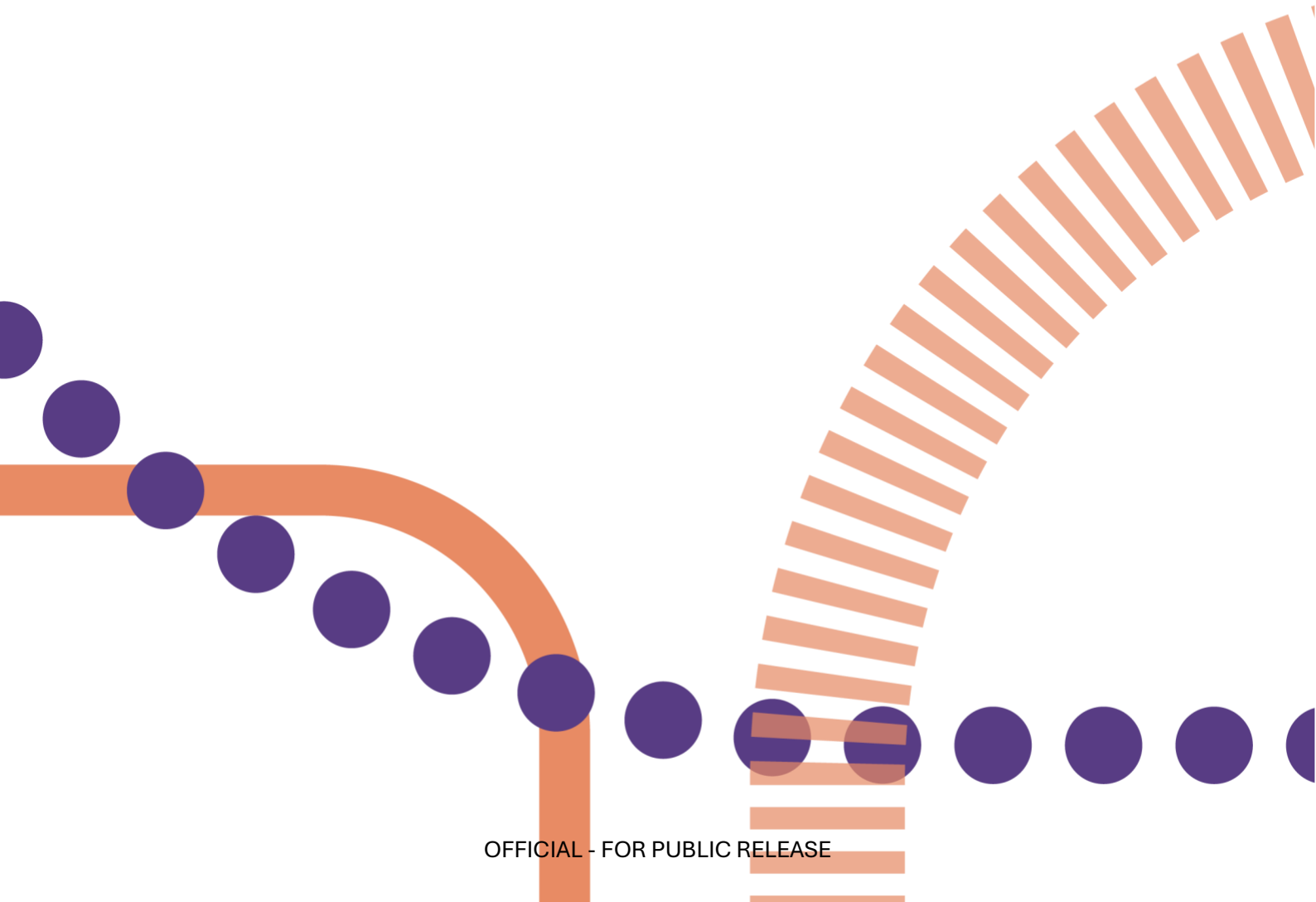
THE CHILD **SAFEGUARDING**
PRACTICE REVIEW PANEL

Safeguarding children from online harms

Online harms, child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

November 2026



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Introduction

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel recently welcomed and responded to *Growing up in the online world: a national consultation* and supports the Government's ambition to ensure children's experiences online are as safe, supportive, and developmentally appropriate as possible.

