

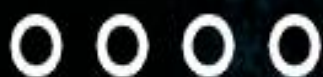
May 2026

A FRAGMENTED SYSTEM

Responding to **Sexual Exploitation**
Across Childhood and Adulthood

Findings from a National Practitioner Consultation

Debra Cowey



May 2026

Debra Cowey
Sexual

The Intent of This Report

This report has been developed to provide insight into how safeguarding systems currently identify and respond to sexual exploitation affecting both children and adults. It aims to bring together frontline practitioner perspectives to better understand current strengths, barriers and gaps in responses across services.

The report is intended to support reflection, learning and improvement across safeguarding sectors by highlighting opportunities for earlier identification, stronger multi-agency coordination and more consistent protection across the life course.

It also seeks to contribute constructively to wider national discussions on how systems can respond more effectively to sexual exploitation in all its forms.

This report was produced collaboratively by

Coloured Hearts CIC and B-Equipt Ltd, two organisations founded and directed by Debra Cowey.

Coloured Hearts CIC

A community interest company focused on improving responses to exploitation, vulnerability and systemic disadvantage through awareness, advocacy, education and reform.

B-Equipt Ltd

A specialist consultancy providing expertise in safeguarding, sexual exploitation, trauma-informed practice, workforce development and systemic improvement.

Together, both organisations are committed to strengthening professional responses, influencing policy and improving outcomes for



Debra Cowey

Sexual Exploitation & Systemic Reform Specialist
Founder & Director, Coloured Hearts CIC and B-Equipt Ltd



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Executive Summary

While there continues to be significant national attention on historical cases of child sexual exploitation across the UK, less focus has been placed on how safeguarding systems currently identify and respond to sexual exploitation in practice. This consultation was undertaken to explore how professionals working across both children's and adult services experience current responses to sexual exploitation, and whether existing systems are effectively recognising and responding to exploitation today.

Practitioner Voice

“Once they are adults, they are seen as making ‘unwise choices’ rather than being exploited.”

Sexual exploitation remains a complex safeguarding issue affecting both children and adults. While substantial attention has focused on Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), less is understood about how systems respond across the wider life course, particularly as individuals transition into adulthood.

To explore current responses, a national practitioner consultation gathered 30 responses from professionals working across safeguarding, advocacy, policing, health, housing and voluntary-sector services. More than half of respondents reported over ten years of professional experience, indicating that the findings reflect the perspectives of highly experienced practitioners.

Findings suggest that exploitation is frequently identified late within current systems. Only 10% of practitioners reported being very confident that exploitation is recognised before crisis or disclosure, suggesting that responses often occur after significant harm has already taken place.

Practitioners also highlighted concerns regarding the transition from child protection to adult safeguarding. 53.3% of respondents reported that adults experiencing sexual exploitation are not adequately protected, describing a marked reduction in structured safeguarding responses once individuals reach legal adulthood.

Patterns of repeat victimisation were widely reported, with 90% of practitioners indicating that those they support experience repeated or cyclical exploitation, and 66.7% stating they encounter this frequently. Responses linked this pattern to intersecting vulnerabilities including homelessness, substance misuse, domestic abuse, mental ill-health and trauma linked to earlier abuse.

Across responses, practitioners described systems that are often reactive rather than preventative, with thresholds, fragmented pathways and limited specialist expertise creating barriers to early identification and coordinated intervention. They also emphasised that responses to exploitation frequently require input from multiple sectors, reinforcing the need for coordinated multi-agency approaches rather than reliance on any single safeguarding system.

Taken together, the findings highlight the need for stronger systemic approaches across both child and adult safeguarding frameworks. Practitioner responses indicate that improving outcomes will require:

- Earlier identification of exploitation
- Stronger multi-agency coordination
- Greater continuity of support across age thresholds
- Specialist expertise to recognise exploitation patterns
- More consistent responses across childhood and adulthood

This consultation provides valuable insight into frontline practitioner experience and contributes to ongoing discussions about how safeguarding systems can more effectively identify and respond to sexual exploitation across the life course.

