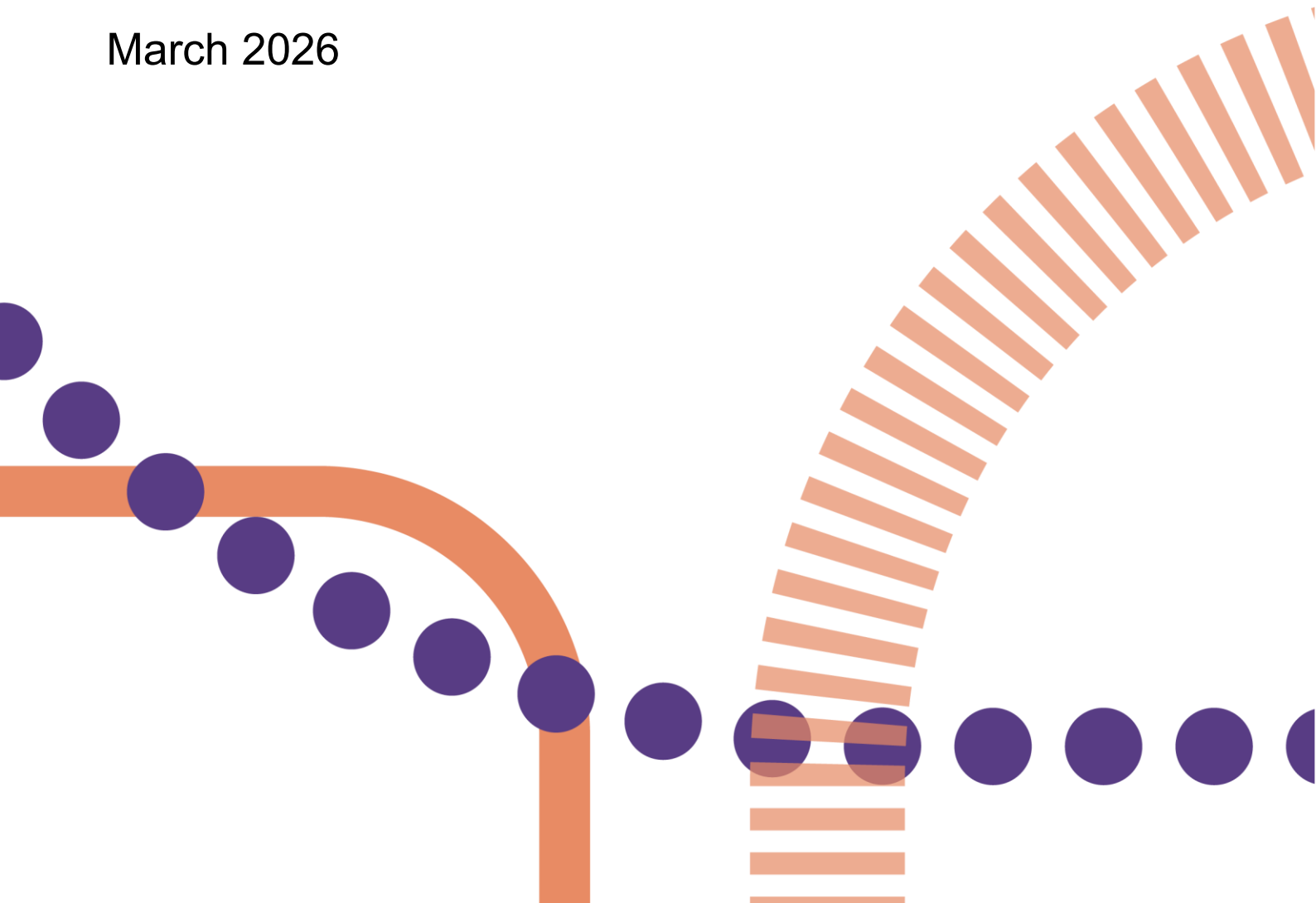


Child sexual abuse within the family environment

Enabling Independent Scrutineers to offer
support to safeguarding partnerships

March 2026



Introduction

The national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (the Panel) published a [national review](#) into child sexual abuse within the family environment in November 2024.

One of the key findings was that practitioners working with children and families have not been equipped with the knowledge, skills and practical guidance to identify and respond confidently when there are concerns of child sexual abuse in the family environment.

In addition to the review's national recommendations, it also gave a set of six local recommendations for safeguarding partnerships to help bring improvements at a local level.