The Panel, of course, acknowledges the importance of ensuring that all children and young people have access to and understand the growing benefits of technology, but hopes that the consultation will result in appropriate safeguards to ensure that access and content are age appropriate.

The Panel also recognises the importance of supporting practitioners, who often report feeling less confident navigating children's digital lives than they are in assessing risk in a physical setting. Strengthening professional capability in the assessment of digital safety, alongside recognising that children may operate in largely unsupervised online environments, will be increasingly critical to effective safeguarding practice in the future.

As set out in the Panel's core paper on online harms as a cross-cutting safeguarding risk, online environments are increasingly featuring within the context of serious harm to children and young people.

This paper focuses specifically on child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation (CSA/CSE), where safeguarding reviews consistently highlight the role of online platforms in enabling grooming, sexualised communication, coercion, and the sharing of indecent images.

The learning in this paper relates to circumstances where children have been harmed or have died and where online activity was present in the child's life and formed part of an exploitation pathway.

Serious harm can occur in unseen digital spaces, and safeguarding practice must include active exploration of children's online lives, relationships, and behaviours, supported by strong multi-agency communication and professional confidence in addressing online risk.

When asked 'In order to keep young people safer, what do practitioners need to keep in mind in relation to online harms?', a parent whose child experienced online harms said:

> *"The responsibility for preventing exploitation must not be placed on the child. Nor should it be left to parents to monitor every interaction or try to prevent harm that can happen so quickly and across different platforms."*

Who is this document for?

Multi-agency practitioners and managers working in universal services such as schools, colleges, further and higher institutions, health services, police, and social care settings as well as relevant voluntary organisations and services working with adolescents.

This includes practitioners who are responsible for identifying and responding to safeguarding concerns, and who play a role in understanding how online activity may contribute to child sexual abuse and exploitation.

How to use this resource

Multi-agency practitioners should use this resource as a practical guide to strengthen their approach to identifying and responding to safeguarding concerns where online activity may be contributing to harm.

This learning resource can be used by practitioners, managers and leaders in supervision, team discussions and learning events to reflect on relevant safeguarding incidents relating to online harms and the multi-agency practice response.

In particular, this resource should be used to support practitioners to recognise patterns of child sexual abuse and exploitation where online activity is present, and to inform timely and coordinated safeguarding responses.

Why is it important for children and young people?

As highlighted in the Panel's core paper, online harm is increasingly featured within children's lived experiences and often interacts with wider vulnerabilities.

Safeguarding responses must move from recognising vulnerability alone to actively and consistently identifying, analysing, and responding to patterns of child sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly where online grooming, the sharing of sexual images, and missing episodes are present.

We must recognise that online spaces frequently function as sites of grooming, sexualised communication, and image sharing. This can include threatening or pressuring children to share sexual images and videos of themselves and children receiving sexual images and videos of adults. These behaviours may precede, happen instead of, or coexist with offline abuse.

This includes recognising that early indicators of exploitation may present through online activity and require timely safeguarding responses, even where harm has not yet occurred offline.

When asked if they would like to share any comments with practitioners, the parent of a child who had experienced online harms said:

> *"I want professionals to understand that children are not just cases being investigated. They are real young people who are frightened, distressed and trying to carry on with their lives while this is happening. Their families are also trying to cope, often while feeling that they have to fight to be heard."*

This resource is to help multi-agency practitioners navigate a complex and growing safeguarding risk to children and young people

What is the evidence base?

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's Annual Report (2024 to 2025) highlighted online harms in safeguarding incidents as an emerging trend, with 9% (24) of all rapid reviews reporting an online context to the harm caused to the child.

Online contexts, both directly relating to the incident and within the child's life, are increasingly featured within safeguarding reviews considered by the Panel. Numbers of relevant reviews have increased from 5% in 2022–23, to 7% in 2023–24 and 9% in 2024–25.

Within these cases, a significant proportion involved child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. Online environments were frequently identified as enabling grooming, sexualised communication, coercion, and the sharing of indecent images.

In the context of CSA/CSE, online activity rarely occurs in isolation. It often forms part of a wider exploitation pathway, where initial contact including grooming, a relationship, and coercion take place online and may progress to offline harm.

