



"Tell us who we can be, not who we shouldn't be."

Youth voice insights into
education on exploitation

May 2026

**The
Children's
Society**

We would like to give special thanks to all the young people who participated, and the organisations who supported us in facilitating these consultations.



Introduction



The Prevention programme

The Children's Society's national Prevention programme was established in 2019 and is commissioned by the Home Office. The programme works to drive improvements in the prevention and disruption of child sexual abuse (CSA) and exploitation (CSE), child criminal exploitation (CCE), and modern slavery on a regional and national basis across England and Wales. With expertise on the lived experiences of children, current and emerging forms of child exploitation, and effective approaches to improving victim identification and support, the programme has built a reputable profile recognised across law enforcement, child protection, healthcare, and the private sector. We work with thousands of professionals across these sectors each year to tackle child exploitation.

The programme also leads the award winning #LookCloser campaign, focused on supporting the public and businesses to spot child exploitation and take action to get them help.

The programme works closely with multi-agency partners across sectors and regions to ensure we are guided by the latest developments and intelligence. Drawing on evidence from direct practice, youth voice consultations, and emerging strategic insight, the programme is an agile resource that enables partners to develop and take ownership of new approaches to preventing child exploitation and abuse.

Background

The Children's Society Prevention programme has consulted young people on a range of topics since 2024. Through these consultations, young people have often shared views on the need to improve education messaging and approaches to children on exploitation. Strategic policing professionals also shared a desire to standardise the sessions being delivered by police. This indicated a need to explore the topic further and obtain the views of young people on this topic at a larger scale.

Across England and Wales, children and young people usually learn about exploitation in their school through:

- teachers delivering content as part of a set curriculum and/or through endorsed learning materials and resources (for example the PSHE Association)
- police officers delivering one-off sessions in schools
- external agencies and/or charities working in partnership with the school to come in and deliver one-off or a series of sessions.

There is some existing research on the effectiveness of educational content to deliver preventative interventions (PSHE Association, 2016), as well as research around the effectiveness of police presence in schools in relation to tackling crime and building relationships (Bradford and Yesberg, 2019). However, there is little information regarding how young people feel about current approaches to police and wider professional delivery specifically relating to exploitation.

Methodology

Between October 2025 and January 2026 we carried out 8 consultations, both in group and one-to-one settings, with 68 young people across various youth forums, young people's services, and schools. These sessions took place both in person and virtually. The participants were aged between 13 and 21, with the majority being under 18.

When consulting with these groups, we ensured representation from a variety of regions and locations. Participants were provided with information about the Prevention programme, the aims of our consultation, and how their views would inform and influence our work. We followed ethical guidelines, ensuring that confidentiality was maintained and that any information which could identify participants was changed or removed. This was clearly communicated to the young people prior to their participation. We also obtained consent from all the young people and ensured that their engagement was voluntary and informed.

We worked through a structured session plan and shared examples of exploitation-related educational materials currently delivered in schools. These included police-led presentations from different forces, along with short films created by charities and policing partners. The young people were often already familiar with the content we showed to them during sessions.

Using these materials, we explored young people's perspectives on how effectively the content communicates risk, safety and support. We asked them to reflect on how experiences of exploitation, interactions with the police, and with education settings more broadly might influence how this content is understood and received.

Beyond reviewing the materials themselves, we also examined how delivery style shapes engagement. Young people discussed what approaches help them feel safe, what makes learning meaningful and engaging, and what support they would need before, during, and after a session for it to have a positive impact.

The responses gathered from these consultations were analysed to identify common themes and insight. The responses were categorised based on how young people responded to the existing content presented to them, their current thoughts and feelings about police presence in schools, and what delivery styles they thought would be most supportive.

The findings outlined in this report demonstrate general views on the delivery of education materials relating to exploitation as opposed to reflections from lived experience. However, it is possible that some young people within these groups may have lived experience of exploitation and may have expressed views from this perspective.

While we sought to consult with as many young people as possible, it is important to note that this report is not reflective of the thoughts and feelings of every young person.

How will this information be used?

This youth voice report aims to inform schools, commissioners and police about how young people feel about the quality of educational content on exploitation delivered in schools. This can then be used to consider best practice at a local, regional or national level.

Alongside this report, we will be publishing a 'Best Practice Guide', which will offer actionable insight into effective ways to engage, educate and support young people in relation to exploitation.

Navigating this report

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Delivery and approach



Trust and relationships

What are young people telling us?