Summary of Key Practitioner Findings

10% - Very confident exploitation identified early	53.3% - Adults not adequately protected
90% - Repeat exploitation reported	73% - Lack of understanding and training identified as key barriers
60% - Referrals are sometimes rejected	83.3 – Supported specialist exploitation roles

Introduction

For the purposes of this report, the term *safeguarding systems* refers to the wider, multi-agency network responsible for identifying and responding to exploitation. This includes statutory safeguarding services, policing, health services, housing providers, advocacy services and voluntary-sector organisations.

“Despite all the talk of dealing with violence against women and girls, as soon as they turn 18, I don’t feel anyone works actively to stop sexual exploitation. We’ll deal with cases where a clear-cut sexual offence has taken place. Nothing is done to prevent sexual exploitation of adults.”

— Anonymous Practitioner

While there remains a significant national focus on historical cases of child sexual exploitation across the UK, less attention has been given to how safeguarding systems currently respond to sexual exploitation in practice. This practitioner consultation was developed to explore how both children’s and adult services identify and respond to sexual exploitation today. By gathering insight from professionals working across safeguarding, advocacy, policing, health and community services, this consultation seeks to understand whether current systems are effectively recognising and responding to sexual exploitation across the life course.

Sexual exploitation presents complex challenges for safeguarding systems. It often involves patterns of coercion, grooming, manipulation and control that can be difficult to identify within traditional safeguarding frameworks. Victims may not immediately recognise exploitation, may not disclose abuse, or may be perceived as making choices that obscure underlying coercion.

Over the past decade, significant policy attention has focused on Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), leading to the development of safeguarding strategies, disruption approaches and specialist services in many areas. However, comparatively less attention has been given to how systems respond when exploitation affects adults or when young people experiencing exploitation transition into adulthood.

Practitioners working with victims and survivors frequently navigate complex situations where exploitation intersects with other vulnerabilities, including homelessness, substance misuse, domestic abuse and mental health challenges. These overlapping factors can complicate safeguarding responses and create barriers to consistent protection and support.

Despite growing recognition of the complexity of exploitation, questions remain regarding how effectively current systems identify exploitation at an early stage, how safeguarding responses operate across the transition to adulthood, and whether existing service structures provide sufficient continuity of support for victims and survivors.

This consultation, therefore, sought to capture the perspectives of frontline practitioners working across safeguarding and support services. By gathering insight from professionals across multiple sectors, the consultation aims to contribute to a better understanding of how sexual exploitation is currently recognised and addressed within safeguarding systems, and where practitioners perceive gaps in current responses.

Methodology

This practitioner consultation was conducted to gather insight from professionals working across safeguarding and support services who have experience of responding to sexual exploitation.

The consultation was delivered through an online survey and was open to practitioners working across sectors, including safeguarding and social care, policing, advocacy services, health, housing and voluntary-sector organisations.

The survey was conducted between December 2025 and March 2026 and gathered a total of 30 responses from professionals with direct or indirect experience of supporting victims and survivors of sexual exploitation.

The consultation included a mixture of structured and open-ended questions, allowing practitioners to provide both quantitative responses and qualitative reflections on their experiences working within current safeguarding systems.

Questions explored several key areas, including practitioner confidence in early identification of exploitation, perceptions of safeguarding responses across different age groups, experiences of repeat victimisation, and views on gaps within current service structures.

Responses were analysed to identify common themes and patterns within practitioner experiences, and response percentages were calculated for key questions.

The findings presented in this report reflect practitioner perspectives and are intended to provide insight into frontline experiences of how sexual exploitation is currently identified and addressed within safeguarding systems.

Key Findings

1. Confidence in Early Identification of Exploitation

Early identification of sexual exploitation is widely recognised as critical in preventing harm and enabling timely safeguarding intervention. However, practitioner responses suggest that current systems may struggle to consistently identify exploitation before situations escalate.

These responses suggest that exploitation may often be recognised only once situations have escalated, disclosures have occurred, or harm has already become visible within safeguarding systems.

This finding reflects practitioners' concerns that safeguarding responses are frequently reactive rather than preventative, with interventions often triggered by crisis indicators rather than by early identification of exploitation patterns.

