Vulnerability & Policing Futures
Research Centre

Co–designing community resilience to online child sexual exploitation and abuse victimisation

Key points

- Community practitioners struggle to respond to online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) victimisation due to its volume, complexity and the lack of relevant evidence-informed guidance and training.

- Police reactions to peer-on-peer abuse can influence the extent to which enforcement, social care or educational approaches dominate local responses. Holistic and multi-agency informed practices are needed to combat the problem.

- There needs to be meaningful engagement with children and parents when delivering community-based responses to OCSEA.

- Empowering communities to tackle OCSEA requires collaboration to agree local priorities and co-produce quality response standards.

Summary

The aim of this two-year project was to take a place-based and problem-oriented approach to understand and improve offline responses to OCSEA.

The project commenced in May 2022 with a pilot study in one local authority area, using a mixed-methods approach involving a rapid appraisal, co-production, and a police case file analysis. A wide range of local stakeholders co-designed 11 priorities that have formed the basis of shared quality standards to improve responses to OCSEA locally.

Local action groups (representing local services and young people) were tasked with co-creating these standards. Implementation of shared priorities is complex and ongoing but the passion and interest of young people, parents and services to address OCSEA is loud and clear.

Background

Addressing OCSEA is a significant challenge. Policing is overwhelmed by the increasing volume of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) and current prevention efforts are not addressing the problem. Over recent years, governments, communities and services have sought to improve the responses to OCSEA (e.g. through the UK Online Safety Bill).

Much OCSEA starts, ends or is intertwined with offline child sexual or criminal abuse. This can include self-generated CSAM, sexual images and videos of children created by peers and shared under duress. However, a lack of clarity and agreement on definitions and effective responses, i.e. what constitutes OCSEA, who should respond to it, and how it is recorded, are significant barriers to addressing this problem.

In the past five years, online grooming of children in the UK has increased by 82%, of which 1 in 4 was against a primary school-aged child. Internationally, there was a 77% increase in child self-generated CSAM between 2019 and 2020. And over 50% of victims in the International Child Sexual Exploitation Database of CSAM are aged under 13. This problem is pervasive and has far-reaching consequences; children who experience OCSEA can have severe mental and physical impacts such as depression, self-harm, anxiety, PTSD-related symptoms, and issues around trust and guilt.

The recently published National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) priorities highlight police interest in innovative and evidence-based approaches to OCSEA prevention. The quality standards approach adopted in this study aligns well with NPCC priorities and with health and social care services evaluation techniques, which are used and understood to improve service provision.

What we did

The team had three objectives:

1. To scope how police and partner agencies, youth clubs and the public – particularly parents and children – identify and address OCSEA vulnerabilities;

2. To identify how the police can best work with others to anticipate, to respond to, and to prevent OCSEA;

3. To co-produce a locality-based online child sexual abuse quality standards tool that can be developed to be applied nationally and internationally.

The researchers collected data in one coastal town in the north of England between October 2022 and April 2024. They talked to over 50 representatives from local youth organisations, police, social work, children's services, health, local authority, young people, parent support services and parents as part of a rapid appraisal conducting interviews and focus groups. They co-produced an **animated video** with children, centering their views on online safety and responses to OCSEA into the appraisal.

The team then co-produced local priorities in the response to OCSEA, initiated through an event bringing together services, parents and young people. Eleven priorities to guide local multi-agency responses were identified and ranked, which are being taken forward by local action groups.

References are available in the digital version of this report

Key findings

Key messages emerging from the work are summarised in the following themes:

1. The complex nature and risk of OCSEA;
2. Challenges faced when trying to prevent and address OCSEA;
3. Best practice indicators derived from the 11 priorities co-produced by the community.

1. The complex nature and risk of OCSEA

Stakeholders agreed that the scale of OCSEA is more significant than official numbers suggest, and that they struggle to keep up with the diverse ways OCSEA can manifest. Many young people felt that experiencing grooming and cyberflashing online was normalised and meaningful responses are rare. Therefore, reporting it felt unnecessary or more trouble than it was worth.

Whilst stakeholders agreed that any child could be at risk of OCSEA, there were some factors thought to heighten vulnerability (Table 1), making responses more complex.