- Young people are more likely to engage with adults who they already know, or who repeatedly attend. This could include police officers who have a regular presence, teachers, or youth workers.
- Trust builds through consistency, transparency and ongoing presence outside of session/lesson delivery.
- Young people gave examples of positive experiences of getting to know the police officers who attend their school. For example, officers joining in for football during lunch breaks or sharing light touch information with young people about their own lives outside of work.

"Because you share your personal stories, if you have the same person coming back multiple times you might feel more comfortable."



"When the funding was there, they were stationed at school.

They built relationships with schools. For relationships to be effective, it needs to be repetitive or consistent, so you know they are reliable. You know them, so you trust them."

- Some young people reported feeling on edge, overwhelmed or scared in the presence of uniformed police officers. While some young people felt that a uniform provides a sense of 'authority' and can create respect among young people, most reported finding it a barrier and felt that if officers are attending schools, they should be in plain clothes.
- Young people want to know in advance who is coming, why, and what for.

"A boy in my class, his dad was a police officer. We saw him at sports day and places like that. We had a positive relationship with him. We saw him as a person outside of his uniform."




Past experiences with police

What are young people telling us?

- Young people who reported having negative experiences with the police, either personally or through their family or community, shared that they may feel anxious or overwhelmed when police are present in school. This can result in them withdrawing, shutting down or finding it difficult to engage with the session.
- Police should be aware of past trauma and be sensitive and adaptable when responding to it.

"The child's background is important - their experiences of police matters. Police officers need to explain who they are, what they are there for, what they are going to be talking about. A lot of young people have trauma related to the police."



"It's hard for me to communicate with the police because of my understanding of how they behave. We're taught they're trying to 'get us'. They're trying to imprison us, not help us."

"If someone feels overwhelmed or intimidated by the officer being there, it would affect how they act. They might be conscious of what they're saying. They would sense it, act a certain way and wouldn't feel comfortable."

"In my Pupil Referral Unit, appropriate adults came in, instead of police. Other young people knew who they were, they knew the service and had had a positive experience. They were around the area, they saw them. We had built trust and a relationship with them. After their sessions, disclosures happened, because we knew them."

- Police are not always best placed to deliver educational content on exploitation. Some young people felt that they may be more likely to engage with teachers, youth workers, or other trusted adults. This can be due to mistrust in police, and perceptions of which professionals 'safeguard' and which professionals 'criminalise'.

"First of all I don't think it should be done by the police. You have no relationship with the police and in some areas young people don't trust the police. I think it should be a teacher because they have a relationship with you."

"Seeing a county lines video could trigger certain behaviours, you might go to your next class and 'act out' because you are triggered'. Teachers should be sympathetic and understanding."




Environment and community context

What are young people telling us?

- Police must understand the community, local dynamics, and young people's perspectives. Content should be relevant and relatable to the young people it is being delivered to.
- Young people don't want police acting like they "know more" than them about their own area.
- In some communities, police presence could reinforce "us v them" dynamics.
- Young people in alternative provisions, hospital schools, and who are home schooled should also receive educational content on exploitation.

"What accommodations are made for children outside of school? It's kind of like survivorship bias. A lot of kids who would be exploited are not likely to be in school."



"Young people know the secrets of the areas they live, so police shouldn't act like they know more than us."

"Police need to adapt their approach based on the young people's needs. They should understand the individuals and the areas they live in."

"Being able to relate to an area is important. They need different videos for different areas."

Content



Messaging

What are young people telling us?

- Messaging should empower, not shame or scare young people. Victim blaming language serves as a barrier to young people making disclosures.
- Fear based messages, or focusing on young people's "decisions", will make young people less likely to make disclosures or seek support. Young people need reassurance that exploitation is not their fault.
- Young people want to be reminded of what they can achieve and what their value is, not what risks face them.

*"Some young people are **mentally wired to do positive things**, some aren't. Some don't believe they can do anything. Police and teachers need to **do the work to rewire us**. Don't tell us you're trying to stop us making mistakes. People already believe they're going to fail because of the environment they come from. You have to **help us find our value, purpose. Our meaning.**"*



"I feel like it is easier said than done to say 'be brave'. You might not know you are being exploited and then you attend this presentation and realise you are. You would feel really overwhelmed."



"If you are living through poverty, parents with addictions, and police come to your school and say 'don't do this' it would have an adverse effect and further marginalise you."



