



Tackling Child Exploitation
Support Programme

Excluded or missing from education and child exploitation: literature review and stakeholder views on safeguarding practice – report

Key findings from the literature and interviews:

- > Up to 2018-19 exclusion rates have been rising, especially in secondary school. Children from certain groups are disproportionately excluded. These include children from low-income households (eligible for free school meals), children with special educational needs (SEN) and children in need. Boys are more likely than girls to be excluded. Children from Black Caribbean backgrounds and those from Roma Gypsy Traveller groups are excluded at a disproportionately high rate.
- > There is a relationship between school exclusion and child exploitation. Causality is less clear, but the relationship between the two is important. Permanent school exclusion can act as an escalation of risk on a pathway where risk is already likely to have been evident. Attending school full time can be a protective factor. Preventing exclusion reduces the risks around child exploitation.
- > There are different ways in which children are excluded from school. There are official exclusions, unofficial exclusions and unlawful exclusions. The scale of unofficial and unlawful exclusions is unknown. There can be a pathway to exclusion from school that can begin years before exclusion and can be a gradual process of marginalising a child. Early intervention around vulnerabilities and difficulties accessing the curriculum was seen as likely to be the most effective intervention possible in avoiding exclusions. Broadening schools' approach to inclusion was also seen as key.
- > There are children in unregistered settings who are missing entirely from official statistics, because they are, for example, out of placements or in certain home school environments. These children may not be effectively safeguarded until they come to the notice of a statutory agency (e.g., they are arrested). Ensuring safeguarding access to these children has long been campaigned for by some local authorities.
- > Mainstream secondary schools have variable awareness and knowledge around child exploitation. Their thinking was often seen as more developed in child sexual exploitation than in child criminal exploitation.

- > While schools may recognise the signs of possible child criminal involvement, they may be less able to identify exploitation, instead ascribing agency and choice to the child's involvement. Schools may struggle to establish exactly what is happening – assessing the risks accurately is an area where practice is generally still in development. Having a flag for recording possible criminal involvement runs the risk of schools then responding more strongly to later behavioural issues. For example, calling the police when child X is involved in a fight because of flags around criminal involvement, but not calling the police when child Y is involved in a fight.
- > Schools wanted to respond to the risk of criminal involvement with early help. Mentoring, diversionary activities and intensive support for those struggling with literacy were seen as the most effective. However, finding the resource to meet these needs was a key challenge.
- > Helping children to avoid exclusion reduces risks around exploitation. Reducing exclusions will require interventions that need to be provided by skilled professionals who can work on school sites. Schools would benefit from directories of available services within their community but need to take coordinating roles. Schools can be 'like fortresses' to external agencies and need to be more willing to open up and work with them.
- > Once a child is entrenched in exploitation it can be much more difficult to support and help to extricate them. Entrenchment can happen fast. As a result, recognition and early intervention are particularly important.
- > Data-sharing and intelligence could be strengthened to identify risk earlier. This is in both an individual and a place-based sense. Child exploitation rarely happens to one child alone. Schools can have vital intelligence on students of concern (e.g., in their safeguarding logs). Local police could share intelligence that elevates schools' awareness of risk and ensures they prioritise awareness-raising with their student body. Police forces saw value in having access to schools' exclusion and absence data, which helps them concentrate their support on schools in greater need.

- > Detecting and addressing exploitation risk depends on a schools' safeguarding approaches. Schools with a whole-school approach to contextual safeguarding were seen as most effective around exploitation. It also helped to have a strategic, proactive model of safeguarding rather than being responsive. This depends in large part on the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). This is a role that has grown significantly in recent years and requires training, expertise, strategic thinking and time. Note that DSLs in schools tend to be senior managers with other additional areas to cover in their portfolio.
- > Being able to discuss a case informally either with child social services or with a designated police officer facilitated effective referral. It also helped when a school understood the system, structure and language of social care, and could reflect these in discussions and referrals.
- > There is a 'gap in the middle' between logging early concerns and things escalating enough to meet statutory safeguarding partnerships' thresholds of referral. This gap is where resource is most needed.
- > A low exclusion culture was seen as desirable. Generally, schools don't want to permanently exclude children. However, early help to prevent exclusion, and therefore reducing exclusion overall, was seen as requiring additional resource. Expecting a school to 'hold' a child in place when that child is unable to access what the school offers, and the school lacks the resources to effect real change, is unrealistic and unhelpful.
- > Schools exclude children as a last resort, although what is meant by 'last resort' varies considerably from school to school. Ensuring transparency and better consistency in exclusion decision-making was seen as desirable.

- > Decisions on permanent school exclusions are complex. Headteachers experience multiple pressures, often take decisions quickly and can feel they have little choice but to exclude where zero tolerance policies are in place. These policies can prevent a headteacher taking into consideration the driving causes behind behaviours that are a serious breach of behaviour policies.
- > There is a ‘perverse’ financial incentive for schools in permanently excluding a child who needs intensive and costly support. It costs more for a school to have a pupil dual-registered in a setting like a pupil referral unit than it does to exclude them and have the local authority assume funding responsibility.
- > The behaviours demonstrated because of being at risk of exploitation may be the same behaviours that put a child at risk of school exclusion. In decisions around exclusions, safeguarding and behavioural policies can be seen as being at odds, with behavioural policies often prioritised. As well as requiring schools to consider mitigating circumstances, safeguarding considerations could be made a part of the decision-making framework for school exclusion.
- > Five core issues were seen to influence the ability of schools to be an effective safeguarding partner, and to work effectively at a strategic level with the statutory safeguarding partnerships. These were:
 - > limitations in how well exploitation was recognised, especially in cases of criminal exploitation
 - > the fact that the current child protection system was designed for intra-familial not extra-familial harm
 - > the ‘unharnessing’ of schools from local authorities
 - > schools’ role in statutory safeguarding
 - > the lack of resource around early help.