Qualitative responses from practitioners suggest that several factors contribute to challenges in early identification, including:

- Safeguarding thresholds that delay intervention
- Fragmented service pathways across agencies
- Limited specialist expertise in identifying exploitation patterns
- Reliance on victim disclosure before action is taken

Practitioners described situations where exploitation may remain hidden within broader vulnerabilities, such as homelessness, substance misuse, or domestic abuse, making early recognition particularly complex.

Taken together, these responses suggest that while safeguarding systems are designed to protect individuals at risk, **the identification of sexual exploitation often occurs later in the harm cycle**, limiting opportunities for earlier disruption and preventative intervention.

When asked how confident they were that **current systems identify exploitation before crisis or disclosure.**

- **10%** of respondents reported being very confident in early identification.
- **40%** reported being somewhat confident in early identification.
- **50%** reported neutral or low confidence, indicating uncertainty about whether exploitation is consistently identified at an early stage.

2. Perceived Reduction in Protection Across Adulthood

Safeguarding responses to sexual exploitation are often framed around the transition from child protection to adult safeguarding at the age of 18. However, practitioner responses suggest that reductions in protective responses continue beyond this point.

When asked whether individuals who have experienced sexual exploitation are adequately protected once they transition from child safeguarding into adult services, **over half of respondents (53.3%) reported that adults experiencing sexual exploitation are not adequately protected within current safeguarding systems.**

When asked whether current systems effectively protect different age groups from sexual exploitation more broadly, respondents reported significantly stronger confidence in protections for children and younger adolescents than for adults.

While many practitioners identified the transition at **18** as an important shift in safeguarding responses, responses also suggest that **perceived protection continues to decline through adulthood**, with the weakest levels of protection reported for individuals aged **25 and over**.

Practitioners described situations where exploitation affecting adults may be interpreted differently within safeguarding systems. Once individuals are legally recognised as adults, exploitation may be more likely to be framed as a matter of personal choice or lifestyle rather than coercion or control, particularly where individuals are assessed as having mental capacity.

This shift can create challenges in maintaining safeguarding responses for individuals experiencing ongoing exploitation, particularly where exploitation intersects with

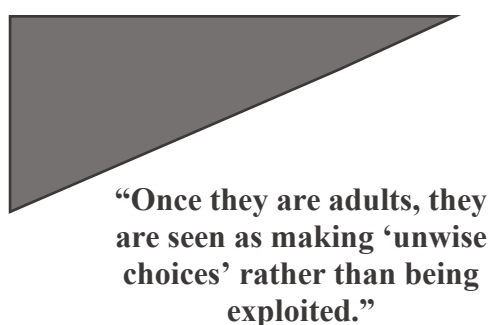
Transition from child safeguarding into adult services

- **13.3%** indicated that protection is only partial, suggesting that many practitioners perceive a significant reduction in safeguarding support once individuals move from child to adult frameworks.
- **3.3%** of respondents believed that adults experiencing sexual exploitation are adequately protected, while 20% reported uncertainty, reflecting the complexity and variability of safeguarding responses within adult services.

vulnerabilities such as homelessness, substance misuse, domestic abuse or previous experiences of trauma.

Qualitative responses highlighted practitioner concerns that support structures available to children and young people may not always be replicated within adult services, resulting in a gradual reduction in coordinated safeguarding responses as individuals move further into adulthood.

Taken together, these responses suggest that while safeguarding systems provide structured protections for children, **recognition and protection for adults experiencing sexual exploitation may become increasingly limited with age**, particularly beyond the age of 25.



— Anonymous Practitioner

Age Group	Practitioner View
Under 16	Mixed confidence
16–25	Partial protection most common
25+	Low confidence / high concern

Practitioner Insights: Transition to Adulthood

Qualitative responses from practitioners highlighted consistent concerns regarding the transition from child safeguarding to adult services.

Many practitioners described a **significant loss of structured support once individuals reach adulthood**, with services that had previously provided protection during childhood no longer available after the age of 18. Respondents frequently described this transition as creating gaps in safeguarding responses, particularly where adult services operate under different thresholds or legal frameworks from those used within children’s safeguarding systems.