"If someone's going through it (exploitation) don't make them feel like they're in the wrong, like in the video the boy seemed like he was in the wrong, if you were being exploited this would stop you telling anyone."

"I feel like the presentation puts a lot of pressure on the child. If they realise that this is what is happening to them, they are expected to do something about it."



- All delivery should centre around what support is available to young people, and reassure them that they will not be judged or criminalised for making disclosures.
- Content should focus on what support pathways are available for young people.
- Messaging should emphasise empowerment, protection, and trusted relationships, not morality. Messaging encouraging young people to “be fearless” implies that there is something wrong with being afraid, or that they won’t get support if they are scared.

“Young people need to know, they can be more than their pain, they can do something through their pain. I didn’t understand that I could become something good until I was told I could be. If police communicate that young people can become something, they stop being the enemy.”

“When police make out that we get involved with county lines for money or for clothes, it undermines the real reasons like poverty or because we don’t have a choice.”



"Police should remember that county lines or gangs gives people a sense of purpose, and our lives a feeling of meaning. You should be telling us what is our alternative meaning. Tell us who we can be, not who we shouldn't be."



Adapting to the needs of the audience

What are young people telling us?

- Young people generally prefer content that reflects real-life settings, real language and their communities. Young people want to hear their own accents reflected in videos and see locations which are relevant to them.
- Young people want information that aligns with their developmental stage and real-life experiences. Primary-aged children may prefer cartoons and simple, clear visuals, whereas older young people want realistic images and real-life examples.
- Some young people prefer interactive approaches. Long, text heavy presentations with complex terminology may be confusing and fail to engage young people.
- Storytelling, role plays and relatable characters are more memorable than presentations.


"Not every child will be able to sit and listen to a presentation, particularly if there are no videos or pictures."



Session style

What are young people telling us?

- Some young people felt that it would feel more comfortable to receive delivery in smaller groups.
- Pair work or group discussions could put young people at risk if they are in the same school or class as someone they are experiencing conflict with outside of school.
- Some young people felt the use of VR headsets could be engaging for some, but that it also risks re-traumatising those who had experienced exploitation.
- The person delivering content should be knowledgeable about exploitation.

A young girl with light brown hair tied back, wearing a dark grey jacket and a necklace, is speaking to another person whose back is to the camera. They are outdoors with green foliage in the background. The girl's hands are clasped together as she speaks.

"There are conflicts in schools, you might be sat next to a gang rival when receiving this delivery. It could be dangerous."

"It would feel easier to ask questions in smaller groups or with your form group than in a big assembly."


"Looking at something alone on a VR headset would be isolating and maybe traumatic."



Descriptions or portrayals of exploiters

What are young people telling us?


- 'Gang' terminology can worry young people, particularly at a primary school age. Young people may feel anxious that their 'gang' of friends is harmful.
- Young people felt a lot of existing material frames perpetrators as strangers, which doesn't align with all young people's experiences. This can make young people experiencing intra-familial abuse or exploitation feel isolated.
- Scenarios which were perceived as unrealistic by young people (i.e. exploiters loitering outside a school, or buying a victim new shoes) undermine the credibility of content delivered, and serve as a barrier between young people and professionals delivering sessions.



"So much happens before this [before handing over a package], even before the text messages. It's unrealistic to think they text and then just come to football."

"Descriptions of gangs might make me a little worried because I see my group of mates as a gang. It might make me start to question that friendship."

- Young people felt that grooming and exploitation is more covert and gradual than what is depicted in the existing content. It therefore risks undermining young people's lived experiences. Young people felt that they would be less likely to trust professionals who didn't fully understand how exploitation often occurs.
- Young people identified that "often the exploiter is exploited themselves". By content not highlighting that exploitation can be cyclical in nature, young people felt that their experiences, and the experiences of their wider communities, are downplayed and misunderstood by the professionals who are supposed to safeguard them.



"It doesn't really show that there is a chain. Often the exploiter is exploited themselves."

Support



Emotional health and wellbeing

What are young people telling us?

- Young people felt that a lot of the existing content may make them feel nervous, confused or scared. Follow-up sessions, and opportunities for one-to-one conversations with trusted adults, is important.
- Any professional delivering content of this nature must consider the emotional implications for young people and behave compassionately and kindly.

"Instead of someone needing to put their hand up, they could have an opportunity to speak to the police officer on their own."

"You would feel too scared to snitch. We need to be reassured we will be protected."