- > In order to safeguard children at risk of exploitation more effectively, facilitators need to:
 - > reduce school exclusions
 - > ensure exclusion decision-making is transparent, consistent and takes safeguarding risks into consideration
 - > have accountability in the school exclusions system
 - > ensure the quality of alternative provision is consistent
 - > find effective ways to proactively share intelligence across organisations
 - > work effectively across systems to address the gaps between them.

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1 Introduction and methods

This paper reports the findings from research interviews and a rapid evidence review on child exploitation and children missing from education. This exploratory research was commissioned by the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme and carried out by an independent researcher. 12 in-depth interviews were carried out with participants who were either in strategic roles and / or involved in innovative practice. Stakeholders held varied roles in education, the police, third-sector organisations and academia. Stakeholders in education included specialists in alternative provision, further education, mainstream education, inclusion and looked-after children. It was not possible to include children's social care or health representatives during the timetable for the research, (see appendix 1 for further detail on methods).

The key research question was: How can the education sector act as a more effective safeguarding partner where there are concerns about child exploitation for children who are excluded from school, at risk of exclusion or without placement? The research also explored:

- > the context of young people missing from education
- > how exclusion and exploitation relate to each other
- > how schools identify and respond to exploitation risk
- > the extent to which this form of harm is factored into decision-making on exclusion.

The research is exploratory and interviews were carried out with a small and non-representative sample. While participant views often echoed findings in the literature, the limitation of this sample means the qualitative research cannot offer robust and conclusive findings. The aim was to explore the key issues, bring together the literature, and voice participant views and experiences to better understand current practice and identify areas where systems and approaches could be strengthened to better protect children at risk of exploitation.

2 School exclusion and child exploitation: the relationship

Prior to 2019/20, school exclusion had seen a rise in recent years after a previous downward trend. The recently published¹ data shows an overall reduction in exclusion rates for the year 2019/20. However, this data is less likely to represent trends because exclusion was impacted by school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic (DfE, 2021). Data from the most recent year prior to the pandemic (2018/19) showed an increase in schools' exclusion rates. 7,894 permanent exclusions² happened in the school year 2018/19, with a rate of approximately 0.20% in secondary schools. In other words, 20 pupils per 10,000 were permanently excluded from secondary schools in 2018/19. The rate of permanent exclusions in primary schools and special schools is considerably lower (0.02% and 0.06% respectively – DfE, 2020).

In 2018/19, for over a third of permanent exclusions (35%), the reason given was persistent disruptive behaviour. The next most common reasons were physical assault against a pupil (13%) and physical assault against an adult (10% – DfE, 2020).

The rate of fixed-term exclusions in secondary schools increased in 2018/19 to a rate of 10.75% (or 1,075 pupils per 10,000). The increase in fixed period exclusions was driven most strongly by more pupils having repeated exclusions. 84,500 pupil enrolments had two or more fixed period exclusions in 2018/19, an increase from 78,900 in 2017/18 (DfE, 2020).

Particular groups of children and young people are more likely than others to be excluded from school. The Timpson Review highlighted that 78% of permanently excluded children either had special educational needs, were classified as children in need or were eligible for free school meals. 11% of permanent exclusions were children who had all three characteristics. This means that children from low-income households were more at risk than the general population. Boys and children from particular ethnic backgrounds – Black Caribbean and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are also more likely to be permanently excluded (Graham, White, et al., 2019). It should be noted that these issues are not new but represent persistent disproportionality in relation to school exclusions. This has been evident in national data since systematic record collection began in 1997, but local data points to disproportionate exclusion from the 1980s (Gilbourne et al., 2015).

In addition to formally recorded exclusions, there are 'unofficial exclusions' (Gill with Quilter-Pinner & Swift, 2017).

1. July, 2021

2. The 7,894 exclusions included 6,753 from state-funded secondary schools, 1,067 from state-funded primary schools and 67 exclusions from special schools.

These include:

- > Managed moves (where headteachers mutually agree to move a pupil from one school to another).
- > Offsite alternative provision (where a school directs a pupil to a placement either full or part time in an offsite setting but where the school remains legally, and financially, responsible for the child's education).
- > Illegal exclusions, where a school encourages parents to take their child out of a school (off-rolling is also seen as a form of unlawful exclusion).

Unofficial exclusions do not show on schools' data and, as a result, are not reflected in official statistics. How widespread these kinds of exclusions are is therefore currently unclear.

There is a 'clear near universally acknowledged' (Just for Law Kids, 2020) link between young people being involved in criminal activities and falling outside mainstream education. Being excluded from school is one of the child-level risk factors noted by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for being vulnerable to exploitation or grooming by gangs (Longfield, 2019). Similarly, The Children's Society, National Police Chief's Council and NSPCC highlight exclusion from school as a risk of child criminal exploitation (Just for Law Kids, 2020).

Debates around causation are more complex. This complexity needs to be recognised and corresponding care taken not to make assumptions about individual children. Exclusion and exploitation overlap and co-exist, 'they're symptoms of the exact same societal issues'.

There is overlap in the characteristics and experiences that make a child vulnerable to exploitation and an increased likelihood of being excluded. Participants pointed out that not all excluded children are at risk of exploitation, but for those at risk of exploitation, exclusion heightens the risk.