Several practitioners highlighted challenges associated with the way exploitation is interpreted once individuals are legally recognised as adults. Situations that may previously have been recognised as safeguarding concerns during childhood may be reframed as matters of personal choice, particularly where individuals are assessed as having mental capacity.

Respondents also described difficulties maintaining continuity of support during the transition to adulthood, noting that referrals between services are not always completed or

that individuals may lose access to specialist services once they move beyond child-focused safeguarding systems.

Practitioners frequently highlighted how exploitation may intersect with other vulnerabilities during this period, including housing instability, mental health challenges, substance misuse and trauma linked to earlier experiences of abuse.

These factors can increase the risk of individuals becoming **further exposed to exploitation during early adulthood**, particularly where coordinated safeguarding responses are reduced.

“The legal guidelines that mean at 18 they are treated as an adult can overlook the complexity of their experiences.”

— Anonymous Practitioner

3. Repeat Victimisation and Cycles of Sexual Exploitation

Have you supported victims who experienced repeated victimisation or cycles of sexual exploitation?

- **90%** of respondents reported encountering repeat victimisation.

Sexual exploitation is rarely experienced as a single isolated incident. Practitioner responses suggest that many victims experience ongoing or repeated cycles of exploitation over time, often involving recurring perpetrators, multiple locations, repeated disclosures or ongoing coercion.

Responses indicated that repeat victimisation is shaped by a combination of intersecting vulnerabilities and systemic barriers, leaving

individuals vulnerable to further harm even after contact with services.

Vulnerability factors identified by practitioners included:

- Homelessness or unstable housing
- Substance misuse
- Mental health difficulties
- Poverty or financial dependency
- Social isolation
- Learning disabilities or neurodiversity
- Childhood trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
- Disrupted attachments and earlier abuse

- Coercion, intimidation and threats
- Financial control
- Trauma bonding with perpetrators

Structural barriers within support systems included:

- Limited access to specialist services
- Gaps in housing support
- Cases closed due to disengagement
- Long waiting lists
- Poor continuity between services

Some respondents also raised concerns that victims may be misidentified as complicit in their exploitation or viewed primarily through behavioural concerns rather than underlying trauma.

Taken together, these findings suggest that repeated cycles of exploitation are often sustained by a combination of vulnerability, coercive control and fragmented support systems. While services may respond to individual incidents of harm, the underlying conditions that enable exploitation can remain unresolved.

“Services start to become more victim-blaming, focusing more on the victim keeping themselves safe... rather than support being kept in place to protect them from harm.”

— Anonymous Practitioner

4. Practitioner Support for Specialist Exploitation Role

Given the challenges identified in early identification, safeguarding continuity and repeated cycles of exploitation, practitioners were asked whether they would support the introduction of **dedicated specialist roles focused on sexual exploitation**.

The consultation proposed two potential specialist roles:

- **CHEA – Child Harm & Exploitation Advisor**
- **ASEA – Adult Sexual Exploitation Advisor**

These roles were presented as qualified specialist positions designed to support early identification of exploitation, improve multi-agency coordination and strengthen safeguarding responses across both child and adult safeguarding systems.

Overall, **83.3%** of respondents **supported** the introduction of both roles, indicating strong professional recognition that sexual exploitation requires specialist expertise within safeguarding systems.

Whilst **83.3% of respondents supported the introduction of both roles**, a small number of respondents expressed support for either the child or the adult role, while a small proportion reported uncertainty.

The findings suggest that practitioners working across safeguarding, advocacy and community support services recognise the potential value of **dedicated exploitation-focused expertise** within existing safeguarding frameworks.

These responses reinforce earlier findings within this consultation, particularly the challenges practitioners described regarding early identification, safeguarding continuity and repeated cycles of exploitation.

Taken together, practitioner responses indicate a growing recognition that **sexual exploitation may require specialist roles capable of identifying patterns of exploitation, coordinating multi-agency responses and maintaining safeguarding continuity across age thresholds**.

5. Systemic Barriers to Early Identification and Protection

Practitioners were asked to identify systemic barriers that prevent the early identification of sexual exploitation within safeguarding systems.