"Maybe the **nicest** teachers would reassure them it's not their fault like don't worry they won't go to prison and just **give advice** and try **help them out.**"



Pathways for support

What are young people telling us?

- Young people want clear, practical pathways for making disclosures and gaining support when they are experiencing or have experienced exploitation.
- Young people felt that the existing materials put too much emphasis on the 'consequence' of 'making bad decisions' and did little to reassure them that they wouldn't get into trouble, be judged, or labelled as a "snitch" for reporting exploitation.
- Young people want to understand their rights, what laws exist to protect them, and how they can access support.
- Young people want to know what responses to disclosures might look like, and what steps will be taken to protect them.

"I think children and young people should learn how to approach trusted adults with difficult topics and how it will be handled."



"One mistake is waiting for children to come and tell you their experiences.

Around the time these presentations are given, for the rest of the

afternoon you could take young people aside

and ask them is this happening to you, do

you know anyone this is happening to."

"When a young person decides to tell you something you need to be really clear about confidentiality because if they tell you they are being harmed you're going to need to break confidentiality. You need to be clear about that because it actually builds trust even if they decide not to tell you then. Or give them some helpline numbers."

Appendix



References

- PSHE Association. Key principles of effective prevention education [Internet]. Produced by the PSHE Association on behalf of CEOP. 2016 [accessed 2026]. Available from: <https://fs.hubspotusercontent00.net/hubfs/20248256/Evidence%20and%20research/PSHE%20Association%20report%20to%20CEOP%20April%202016%20FINAL.pdf?hsCtaTracking=644943a6-990b-4464-a490-8c24548c6cdc%7C36c2e42c-bcfe-40d7-92d4-bdcee99dce66>.
- Bradford, B. and Yesberg, J. Police in schools - an evidence review [Internet]. 2019 [accessed 2026]. Available from: <https://pshe-association.org.uk/hubfs/Evidence%20and%20research/Police%20in%20schools%20Evidence%20Review.pdf?hsLang=en>.

Appendix 1

<p>Protection</p> <p>Our engagement with children and young people will not introduce unnecessary risks to their safety and wellbeing. We will always seek to ensure that they are protected from harm and they can be anonymous and not exposed to public scrutiny when it may harm their interests. Any engagement activity will operate to the standards set in The Children's Society Safeguarding Policy and contribute to our understanding of how best to safeguard young people and protect them from harm.</p>	<p>Recognition</p> <p>We will always acknowledge and celebrate the contributions made by children and young people and will give them information and feedback on how their contribution is used and makes a difference.</p> <p>That recognition includes providing accreditation and awards for developing skills.</p>	<p>Provision:</p> <p>We will always ensure that young people are able to participate in activities without cost to them or their families.</p> <p>Our engagement with them will provide a tangible benefit to them that otherwise would not have been available.</p>	<p>Professionalism:</p> <p>We will engage with children and young people in ways that show our respect for them and our aspiration to take account of their needs and wishes in all circumstances.</p> <p>We will be honest and transparent at all times. Our confident and competent approach to engagement means we are ready and willing to share power with young people.</p>
<p>Belonging and Sharing:</p> <p>We will seek ways of enabling young people to share their experiences with each other and develop skills and knowledge that enhance their wellbeing. This recognises the friendship and kinship that develops among young people when they participate in collective activity.</p>	<p>Choice and Influence:</p> <p>We will always ensure that children and young people make an informed decision to participate and that the influence of their contribution is clear. We also want to make sure that a wide range of young people are offered a multitude of opportunities to participate and engage in.</p>	<p>Mutual gain:</p> <p>There needs to be a tangible benefit to the adults involved for the engagement activity to have meaning and credibility. Where possible, the benefit being sought should be made known to young people from the beginning.</p>	<p>Inclusive:</p> <p>We will ensure the opportunity to participate is extended to all and any regardless of personal circumstances, background or perceived competence and ability. We acknowledge that young people can grow in their capacity to participate and start their journey at different levels.</p>

Our Principles

Based on The Children's Society's Youth Engagement Principles



For over 140 years, The Children's Society has stood with young people when they've needed support.

Teen years should be a time to grow, explore, and build confidence. But across the UK, too many teens are struggling with mental health challenges, abuse, exploitation, or neglect — and help often comes only at crisis point.

We meet young people where they are, providing early, tailored support that helps them build hope and confidence for the future. We also hold the government to account, pushing for policies that protect the next generation.

A future of hope and happiness belongs to every teen. Together, we're making sure no young person faces life alone.

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