'It's a... circular relationship between exclusions and exploitation where you could be being exploited, which then enhances the risk of being excluded. Or you're excluded, which then enhances the risk of being exploited... But it seems to be a vicious circle.'

(Interview 06, third-sector organisation)

The number of girls permanently excluded is about a third less than boys (1,885 compared to 6,009 in 2018/19 (DfE, 2020). Whilst there is limited research about this group of girls, existing evidence suggests that they are likely to experience a range of challenges, including exploitation, violence, poor mental health, poverty and discrimination (Girls Speak, 2021). Their trajectory to being excluded from education is often characterised by long-term absenteeism. This presents a challenge with respect to engaging them with support or alternative provision, with the latter further hampered by the gender imbalance (Osler et al., 2002).

2.1 Exclusion: a tipping point in the escalation of risk

Exclusion from mainstream school can be a tipping point in the escalation of risk, especially if a young person is on a path toward being exploited. Both interviews and the literature emphasised that, although risk would likely have existed prior to the exclusion (i.e., it wasn't caused by exclusion alone), it nonetheless increased substantially as a direct result of exclusion.

When young people are excluded from their communities, they find other ways / places in which to be included, which can increase the risk of exploitation. This elevated risk is heightened by school exclusion for several reasons:

- > Permanent exclusion from school is a sudden and drastic form of social exclusion, because a child is sent away from their day-to-day community as well as away from their peers.
- > Movement into an alternative provision can expose a young person to peers already involved in criminal activities, thereby increasing the likelihood of their own involvement.
- > A child or young person without a placement or on a reduced timetable can be left without structure or supervision, leaving them more vulnerable to groomers in their community.
- > There is also evidence that groomers and exploiters deliberately drive some young people toward school exclusion to further their own ends (Lamrhari, Maitland, et al., 2021).
- > Being excluded has a negative impact on children's self-esteem, self-worth and their sense of likely future achievement (Lamrhari, Maitland, et al., 2021), arguably compounding the challenges facing that young person before exclusion.

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020) examined serious case reviews over an 18-month period to learn lessons from the serious harm done to children involved in child criminal exploitation. In this review, they identified exclusion from mainstream school as a pivotal moment in the majority of the 21 cases included; it's a trigger for 'significant acceleration' in risk. 17 of these 21 children had been permanently excluded from school. Both their families and the professionals who worked with them viewed permanent school exclusion as a 'tipping point' in each case.

In this research, interview participants spoke particularly strongly of the link between exclusion and an involvement in criminal activity, but did not make this link as clearly with sexual exploitation. The literature, however, highlights that this, too, is an important link. When young women are being sexually exploited, one impact can be a deterioration in their behaviour. They may truant more from school or become more aggressive or withdrawn (Bovarnick & D'Arcy, 2018; Jonnson & Svedin, 2012; Hickle & Hallett, 2016 in Rawden, 2019). Depending on the approach of a school and its awareness of sexual exploitation, this can make exclusion more likely. Young women experiencing sexual exploitation can also drift away from school attendance (Rawden, 2019).

To exclude a young woman from school can place her at direct risk of an escalation of abuse. For girls where school provides support, supervision or positive peer groups, these protective factors are lost at the point of exclusion (Barnado's, 2011; Rawden, 2012; DfE, 2017). It is important to note, however, that sexual harm can also be experienced in school, as reports from the website [Everyone's Invited](#) have recently shown.

Assumptions about the gendered nature of different types of exploitation also need to be considered. There is a tendency to see boys as victims of criminal exploitation and girls as victims of sexual exploitation (McNaughton et al, 2014). It is important to be mindful that both boys and girls can be victims of criminal *and* sexual exploitation, and that it is, unfortunately, common for young people to be victims of multiple forms of exploitation.

Given the correlation of risk between exclusion and exploitation, and the risk of school exclusion as a tipping point, reducing and avoiding school exclusion wherever possible was seen as beneficial. When it comes to exploitation, participating in mainstream schooling is an important protective factor. If this is not possible, planning for what happens to safeguard a young person at the point of exclusion is key.

2.2 Children without educational placements, missing from education or in unregistered settings

The Wood Report (2021) found the current Department for Education statutory advice (2016) is not detailed enough regarding children who are not in registered settings. This is an issue about which local authorities have highlighted concern (Parish, et al., 2020, p. 40). The London Borough of Hackney has also campaigned on this. Currently, the statutory safeguarding partners have no power to require information from unregistered educational settings and have no legal powers to visit them.

Participants in this research were clear that registered formal education can be an important protective factor. Children outside of this framework are effectively ‘hidden’ unless they come to the notice of statutory agencies by another route, such as being arrested or turning up in A&E³. This can mean that statutory services are not alerted until further along in a child’s involvement in criminal activity, which is likely to make them harder to help. Furthermore, data and intelligence on these children and the circumstances and contexts of their lives can be limited or absent.

Participants in the research spoke about their fears that the pandemic would create an increase of pupils either absent from formal education or struggling to re-engage with school after a substantial time away. They reflected that it would take time to see the full effects of the pandemic on children’s engagement with school. One headteacher noted that there were children still not back at school by summer 2021, although such cases were relatively few. His school was working hard to re-engage these children but felt it was a difficult challenge to overcome.

3. There are a number of services that can step in at those ‘teachable’ moments of crisis, such as Redthread - <https://www.redthread.org.uk/> - which works in hospitals to support young victims of violence.

