the transcriptions should they so wish.
. If you would like further information on the study then you can contact the studies supervisory team Dr Louise Livesey E: llivesey@glos.ac.uk . **This research has received ethical approval from the University of Gloucestershire's research committee, If there are any concerns regarding the ethics please contact Br Robin Bown, Acting REC Chair rbown@glos.ac.uk**

Should you wish to later withdraw from this study, you must email the researcher stating your individual ID number and explaining your choice to withdraw. Withdrawing from this study must be done within 2 weeks following the completion of the interview. This is to enable the researcher time to remove your data before data analysis commences.

If you would like to participate in this study, please read and sign the informed consent form.

Many thanks

Angharad Davies MSc. BSc.

Appendix 3 – Consent form.

Informed Consent Form

Title: Evaluating multi-agency working of CCE cases (PHASE 1)

Researcher: Angharad Davies MSc. BSc.

I have read and understood the information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions and can ask further questions at any point.
Please Circle: **Yes   No**

I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the information sheet and can refuse to answer any question.
Please Circle: **Yes   No**

I agree to the researcher observing me working within the CCE team.

Please Circle: **Yes   No**

I agree for this interview to be tape recorded and for it to be used for this study and then destroyed.
Please Circle: **Yes   No**

I agree that extracts from the interview in which I will not be identified can be used for presenting research findings, academic publication, conference presentation or future research projects.
Please Circle: **Yes   No**

Would you like to receive a copy of the interview transcription via post or email?
Please Circle: **Yes   Post**
                    Yes   Email
            No

I agree to take part in this interview.

_____

Name of participant

Signature

Appendix 4 – Debrief form.

Debrief Form

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking time to participate in this study.

The purpose of this study is to develop an evaluation and impact framework for the new CCE work. Drawing on academic literature and professional experience and opinions to understand what is known about effective and proportionate impact evaluation strategies, has supported in the development of an evaluation and impact framework for the new CCE work.

Should you want further information about the study then you can contact the studies supervisory team Dr Louise Livesey E: llivesey@glos.ac.uk

This research has received ethical approval from the University of Gloucestershire's research committee, If there are any concerns regarding the ethics please contact Br Robin Bown, Acting REC Chair rbown@glos.ac.uk

Should you wish to later withdraw from this study, you must email the researcher stating your individual ID number and explaining your choice to withdraw. Withdrawing from this study must be done within 2 weeks following the completion of the interview. This is to enable the researcher time to remove your data before data analysis commences.

If you feel any psychological impact from the research conducted, please utilise the below contact details to receive support.

Mind-01452 245338

The Samaritans- 116 123

OneYou- 01454 868583

Appendix 5 Interview Questions.

Interview Questions

1. What is your understanding of CCE?

2. Can you explain what success means to you when dealing with a CCE case?

3. Can you explain a what a successful outcome would be when working on a CCE case?

4. How many cases can you identify that you believe to have been successful?
   a. What made this case successful?
   b. Are there other measures which would have made this more successful?

5. What would you say is an example of a case not being successful?

6. What do you think would increase success in working on CCE cases?

7. What, in your opinion, are the difficulties of ensuring success in CCE cases?

8. What advice would you give to professionals working on CCE cases- how can multi agency collaboration be improved for CCE cases?