This briefing paper aims to help independent scrutineers to use the recommendations as a basis for their scrutiny and assurance work with safeguarding partnerships and to help drive system improvement.

Who is this document for?

Independent scrutineers within child safeguarding partnerships.

How to use this resource

This resource is designed to help independent scrutineers understand and apply the key learning from the national review into child sexual abuse within families. You can use it to guide your scrutiny conversations, shape the questions you ask of safeguarding partnerships, and support assurance activity. The reflective prompts and recommendations offer a practical way to explore whether local systems are equipped to recognise, respond to and prevent child sexual abuse, and to identify areas where further improvement or support may be needed.

Why is it important for children and young people?

Strengthening how we understand and respond to child sexual abuse within families is vital to protecting children. When local systems work well, listening to children, recognising signs early, and responding confidently, children are safer and more likely to get the help they need. By using this resource, scrutineers can help ensure that safeguarding partnerships are addressing risks effectively, improving practice, and creating environments where children feel heard, supported and protected.

What is the evidence base?

The Panel's national review included:

- Analysis of 136 rapid reviews, 40 related SCRs and LCSPRs, and one thematic review relating to child sexual abuse in the family environment received by the Panel between June 2018 and November 2023.
- 10 online reflective group discussions with 107 practitioners in 9 local safeguarding partnerships who had been involved in 10 of these reviews.
- One-to-one interviews with 2 of the children at the heart of these reviews and 5 people who had been convicted for sexually abusing children in these reviews.
- Reflective discussions involving experts by experience, practitioners and senior leaders from a range of agencies including policing, probation, children's social care, universal health and specialist health services.
- A review of recent research and practice guidance, summarising what is known about child sexual abuse in the family environment and the response to it.

Many of the issues identified have been highlighted in national studies and inspections over a number of years, as well as in our reflective discussions with stakeholders.

Key findings

This national review highlights a **systemic failure** across all services to recognise and respond when children are at risk of, or are already, being sexually abused by someone in their family environment.

Practice issues we have identified include:

- Not hearing children's voices and understanding their needs.
- Not understanding parents' and carers' contexts, vulnerabilities and needs.
- Challenges in identifying signs, understanding risks and raising concerns.
- Issues in responding to concerns of child sexual abuse within the family environment.

Reflective questions and discussion points

Below is a set of questions and statements for independent scrutineers to consider and use when providing objective oversight at a local level. This is not an exhaustive list, but a guide and suggestions based on the review's findings and local recommendations.

- At a strategic leader level, has the partnership considered the findings of the review, particularly the recommendations for local partnerships? (Prompt leaders to reflect on whether the review has informed their strategic planning).
- What steps have been taken to develop a local action plan in response to the recommendations? (Links to recommendation 1 on strategic planning).
- Does the safeguarding partnership collect and analyse data on child sexual abuse from partners in order to inform strategic planning and workforce development?

- Are clear risk assessment processes in place, including how information is shared between probation, police and children's social care, when working with families where a parent/carer is known to have had a sexual offence conviction?
- How is the partnership ensuring that multi-agency training needs are assessed and addressed? (Links to recommendation 2 on professional knowledge and confidence).
- How confident is the Partnership that consideration is given to how intrafamilial child sexual abuse, and practice to prevent it, is influenced by factors specific to families from different communities or backgrounds (including race, ethnicity and faith backgrounds?)
- How confident are agencies in identifying signs and indicators of child sexual abuse within the family environment?
- How does the partnership ensure that children's voices are heard and understood in safeguarding processes?
- Are there clear pathways for health assessments (including forensic medical referrals for suspected child sexual abuse cases? (This links to recommendation 6 on health pathways.)
- What therapeutic services are available to support the victims of child sexual abuse?

Recommendations to safeguarding partners in England

Many of the changes identified by this review are already included in or permitted by current guidance. Local partnerships do not need to wait for government to act to begin making changes at a local level.

- **Recommendation 1**: Strategic planning. Safeguarding partners should consider the findings of this national review and develop a local action plan to respond to its recommendations as it affects local multi-agency practice.
- **Recommendation 2**: Professional knowledge, skills and confidence. Safeguarding partners should undertake a multi-agency training needs assessment, to ensure that their practitioners are able to fulfil their roles and responsibilities in this area. This should include the achieving best evidence joint training. The response to this assessment may require multi-agency and single-agency training initiatives, in a range of formats, supported by evidence informed resources. They should additionally give specific attention to the role of schools, early years and other

education settings and how they can identify and help children affected by child sexual abuse.