2.3 Inclusion and pathways to exclusion from the mainstream school experience

Research participants with expertise in primary education, inclusion, SEN (special educational needs),⁴ looked-after children and mainstream secondary research spoke about an experience of exclusion from school in a broader sense than that of formal exclusion. They described a process by which some children are effectively excluded from a mainstream setting in greater and lesser ways over their school careers. This process of marginalisation can happen in a ‘drip drip’ way. This experience may build up until something gives, i.e. a child’s behaviour becomes difficult to manage and, as a result, they find themselves at risk of formal exclusion, or children may be removed from a setting by their parents or carers. This process of exclusion (or failure of inclusion) can have a negative impact on a child’s self-esteem, sense of belonging and worth. These (along with other experiences and characteristics) may make a child more vulnerable to later exploitation.

An ex-primary school headteacher who had since worked in advisory and mentoring roles described a process of exclusion that can start early in a child’s educational journey. When a child is struggling in primary school, they can (with the best of intentions) be frequently removed from their class setting and go to a nurture group for small group support or other interventions. They may also be removed from class when their behaviour is challenging or as a disciplinary measure (to see the headteacher, for example). This, she argued, begins a process of the child being separated out from their peers, seeing themselves as not belonging in the main group, which can compound difficulties in accessing the curriculum (a child returning to a class after an intervention is likely to return part-way through a lesson and the teacher will be unable to focus their attention on that individual to catch them up). What primary schools could improve, she argued, is how to support a child’s needs while keeping them in their class and amongst their peers.

4. SEN refers to special educational needs. SEND is a broader term that refers to special educational needs and disabilities. Interview participants specifically used the term SEN in their interviews. This is also the term used in Department for Education reports on the levels of SEN in schools. To reflect these uses, this report uses this terminology SEN rather than SEND.

'We need to 'wash' them in there with their class. We need those children totally submerged in what we think is normal behaviour. They probably haven't had that. Children are good at working with each other within tight boundaries. We don't let them do that.'

(Interview 03, education sector)

The pathway to exclusion from secondary school was seen to begin in primary. Primary headteachers, it was felt, could probably point out by year 6 the children from their school most likely to end up being excluded from secondary education.

For children with SEN, school can be a place that effectively excludes children by failing to make reasonable adjustments to meet their needs in mainstream settings. An education specialist who focuses on inclusion described how the school journey for children with SEN can be marked with frequent school moves (a similar picture to that for children in care). Parents and carers move children with SEN when a school setting becomes difficult for their child, either because of relationship difficulties, unmet needs or difficulties accessing curriculum learning. Schools will also work with parents and carers to find alternative placements when they feel they are unable to meet a child's needs. This can result in individual children moving school multiple times. The 'SEN churn' is not evident in data on school exclusions but should be thought about as such, especially given the overrepresentation of children with SEN in alternative provision.

Mainstream settings struggle to provide an inclusive environment for several systemic reasons. The performance framework for schools is largely focused on attainment data. Participants described this emphasis as detrimental to broader inclusion: schools need to prioritise this first and foremost to succeed, an effect of which can be that they have 'little choice but to cater to the academically able' children. One participant described how the system *says* that nurture and inclusivity are important, but that it also 'technically punishes' school leaders for having a child who struggles to learn. An example of this is the Progress 8 measures.

Despite its original intention to account for different starting points, Progress 8⁵ was described as ‘actually calibrated to detract’ from inclusion⁶.

A two-tiered system of SEN was also described. Children with education and health care plans (EHCPs⁷) have been assessed as having support needs at a higher level and as a result have resource allocated to them, whereas those on the ‘lower’ level of SEN (without an ECHP) have little additional resource available to support their needs.

The level of recognised SEN in schools is growing. In 2019, 12.1% of pupils were on the SEN register and 3.3% had EHCPs. Diagnosed SEN is more prevalent in boys than for girls. Boys represented 73.1% of pupils with an ECHP in 2019 and 64.6% of those with SEN (DfE 2020b). Some participants felt that schools lack adequate resource to provide all the support needed to meet pupils’ needs. This can be exacerbated when schools become ‘known’ as inclusive and consequently attract a higher proportion of SEN pupils.

Both the inclusion specialist and primary headteacher felt that teaching staff could benefit from training and an emphasis on being adaptive and inclusive (currently teachers may see the needs of children with SEN as too specialist for them to meet). One participant argued that, with more adaptation and professional curiosity, many children with SEN could be successfully supported within a mainstream setting and that the kind of support or adaptation needed for a child with SEN will have big overlap with the kind of support that works for a child with mental ill health, or ‘adverse childhood experiences’. The policy ‘silos’ around these areas act as a barrier to teachers feeling able to adapt to a broad range of needs in the classroom.

5. Progress 8 was introduced in 2016 (and 2015 for schools that chose to opt in early). It aims to capture the progress a pupil makes from the end of primary school to the end of secondary school. It is a type of value-added measure, which means that pupils’ results are compared to the actual achievements of other pupils with similar prior attainment. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/561021/Progress_8_and_Attainment_8_how_measures_are_calculated.pdf

6. See Leckie, G., & Goldstein, H. (2018). Should we adjust for pupil background in school value added models? A study of Progress 8 and school accountability in England <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/education/documents/FINAL.pdf> for a discussion on how Progress 8 can disadvantage schools by taking into account prior attainment and not socio-economic background.

7. Getting assessed for and getting awarded a ECHP can be a long process and there is variation in practice in different areas in when and how these are awarded. See, for example: <https://schoolweek.co.uk/its-not-fair-that-getting-an-ehc-plan-could-depend-on-your-postcode/>

‘There is a....deskilling of, of the teaching profession I think, to believe that there is this body of knowledge that somehow without which you can’t deal with a child who’s got a complex relationship with the curriculum or complex relationship with the school and somehow outside of your frame and your capacity. And that’s just not true.’