Of the relevant 24 rapid reviews in 2024–25 that noted an online context:

- 58% (n=14) involved incidents of serious harm, particularly extra and intrafamilial child sexual abuse
- 29% (n=7) were fatal incidents, with 4 of these identifying suicide as the likely cause of death
- 13% (n=3) were for "other" incidents

Learning from the Panel's national and thematic reviews consistently shows that online environments feature strongly in the experiences of children who have suffered serious harm, particularly in relation to:

- Child criminal exploitation (CCE) – where online platforms are commonly used for grooming, recruitment, coercion, and control
- Child sexual abuse (CSA) – where online spaces frequently function as sites of grooming, sexualised communication, and image sharing
- Neglect – where unmet emotional needs increase children's vulnerability to online grooming and exploitation
- Suicide – where children's online relationships and interactions can lead to manipulation, coercion or exposure to harmful content, increasing the risk of suicide

Further detail on the wider cross-cutting role of online harm, including its links to suicide and self-harm, is set out in the Panel's core paper.

Key facts and figures

Between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025, the Panel received 274 rapid reviews. Of these, 24 (9%) featured an online context.

Of the rapid reviews where online harms were identified, a significant proportion also involved concerns relating to child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, including harmful sexual behaviour, sexualised online communication, and image sharing.

Further data (***unpublished)*** from 1 April 2025 to 31 December 2025 highlights that from 216 rapid reviews seen by the Panel, 29 (13%) reported online harms. This illustrates that the prevalence of online harms in safeguarding incidents reported to the Panel continues to rise.

Child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

Of the twenty-four rapid reviews which featured online harms, 17 (71%) had harmful sexual behaviour as a co-occurring risk factor and 15 (63%) referenced child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation as a risk factor.

1 April 2025 to 31 December 2025

Of the twenty-nine rapid reviews which featured online harms, 11 (38%) had harmful sexual behaviour as a co-occurring risk factor and 16 (55%) referenced child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation as a risk factor.

Rapid reviews revealed a wide range of harms to the children who were the subject of those reviews including:

- CSA/CSE of a child by an individual they had met online
- CSA perpetrated by a child's father, which included sexually explicit text messages
- The child in focus displaying harmful sexual behaviour both online and offline including accessing inappropriate online pornography and bestiality

Online pathways to child sexual abuse and exploitation

Safeguarding reviews consistently show that online environments play a central role in how child sexual abuse and exploitation develop.

Online platforms are commonly used to enable:

- initial contact with children, often through social media, gaming or messaging platforms
- grooming and relationship building through ongoing communication
- sexualised conversations and the sharing of indecent images
- coercive and controlling behaviour, including threats and manipulation, demands for money or blackmail, and pressure to provide sexual content or images
- re-victimisation as explicit images continue to be shared online with no control over forward distribution

Children may form relationships with individuals online, including those they believe to be peers. These interactions can escalate quickly and involve emotional dependency, pressure to share images, or engagement in sexualised behaviour.

Online activity rarely occurs in isolation. In many cases, it forms part of a wider exploitation pathway, where harm develops over time through a pattern of escalating behaviour.

This may include:

- initial contact and communication online
- development of trust or manipulation
- sharing of sexual images or sexualised communication including sharing of artificial intelligence (AI)-adapted images
- coercion, control, or threats
- incidents that progress to an offline meeting and further abuse

In some cases, harm can occur entirely online with no abuse taking place offline. In others, it may coexist with abuse perpetrated within and/or outside the family environment, including through digitally enabled communication.

Understanding these pathways requires practitioners to move beyond viewing incidents in isolation and instead recognise patterns over time, including links between online activity, missing episodes, and relationships with both peers and adults.

This includes recognising that behaviours such as sexual image sharing, secrecy about online relationships, or repeated contact with unknown individuals may indicate exploitation and should prompt a safeguarding response.

Common issues

Analysis of safeguarding reviews in which online harm featured alongside CSA and CSE identified the following common issues:

Systemic failure to recognise an online-to-offline exploitation pathway. Online contact led to sexualised communications, Online contact led to sexualised communication and coercive and controlling behaviour, which in some cases progressed to offline meetings and serious harm. Agencies failed to recognise these as connected stages of exploitation, instead treating each episode (images, conversations, missing) separately.