Barriers to early identification

Lack of understanding of sexual exploitation (73.3%).

Insufficient professional training (73.3%).

Safeguarding referrals are sometimes rejected/ delaying intervention (60%).

These findings indicate that challenges in identifying exploitation may not solely relate to individual cases but may also reflect **system-level limitations in recognising and responding to exploitation patterns**.

Practitioners also identified a range of additional barriers, including limited community awareness, inconsistent multi-agency coordination, and constraints linked to funding or service capacity.

Taken together, these responses suggest that the early identification of sexual exploitation may be hindered by **gaps in training, inconsistent recognition of exploitation indicators and structural barriers within safeguarding thresholds**.

Groups Most Affected by Identification Barriers

Practitioners were also asked whether systemic barriers to identifying sexual exploitation affect certain groups more than others.

Responses suggest that individuals experiencing multiple vulnerabilities may face greater barriers to identification and protection. The groups most frequently identified by practitioners included:

Group Identified by Practitioners	Percentage of Respondents
People experiencing substance misuse	80%
Individuals experiencing homelessness	76.7%
Adults aged 25 and over	73.3%
Young adults aged 18–25	66.7%
Neurodiverse individuals	66.7%
Care-experienced young people	63.3%
LGBTQ+ individuals	60%

These responses suggest that individuals experiencing multiple vulnerabilities may face the greatest barriers to recognition and protection within safeguarding systems.

The findings highlight the complex intersection between exploitation and broader social vulnerabilities. Practitioners indicated that individuals facing multiple disadvantages may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation while also facing greater barriers to recognition and support.

When considered together, the findings from this consultation suggest that sexual exploitation may often be recognised late, particularly where it intersects with complex vulnerabilities such as homelessness, substance misuse or mental health challenges. **As individuals move from child safeguarding into adult systems, practitioners reported reduced recognition and protection, particularly for adults aged 25 and over.** The high prevalence of repeat victimisation reported by practitioners further suggests that exploitation dynamics may persist across time and across services.

These patterns highlight the need for safeguarding systems capable of identifying exploitation earlier, recognising patterns across vulnerabilities, and maintaining continuity of protection across the life course.

Conclusion

This practitioner consultation provides insight into how professionals across safeguarding and support services experience current system responses to sexual exploitation. The findings highlight consistent concerns regarding late identification, reduced protection across adulthood and the repeated cycles of exploitation experienced by many victims. Practitioners also identified structural barriers that can limit early recognition of exploitation, particularly for individuals experiencing multiple vulnerabilities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, despite growing awareness of sexual exploitation, practitioners continue to encounter persistent systemic gaps and barriers in identifying and responding to exploitation across safeguarding systems. Sexual exploitation frequently intersects with other vulnerabilities, requiring coordinated responses that extend beyond individual services or age-based safeguarding frameworks.

The strong practitioner support for specialist exploitation roles identified within this consultation indicates growing recognition that safeguarding systems may benefit from dedicated expertise capable of identifying exploitation patterns, supporting earlier intervention and strengthening coordinated responses across both child and adult services.

There is a clear need for systemic reform to strengthen responses to sexual exploitation across the life course. The evidence from this consultation indicates that safeguarding systems must be capable of recognising exploitation earlier, responding consistently across age thresholds, and maintaining protection for individuals affected across the life course.

“Sexual exploitation does not exist within a single system, nor does it sit neatly within children’s or adult services — safeguarding responses must reflect that reality.”

— Debra Cowey, Founder & Director

Further frameworks, models and improvement programmes are available on request through Debra Cowey, Coloured Hearts CIC and B-Equipt Ltd – debra@colouredhearts.com

A FRAGMENTED SYSTEM

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

“Once they are adults, they are seen as making ‘unwise choices’ rather than being exploited.”

— Anonymous Practitioner

This report brings together frontline practitioner insight into how systems identify and respond to sexual exploitation affecting children and adults.

It explores barriers to protection, fragmented services and opportunities for stronger safeguarding responses across the life course.



Debra Cowey

www.colouredhearts.com

