



The Trust leads for safeguarding explain how we're encouraging our staff to be 'professionally curious' when it comes to spotting the signs of child sexual exploitation through the introduction of a new strategy.

Frequently we hear stories in the media about gangs grooming vulnerable young people and court cases related to child sexual exploitation. Many young people in society have been the victim of this kind of abuse, often by groups of men and sometimes women. Perpetrators of this kind of sexual abuse often look for signs of vulnerability in children and young people who they target. This might simply be a young person who is being bullied, who isn't getting along with their family, or it might be that the young person is a looked after child in the care system.

It's often the case that children and young people who are targeted have been subject to some form of abuse or neglect previously and that they have been removed from their families. The child or young person may not be aware that they are the victim of sexual abuse at first. In many cases they don't become aware until much later, when they have sustained considerable levels of harm. Often perpetrators will provide alcohol and drugs to the victims, sometimes creating dependency as a form of control.

These children have been failed by society and probably by a number of services before their abusers are ever brought to justice, this may even include our services. Because of this we need to ensure that our staff can identify early warning signs and be professionally curious. Being professionally curious enables practitioners to challenge carers or parents while maintaining an objective, professional and supportive manner.

There are a number of [key indicators](#) which should lead us to consider whether the child or young person in front of us might be experiencing sexual abuse.

The child sexual exploitation strategy was introduced to help our staff have awareness at a level relevant to their role. It's all about giving our staff the confidence to see signs and act on them. A child may understand that something isn't quite right but might not be able to articulate this in professional language.

Victims of child sexual exploitation may now have reached adulthood. This does not mean that they are any less vulnerable. In fact, they may be more vulnerable as the legal frameworks for children are no longer in place. As individuals and teams, we need to be mindful that the trauma experienced as a child may continue into adulthood - as may the sexual exploitation. In relation to capacity, some victims of this abuse have been so traumatised by their experiences that their ability to exercise choice has been eroded.

Sometimes professionals get confused about adults who may have capacity to consent to sexual intercourse but who do not consent to being abused. Victims

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are frequently threatened and experience extreme forms of physical and sexual violence, including rape. Some victims may have had children through this form of abuse and some of those children may have been removed from them. Trafficking is common amongst the people who undertake this form of abuse, and children and young people may be moved around for the purposes of being sexually exploited. In addition, the victim may have been blamed for the abuse they have experienced by services; statements such as 'making a lifestyle choice' and 'voting with their feet' are unhelpful and place the blame with the victim.

Children and young people who are victims of CSE are often seen as difficult and challenging, which is why it is important to put the person first and in the centre, looking at what may be behind the behaviour. Being open and honest with children and young people is very important; if you are being disingenuous they will know. It's okay to ask if they feel safe, if anyone is hurting them, if they need some help, this shows you care. We believe that by living our values and being professionally curious we can keep people safe.

It might be that the way in which we deliver services may hinder us from helping victims in a timely manner, sometimes it's okay to work in ways which look a little different. We want to give our staff permission to do this if it's in the best interests of children, young people and those victims who are now adults.

We already have a well-informed workforce. Safeguarding training is mandatory for all staff alongside bespoke learning for more specialist groups that work directly with children. But through the strategy we want to raise more awareness of child sexual exploitation and to make it clear to our staff that it's everybody's responsibility to raise concerns when they see them. We want staff to ask themselves "Am I professionally curious? Can I spot the signs of child sexual exploitation and act accordingly?"

We want people to know that sometimes you have to think outside of the box. You might work in a service that deals with older people, and you may discover that someone's grandchild stays at their house a lot and isn't attending school. We want people to professionally question this – is there a problem at home? Is there something that I can do to make sure this child doesn't go unnoticed? No matter what your service, you need to know the signs. Never be over-optimistic.

Always question everything and trust your doubts. It's through people feeling informed and confident enough to raise concerns that we can prevent more children from experiencing this horrific act.

The aim of the child sexual exploitation strategy is to:

- Provide a framework for our staff to identify and reduce rates of child sexual exploitation.
- Ensure we contribute to effective partnership working to protect children and young people from this form of abuse at a national, regional and local level.
- Ensure we are able to respond with appropriate interventions to the victims of this crime.
- Ensure the framework aligns with the National Action Plan to tackle child sexual exploitation.
- Along with partners in the West Yorkshire and Harrogate Health and Care Partnership, the Trust is backing The Truth Project's 'I will be heard' campaign, which is part of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.