Repeated missed opportunities at points of indecent image sharing and sexualised behaviour. Indecent image sharing was normalised, minimised, or treated as adolescent exploratory behaviours rather than indicators of exploitation

Inadequate professional curiosity about children's online lives. Practitioners relied on children disclosing risk rather than actively exploring digital environments. Agencies did not routinely explore online relationships and accepted explanations at face value.

Failure to respond to escalating patterns and chronologies. This included known missing episodes, sexual image sharing online, contact with adults and other known exploitation indicators. Patterns were not analysed collectively. Agencies responded to events, not patterns, preventing early recognition of escalating exploitation.

Weak multi-agency coordination and strategy responses. There was evidence of limited joint safety planning and inconsistent use of strategy meetings. Multi-agency safeguarding responses were fragmented, particularly around online exploitation risk. Responses were sometimes reactive, escalating only after harm had occurred rather than in response to earlier digital indicators.

Normalisation of risky and inappropriate online behaviour. Sexual activity with adults and image sharing were sometimes normalised in assessments. Sexualised messaging was sometimes seen as misunderstanding, and peer sexual messaging treated as non-criminal. Sexualised online behaviour in adolescents was misinterpreted as developmental rather than exploitative.

Delayed and ineffective disruption of perpetrators and online harm. There were delays in seizing relevant devices or using digital forensics. Systems prioritised child engagement over assertive disruption of perpetrators, allowing continued exploitation.

Failure to link missing episodes with online grooming and exploitation. Missing episodes were clearly linked to children meeting adults, sexual activity, and exploitation. They followed online contact and led to harm but were treated as behavioural or episodic rather than clear exploitation indicators.

Over-reliance on child engagement and "consent." Investigations were not pursued due to lack of consent or engagement by the young person. Children minimising or retracting disclosures were accepted at face value. Agencies did not recognise that grooming, coercion, and trauma bonding can reduce a child's ability to engage or disclose.

Across these cases, opportunities to identify exploitation were missed because practitioners did not consistently recognise or analyse patterns in children's online activity and relationships at an early stage.

Hallmarks of good practice

Analysis of safeguarding reviews highlighted the following examples of good practice:

Prompt, decisive action at the point of disclosure, including immediate safeguarding, medical and forensic response and engagement with police and children's social care. This included early and proactive enquiries regarding harmful sexual behaviour, particularly when children had disclosed viewing online material.

Timely examination of digital devices of perpetrators to identify and respond to harm and risk.

Strong multi-agency strategy meetings bringing together all relevant partners and practitioners. This supported robust analysis, clear actions and coordinated safeguarding decision-making.

Effective use of specialist safeguarding and criminal justice processes to protect the child and disrupt perpetrators. This included Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) interviews and involvement of Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs), supporting both safeguarding and investigative responses.

Timely health and therapeutic responses at points of crisis, including emotional, mental health and medical support. This supported both physical and psychological recovery.

Child-centred practice and capturing the child's voice. This included actively seeking and recording the child's views and using this to inform safeguarding decisions, helping practitioners to understand the child's lived experience.

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Implementation of clear protective measures following identification of risk. This included increased supervision, placement changes where appropriate, and restrictions to devices, supporting immediate reduction of harm.

Protective parenting and carer engagement, where present. Parents and carers responded to concerns, engaged with practitioners, and supported safeguarding processes.

Recognition of the need for learning and system improvement. This included clear identification of issues relating to thresholds, information sharing, and exploitation recognition, with safeguarding systems demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement.

These examples demonstrate that effective safeguarding responses to CSA/CSE in an online context require practitioners to take active and specific steps to understand children's digital lives, identify patterns of exploitation at the earliest stage, and respond through timely and coordinated multi-agency action.

Reflective questions for practitioners

Understanding online behaviour and grooming

- What do I know about the child's online life (apps, contacts, behaviours, relationships) and am I viewing online behaviour as real-world risk, not separate from offline harm?

Responding to sexualised behaviour and image sharing

- If a child has shared sexual images, am I asking:
  - why the images were shared, including whether coercion, pressure, grooming or exploitation was involved
  - with whom they were shared, including whether the person was a peer or adult, known or unknown
  - whether AI-generated or AI-altered images are involved
  - whether images are being used to exert control

Professional curiosity

- Am I accepting what the child says at face value, or gently exploring inconsistencies, minimisation, and retractions? What am I not asking that could help understand the risk?