(Interview 10, education sector)

2.4 Alternative provision

Around 45,000 children and young people access school in alternative provision. In 2015, Malcolm noted that this number has been relatively stable even when permanent exclusions fluctuate (Malcolm, 2015). And this continues to be the case. In 2018/19 just under 8,000 children were permanently excluded from school. In the academic year 2020/21, 32,436 children were in local authority-funded alternative provision⁸ and an additional 12,800 children were registered in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). This is a total of 45,236 children. An additional 9,200 pupils have dual registration in PRUs and another setting, likely to be a mainstream school (DfE, 2021). Children with SEN and looked-after children or children in need are overrepresented in alternative provision (Malcolm, 2015).

In PRUs in 2020/21, nearly three-quarters of pupils (72.9%) were boys. Over half of pupils in PRUs are eligible for free school meals (53.1%). This compares to 20.8% for the overall school population (DfE, 2021).

Interview participants pointed to an increase of alternative provision being provided in-house by mainstream schools. There is little data on how many children and young people are taught within in-house alternative provision, or how long they stay there. This provision is also wide ranging and may vary from 'just an isolation room' to more supportive and positive environments.

Alternative provision settings that are not in mainstream schools are commissioned by local areas. They were seen by participants in this research as providing variable quality, a finding also highlighted in the Timpson review. Some were described as excellent settings that safeguard risk effectively, support children and young people with trusted relationships and provide an accessible curriculum that can 'help young people flourish when they didn't in mainstream.' (Interview 06, third-sector organisation)

High-quality alternative provision was seen by participants as better able to meet the needs of some young people. They were seen as being effective at building trusted relationships with young people, assessing educational and learning needs that may have been missed in mainstream school and providing contextual safeguarding and mentoring. The smaller class sizes were also described as key to their success for some young people who struggled in the larger size of mainstream classes.

8. This includes the full range of alternative provision settings including secure settings, independent schools where authorities fund places and hospital schools.

This is echoed in the literature review commissioned to support the Timpson review. The positives of alternative provision were found to be that young people could feel safer, have better relationships with staff and be more engaged than they were in mainstream school. The negatives were described in the literature and by participants as young people feeling isolated, having no choice over attending the alternative provision, the absence of particular subjects and low academic attainment (Graham & White et al., 2019).

Outcomes from alternative provision are poor in comparison to mainstream schools. Only 4.5% of children educated in alternative provision got good grades in English and Maths GCSEs in 2015/16 (Timpson, 2019). In 2014, around 40% of school leavers were not in employment, education or training (Malcom, 2015).

It is a sector that has grown up ‘without strong regulation and oversight’ (interview 01, education sector) and without a clear strategic aim. This was echoed in the Children Commissioner’s review of the subjective wellbeing of children excluded from school and in alternative provision (Children’s Commissioner, 2017). There is no required curriculum, in contrast to the national curriculum in mainstream education; there is ‘no centralised assessment for measuring the quality in provision’ (Malcolm, 2015).

In the ‘80s, a stated aim for alternative provision was as a temporary placement for children, with a view to reintegrating them into the mainstream. This has not been systematically monitored and is arguably not how alternative provision is currently seen or used (as can be indicated by the 9,200 pupils with dual registration compared to nearly 13,000 registered only in a PRU). In a Department for Education survey, 23% of schools said they directed children and young people to off-site provision for over a year (Timpson Review, 2019, p. 98).

The literature review commissioned to support the Safeguarding Practice Review quoted research that found children in gangs are more likely to have been in alternative provision and to have experienced school instability through exclusion or mid-year moves. They are also more likely to have been absent from school (Clarke, 2019 in Maxwell & Wallace, et al., 2019). In response, Ofsted (2018) has called for schools to consider the well-documented links between missing education and safeguarding when considering school exclusions. This is supported by the Home Office (2019, p. 41) which is encouraging schools not to exclude or to reduce the timetables for children at risk of or experiencing either sexual or criminal exploitation.

3 Schools' identification and assessment of child exploitation

Participants in the research discussed their knowledge and experience of how schools work in relation to exploitation and exclusion. Discussion of this did focus mainly on state-funded secondary schools that were not offering specialist provision around a particular area of SEN need. These are referred to as 'mainstream' schools.

Schools were described (throughout the interviews and the literature; see, for example, the Wood Review, 2021) as a key organisation for identifying safeguarding concerns. Broadly, schools see children frequently and know them well enough to spot significant changes in behaviour, making them better placed than almost any other organisation to systematically spot safeguarding concerns.

While interview participants talked about the work schools do around safeguarding, they also acknowledged systemic limitations in two areas:

- > The support schools are able to provide, particularly to students with additional needs.
- > The relatively high threshold for referring safeguarding concerns and responses from statutory safeguarding partnerships.

This section explores participants' views on how mainstream schools understand exploitation, and how they identify and assess risks, for example, in terms of either child criminal exploitation or criminal involvement.

3.1 Recognising exploitation

In interviews, schools were seen as having a growing awareness of the indicators associated with involvement in criminal activity. This was in part attributed to the Department for Education's 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' (2020) which explicitly refers to the need for all school staff to be aware of extra-familial risks, including child exploitation.

Despite this, there were important differences, participants felt, in schools' approaches to child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. This was a difference identified across interviews and echoed in the literature. Schools have developed their practices in relation to child sexual exploitation over recent years, at least in part due to high profile cases and the subsequent work to strengthen the systems' response as a result. Children and young people subject to sexual exploitation are clearly seen as victims.