Table 1: Sources of vulnerability identified by stakeholders

Online	Offline
Access to online world, time spent online, multiple accounts, online gaming, dating apps, having access to accounts or content that is age inappropriate	Individual: Neurodiversity, Gender, Drug abuse, Adverse Childhood Experiences, having older siblings, relationship with carer
Platform risks: Anonymous chatrooms and encryption, temporary posts, lack of enforced age restrictions	Environmental: Levels of deprivation and need locally, levels of school exclusion, unhealthy relationships and behaviour role models, chaotic home life, starting secondary school
	Developmental: Sexual exploration, peer pressure and acceptance, children's understanding of risks, age when accessing internet, levels of maturity, seeking love and belonging

2. Challenges faced when trying to address and prevent OCSEA

Practitioners were passionate about supporting children and young people, however, the project identified a lack of confidence, relevant skills and up-to-date knowledge. This was exacerbated by disagreement as to who is responsible for preventing and responding to OCSEA, particularly when it is peer-on-peer abuse i.e. where the abuse takes place among young people of a similar age. Participants fluctuated between allocating schools or parents with responsibility to do more. Simultaneously, both educators and parents highlighted their struggle to know what to do, how to do it and the lack of resources and support. Police felt that the responses available to them criminalised young people unnecessarily where an educational response would be more impactful.

Stakeholders felt that serious cases of OCSEA (adult to child), when identified, have clear referral and support pathways, addressed through local safeguarding procedures.

Children's knowledge and skill in relation to the online world surpasses that of many adults. A lot of safeguards put in place are easily circumvented by them. An aligned challenge is young people's agency and right to privacy, problematised by many parents and practitioners who were struggling to change behaviour without being overly restrictive. A cross-cutting theme is a lack of capacity and resources, which prohibits consistent integrated messaging and support.

3. Best practice indicators

A co-production visioning day in November 2023 enabled discussions about the above challenges. It led to attendees identifying priorities to address OCSEA locally. The ranked priorities can be found below (Figure 1).

Figure 1: ranked priorities to address OCSEA locally
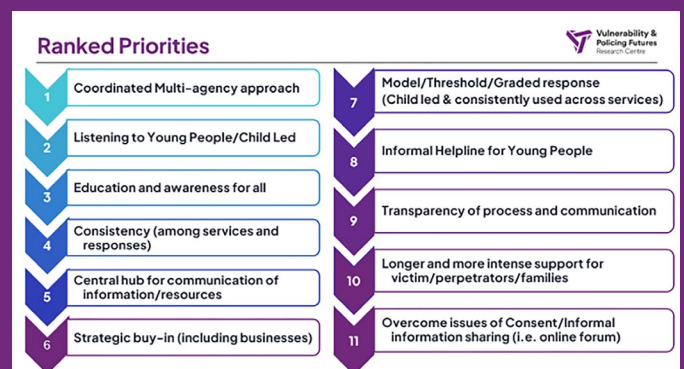
The action group tasked with implementing these priorities has begun work to do so. They are also in the process of developing a youth-led action group which ensures that children's voices are present in all their decisions.

Next steps

The team are in the process of developing and agreeing the quality standards tool from the identified priorities, the rapid appraisal, and the analysis of case files to test their applicability. The team are continuing to analyse police case files from the local area and inform the work of the action groups. They aim to test the standards further with a different local authority and to modify if necessary, according to local need.

Rooted in community-based co-production, the aim of this project is to develop an online child sexual abuse quality standards tool with the capacity and scope to be applied nationally and internationally. With what the team has learned from this project, they are consolidating findings into a transferable template that local authorities can use to further improve their own response to OCSEA. As part of this endeavour, team members are in discussions with different stakeholders in other parts of the UK to identify a new area where they can apply the methodology and tool. This will be done through a demonstration project, which is planned to commence in late 2024.

The team is also seeking different ways to share the project's findings far and wide, including local stakeholder events to ensure that this topic becomes front and centre stage. Findings indicate that the lack of awareness of the scope of this problem, confusion over agreed practices when OCSEA is suspected but not confirmed, and insufficient weight given to child-led responses surrounding OCSEA can all deter children and young people from coming forward. The team has a responsibility to take the young people's voices and elevate them to ensure adults know this is a prominent and ever-growing problem and that everyone, not a single agency, is responsible for playing a part in preventing and addressing OCSEA victimisation.

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For further information

Read more about this project at
vulnerabilitypolicing.org.uk/ocsv

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