Identifying patterns and escalating risk

- What is the pattern over time (missing episodes, online contact, emotional changes, behaviours)?
- Does this case represent escalating exploitation risk rather than isolated incidents?

Missing episodes

- When a child goes missing, am I exploring who they met, how it was arranged (online?) and what happened when the child was away?
- Am I using return conversations to understand pull factors (people/places), not just to record events?

Engagement and persistence

- If the child disengages, avoids, or returns to risky situations how am I maintaining safe, consistent relationships?
- Am I ensuring that there is a trauma informed response to engagement with children and young people?

Reflective questions for leaders

Recognition of online harm and exploitation

- Do we consistently recognise online sexualised behaviour (e.g. image sharing, messaging) as a potential indicator of exploitation, rather than exploratory adolescent behaviour?
- Are we viewing online harm, missing episodes, and CSE/CSA as a single safeguarding trajectory in practice?

Thresholds and decision-making

- Are our threshold decisions sufficiently robust when children present with sexualised online behaviour, contact with unknown adults and repeated missing episodes?
- Do we provide clear multi-agency guidance on when online harm meets Section 47 thresholds?

Multi-agency information sharing and coordination

- Do our practitioners have access to a joined-up picture of risk, including online activity and missing episodes, with safety plans and risk assessments shared consistently with all relevant partners?

Response to indecent images and digital evidence

- Do we treat the sharing of indecent images as a safeguarding issue requiring immediate multi-agency response?
- Are there delays in seizing devices, digital evidence gathering and forensic investigations?

Missing episodes and contextual safeguarding

- Are missing episodes consistently analysed as potential indicators of child sexual exploitation linked to online contact?

Use of exploitation frameworks and pathways

- Are relevant tools and pathways (e.g. CSE risk tools, exploitation services) being used early enough and applied consistently by practitioners?

System learning and assurance

- Are recurring themes (e.g. online harm, thresholds, information sharing) being effectively addressed or repeating? How are we reflecting this system learning in training on responding to online harms?

Case study

Mabel experienced intra-familial sexual harm at a young age. Throughout childhood she was known to a range of agencies due to concerns about her emotional wellbeing, self-harm, suicide attempts, gender identity struggles, and vulnerability to exploitation. At approximately 11 years old, Mabel bypassed internet security controls to upload explicit videos of herself, with Police were unable to identify who had received the images. The following year, four phones containing graphic images sent to Mabel by adult males were found in her possession. Police identified that several perpetrators were based outside the UK.

By the age of 15, police intelligence identified that Mabel had been exploited online. In the subsequent police investigation, Mabel reported she was in a 'relationship' with an adult male she had met via an online forum. She later discovered that he worked in a position of trust. The male was convicted and imprisoned following a criminal investigation.

Learning points

- **Adverse childhood experiences can increase vulnerability.** Experiencing sexual harm at a young age increased Mabel's vulnerability to sexual harm and exploitation in the future. The effect this early trauma had on her self-esteem, self-image, well-being and mental health increased the risk of future harm.
- **Risk factors need to be addressed.** While Mabel received support from a range of agencies, responses prioritised her emotional wellbeing without sufficiently exploring indicators of exploitation, including the sharing of explicit images.
- **Parents are not always able to manage risk.** Despite parents being proactive and intervening to protect Mabel, there were risks outside the home and online that they could not manage without support.
- **Consider why circumstances appear to be more settled and stable**. Interventions may have increased stability and brought about positive change. However, practitioners should remain curious about whether the dynamics of grooming or exploitation may also contribute to an apparently more settled presentation.
- **Consider how neurodiversity and additional needs may shape online vulnerability.** Research highlighted by Internet Matters identifies heightened online

risks for children with additional needs. Additional needs should be considered alongside other contextual factors when assessing and supporting children.

Where can I find out more?

Find more information and resources on the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Learning Hub.

Other useful resources include:

- Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel: Annual Report 2024 to 2025
- Growing up in the online world: a national consultation
- National analysis of police-recorded child sexual abuse and exploitation crimes: 2024
- The Southport Inquiry: Phase 1 report
- Southport Inquiry: Phase 2 terms of reference
- NSPCC: Online abuse and bullying prevention guide
- Local Government Association: Online harms
- UK Safer Internet Centre
- NCA-CEOP: Guidance, policy and research for professionals
- Key messages from research on child sexual abuse by adults in online contexts