Child criminal exploitation, on the other hand, and the modern-day slavery and intra-country trafficking that can be associated with county lines activity, were seen as being much less clear-cut. Different types of organisations have different lenses through which they view these forms of harm. In one interview, a policy specialist reflected that a school lens often sees a young person's choices and agency. Schools focus on teaching young people to take responsibility for their actions and school behaviour systems echo and reinforce this perspective.

Participants felt that, while schools were often aware of the signs of criminal involvement and criminal exploitation, they may struggle to assess risk and to distinguish exploitation from involvement. This can result in young people being held to account, in line with school behaviour policies, for behaviour or activities that result from criminal exploitation, as well as being seen as responsible for involvement in criminal activities.

Young people themselves were described as being unlikely to recognise grooming or to see themselves as victims in something they have rationally chosen to do. However, participants working with children who had been exploited or excluded emphasised that the perception of choice does not equate to an absence of exploitation. Exploitation can be present even where a young person sees themselves as choosing their actions.

The exploitation is driven by:

- > the power differential between the exploiter and the child
- > manipulation of the child
- > contextual factors that make it easier to happen alongside the absence of compelling alternatives.

“If you made better choices, then you wouldn’t be exploited.” Can you see how ridiculous that sounds when I say that out loud?... That completely contradicts the definition of exploitation, which is a power imbalance. And a manipulation... Why are we not considering environments that produce that sort of behaviour [or] considering changing those environments, rather than changing the child’s responses?’

(Interview 06, third-sector organisation)

3.1.1 Victim or perpetrator?

A particular challenge with child criminal exploitation was that a child's level of involvement can change over time and become increasingly entrenched. A child victim of exploitation may in turn become involved in grooming other children and young people. They are then both victim *and* perpetrator. This is a complex issue highlighted across the literature.

Understanding a child's changing involvement and where and when to view a young person as having criminal culpability themselves was a question highlighted by police officers as being particularly challenging.

'It's easy to... say, "Well, every child's a child and we should be after the exploiters." Well, what if the exploiters are children? There's a really horrible grey space in the middle where practically speaking and tactically, we need to be aware that sometimes a CJ [criminal justice] response is the best response. But it's unpalatable and it's not an easy sell and it's not a comfortable thing to even think, whereas we know with CSE [child sexual exploitation], it's completely different, because you can't consent... CSE, you have to be a victim, morally, legally, ethically.

(Interview 09, police officer)

Age also emerged as a factor here. Adolescent males in particular were reported as likely to be seen as responsible for their involvement in criminal activity. This was echoed in the literature. For example, a review of the literature on child criminal exploitation found that, 'while children of all ages can be criminally exploited, older children may be perceived as more autonomous in their involvement and where involvement is seen as a lifestyle choice rather than safeguarding issue.' (Maxwell & Wallace, et al., 2019 p. 8)

3.2 Prevention

Participants talked about the broad range of vulnerabilities associated with young people at risk of both exclusion and exploitation. The importance of early help was emphasised. Prevention was seen as infinitely preferable for young people at risk of exploitation, compared to extricating them once they are involved. However, prevention requires understanding, identification and a holistic assessment of the challenges being encountered by a child, be they cognitive, emotional or family related. Responding to this is a challenge for schools, given the breadth of other activities taking place, and may be where partnership working with other organisations could help to support a child and their family.

The best way to avert exclusion (and the associated risk of exploitation) was seen as intervention in primary school, providing appropriate support to children and families with vulnerabilities, which can make children feel less marginalised, and developing trusted relationships.

'The dream would be... family support workers, attendance engagement officers, education psychologists, counsellors in every primary school... Who, at year one, reception level, are able to pick these students up, because, you know, if you can't go into the home, then you need to get them as early as you possibly can in a kind of a structured environment where you have guarantees that the system could be... transformational.'

(Interview 12, education sector)

Low literacy was described as being an important factor in the marginalisation of young people in secondary school, because they are unable to effectively access the curriculum. The overlap between low literacy and criminal involvement is noted in the literature (see, for example, Morrisroe, 2014) and also by research participants, including school staff and a police officer. Secondary schools were described by participants as being unable to dedicate the resources needed to address children arriving with poor literacy. Secondary school staff in this research felt primary schools were the most effective and appropriate setting in which to address this problem.

3.3 Identifying local risk: sharing data to promote awareness and help identify young people at risk

Intelligence sharing practices were often described by participants as having improved locally, but none felt that they were yet the best they could be. Having data or intelligence from local partners (such as the police or the local authority) that show regional incidences of criminal exploitation could help raise awareness of the scale of the issue and drive up the priority schools place on discussing this topic with their students⁹. Similarly, schools have a wealth of information about their student body that could be shared with partners, such as local hotspots, cars that young people are frequently seen getting into, names of older peers who seem to spend time with school students, and so on. Third-sector organisations working with local communities were also described as rich sources of intelligence which are often overlooked.

A coherent approach to information sharing locally could play an important part in helping to prevent and disrupt exploitation. Participants talked about the benefits of looking at intelligence geographically and sharing it with other professionals whose knowledge could help to interpret it. Child sexual or criminal exploitation seldom happens as an isolated incident, there is likely to be a group of young people being targeted by the same groomers.