- **Recommendation 3:** Enquiries and investigations. Safeguarding partners should audit the quality of local multi-agency decision making when responding to concerns about child sexual abuse. This may include adoption of a pathway approach, use of guidance about signs and indicators of sexual abuse and reviewing threshold documents about assessment of need and risk. Agencies should ensure that Working Together guidance is followed and that, at the conclusion of section 47 enquiries and police investigations, there is a multi-agency discussion to consider risk to the children and how they will be protected and supported. The term 'no further action' should not be used in these circumstances as it is too often understood to mean the abuse did not happen. The term 'no further police action at this time' is more appropriate. There should be a clear record of why a criminal investigation has been closed and that this information has been shared with other relevant agencies. Where the harm has been perpetrated by a sibling, plans must be made for all the children in the family, addressing the needs of the child who has harmed as well as the child who has been harmed, and any other siblings. (*See related panel briefing on "no further police action at this time"*) (*Link to be inserted*)
- **Recommendation 4:** Assessment of people presenting risk of sexual harm. Safeguarding partners should, with all relevant agencies such as the Probation Service, review how people who present a risk of sexual harm and who have contact with children are assessed and managed, with information about risk shared across agencies in a timely way. Partners should consider the use of civil orders and other measures to effectively manage the risk from the person of concern. There is evidence of a need for safeguarding partners and probation to work together to create single points of contact, have robust information sharing arrangements and promote effective learning across agencies.
- **Recommendation 5:** Talking to children. Safeguarding partners should take necessary steps to ensure that all practitioners in their area (including foster carers) understand and are confident in talking directly to children, and families, about concerns of sexual abuse, taking due account of ethnicity, language and disability. Safeguarding partners need to ensure that there are sensitive and effective plans to address the impact on children of any decision to end an investigation (*See related panel briefing on talking to children*) (*Link to be inserted*)
- **Recommendation 6:** Health. Safeguarding partners should ensure that there are local pathways for referring children for appropriate forensic medical and other health assessments, for both recent and non-recent sexual abuse, and that safeguarding practitioners understand them. It is also important that strategy discussions about children, where there are concerns about possible sexual abuse, involve an appropriate health representative who either has clinical experience in

assessment where recent or non-recent child sexual abuse is suspected or, as a minimum, has consulted with a professional who has this expertise.

Where can I find out more?

Find more information on the Panel's new learning hub:

www.childsafeguarding.independent-panel.uk, where you can access videos, webinars, podcasts and other content, including the full report: "[I wanted them all to notice](#)".

Visit [the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse](#) (the lead reviewers on behalf of the Panel) for useful guides to support some of the local recommendations (see Annex A):

- [Developing your strategic response to child sexual abuse](#): A guide for safeguarding children's partnerships to build an effective, evidence-based strategy covering each part of their response to child sexual abuse.
- [Data insights hub](#): Instant access to local and national data on child sexual abuse in England and Wales
- [Funding and commissioning child sexual abuse services](#): To help understand where and how to address gaps in child sexual abuse support services, this guide explains why these services are important, and how to fund and commission them well.
- [Putting the Child Sexual Abuse Response Pathway into practice](#): A guide for local partnerships wanting to introduce the Response Pathway to their locality
- [eLearning](#): Identifying and responding to intra-familial child sexual abuse – a free eLearning course for professionals
- [Supporting practice film series](#): 12 short films, building on CSA Centre resources, to give professionals the confidence to identify and respond to child sexual abuse.
- Practice resources on [communicating with children](#), [signs and indicators of child sexual abuse](#), [supporting parents and carers](#), [sibling sexual abuse and behaviour](#), [managing risk and trauma after online offending](#), [resources for education settings](#), [medical examinations](#), and [using supervision and team meetings](#) to improve responses to child sexual abuse.
- [Key messages from research](#): A series of papers providing succinct, relevant information for frontline practitioners and commissioners.
- [Managing risk and trauma after online offending](#): A guide to help professionals safeguard the whole family when a parent has accessed child sexual abuse material.
- [Sibling sexual behaviour](#): A guide to responding to inappropriate, problematic and abusive behaviour.
- [Communicating with children](#): A guide for those working with children who have or may have been sexually abused.