Example: mapping risks

In one example a participant described bringing together different professionals and using a ‘who, what, where’ framework to geographically map professional intelligence onto data and see helpful links. Mapping young people’s journeys, i.e. where children are going missing from to where they are being found, and from home to where they were found, can highlight places at risk. One example given of this was mapping a hotspot area for serious youth violence or knife crime. Youth workers or social workers can look at the map and identify, for example, the car park in the area where they have heard dealers sell heroin. *‘It gives them something they can hang their practice experience onto with the data and make that link.’* (Interview 02, policy specialist)

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9. The Contextual Safeguarding Network has a range of resources for schools:
<https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/beyond-referrals-levers-for-addressing-harmful-sexual-behaviour-in-schools>

A headteacher described how third-sector organisations can respond to intelligence in ways that schools can't. For example, by alerting local youth workers to potential risks in a local park, they can pitch a gazebo in the right spot and spend time talking to the young people who hang out there.

Police officers in this study advocated for having school-level exclusion and absence data shared with them. This was in part to allow them to target resources – knowing which schools have the highest exclusion levels may help them concentrate support and early intervention resources where they're most needed.

Example: identifying young people for early intervention

In one area, police officers described developing a matrix or dashboard of intelligence on individuals that allowed them to identify risk and put in place a seven-step early intervention programme. Young people are flagged on the matrix on the basis of being a victim, perpetrator or witness to criminal events or violence. They are scored based on recency, frequency and intensity. A high enough score would mean an officer separate from any investigation initiates an early intervention plan and starts by spending time with the young person and their family to discuss recent events.

Barriers to effective intelligence sharing were described as:

- > time
- > resource
- > structures for information-sharing
- > technology
- > data protection regulations.

3.4 From recognising warning signs to assessing the risk

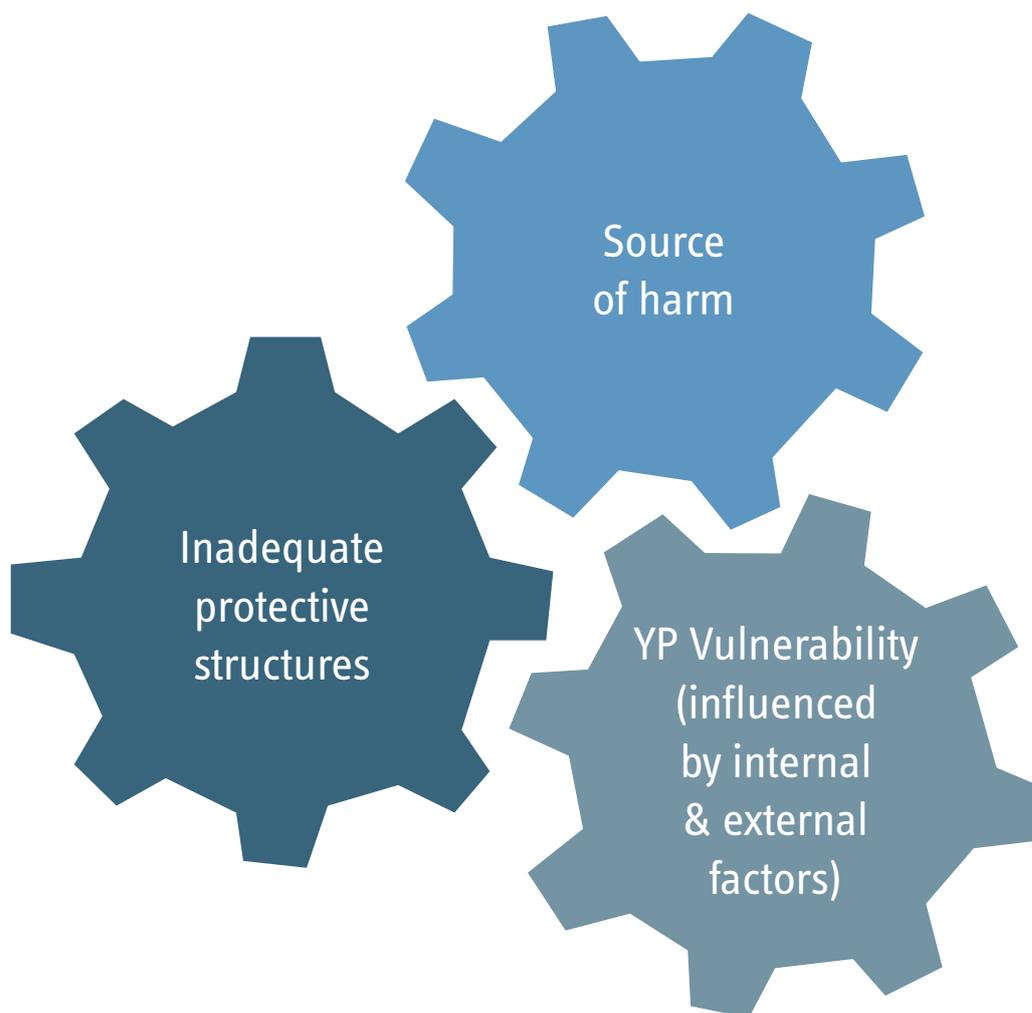
Schools may be able to spot the potential signs but further work is then needed to find out what is happening. It can be ‘hard to nail it to the mast,’ to establish that signs are in fact indicative of criminal exploitation. Employing ‘professional curiosity’¹⁰ was recommended, something schools’ staff could be better trained in but which early help services may be better placed to do.

Risk assessment for child exploitation is still at an early stage of development and the literature highlights some of the problematic issues for practitioners to be aware of (Brown, et al., 2017). Some tools exclude potential indicators of risk (such as online harm), so while one agency might take the lead in assessment, it is desirable, if not essential, that other agencies input information and that young people and their families and carers are also engaged to ensure a holistic assessment. There is also wide variation in consistency of assessment both between and within services. These factors mean that some young people are screened out of services, leaving them at ongoing risk of or entrenchment in exploitation.

Beckett (2011; 2016) emphasises the importance of taking account of more than the child-centred vulnerabilities in risk-assessing child exploitation and instead understanding the context and sources of harm, as illustrated by this diagram:

10. Professional curiosity is a term often used in safeguarding practice guidance to help professionals understand what is actually happening to a child or young person. See this toolkit from Devon safeguarding partnerships as an example: <https://www.preventingexploitationtoolkit.org.uk/guidance-and-support/professional-curiosity-and-respectful-uncertainty/>

Figure 1. The inter-connected conditions of child sexual exploitation Beckett (2011; 2016). Text adapted to ‘source of harm’ in 2019.



At the same time, participants also noted occasions when incidents were escalated without being properly checked or challenged. Part of professional curiosity should also be to keep things in proportion and to think contextually. A police officer gave examples of schools having ‘heightened responses to children who don’t need it’. This can then temper unhelpful responses to later incidences (see section 4.1.2).

3.5 Schools' approach to safeguarding: supporting the identification of child exploitation

Participants could point to examples where schools made the links between vulnerabilities, criminal involvement and potential exploitation. This was typically driven both by experience in the area and heightened risk in particular local contexts. Designated Safeguarding Leads who understood the issue, prioritised it, and took a whole-school approach were seen as key facilitators. A whole-school approach covers not only a preventative education programme for children but also an all-staff awareness, knowledge, and a culture of challenge of and intolerance to sexist or discriminatory language or behaviour.

Police staff, a policy specialist, third-sector participants and schools' staff spoke about the effectiveness of contextual safeguarding¹¹ for a school setting, focusing as it does on peer groups (not just individual young people) and by looking at places and spaces in and around the school where young people feel more and less safe, which is especially important in the context of exploitation. The best whole school approaches to safeguarding were seen as proactive and strategic contextual safeguarding, rather than safeguarding practices that were purely responsive to disclosures and identified risks.

Some participants described how contextual safeguarding as a concept was a more helpful way for schools to engage with and manage the risks associated with exploitation. Exploitation, they felt, is seen as a very high risk, high stakes issue, which schools are likely to feel is beyond their skills and remit to respond to. Thinking about safeguarding a child in their wider context was a more comfortable fit with schools' approaches, and what they see as being within their jurisdiction. This does, however, raise the question of what specialist support is available for schools to refer to when there are young people being exploited, discussed in section 4.1.3 below.

Safeguarding practices in schools was seen as being on an upward trajectory because of *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (DfE 2020a).

11. 'Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. Contextual Safeguarding has been in development since 2011 to inform policy and practice responses to harm that young people experience in contexts and relationships beyond their families. The framework has been adapted to advance safeguarding responses to a range of extra-familial risks that compromise the safety and welfare of young people in school, public spaces and peer groups.' (Firmin & Lloyd May, 2020)

'There's been much more explicit expectation from the DfE. I think that... the Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance is actually probably some of the best guidance that we've had out of the DfE. It's much more in keeping with where I think practice is and wants to go... some of the articulation in Keeping Children Safe in Education is... well ahead of where schools actually are and need [to be]... That's really encouraging.'

(Interview 10, education sector)

Participants who had worked across schools (both those in education and third-sector organisations) felt the schools that struggle to respond to exploitation as a safeguarding risk were seen as more likely to have a 'traditional' view of child protection as an intra- rather than extra-familial risk.

3.5.1 The role of the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL)

The way that a school approaches and manages safeguarding is driven by the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), ideally in close collaboration with inclusion staff and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs).

The DSL role was described as substantial, a role that has grown 'exponentially' over recent years with increased awareness and focus on safeguarding children. DSLs are usually members of the senior leadership team with a portfolio of other responsibilities. This contrasts with the safeguarding role in large further education colleges where it is likely to be a full time and dedicated role. In schools, it was felt 'there's been a lag in the recognition of just how complex that DSL role is.' (Interview 4, education sector)

Effective DSLs were described as knowledgeable, specialist, proactive leaders who act strategically. They develop relationships with local providers to establish a network of resources for additional support. They drive proactive recognition of safeguarding concerns within the school and set up systems that promote and support the recognition of risk. They develop and maintain strong relationships with the statutory safeguarding partners, especially the local authority. They share and receive intelligence about local context and risk. They need to understand the broader safeguarding system well and understand the language and approaches used by other professionals.

Example: proactive whole-school approach to contextual safeguarding

One participant described a system where a large inner city secondary school had fortnightly meetings to discuss children of potential safeguarding concern. This frequency was, he felt, important, as issues can quickly escalate and easily be missed by meetings that only take place each half term. These meetings were attended by the DSL, inclusion team and SENCO, with other specialists, like a speech and language therapist and an educational psychologist, attending as often as possible.

Professionals were invited to the meetings regardless of whether they were working directly with the children that were to be discussed. The idea of this meeting was to bring a rounded view and wealth of expertise, to ask questions of each other, suggest onward referrals and / or specific assessments. Once a term a senior member of child social care (CSC) would attend with whom staff discussed the most serious or concerning cases.

In the same school, the whole-school model was developed and supported, with staff in all roles asked to proactively think about safeguarding risks. One example was:

The English department included an agenda item about safeguarding in every departmental staff meeting. They were alert to possible safeguarding issues that could come from the texts they were covering with children in class. For example, in one term, there was a Year 11 text about race and equality. A small group of boys, spread across different classes, 'pounced on' the text with responses that indicated far-right and extremist views. Only through discussion in a departmental meeting was this recognised as a pattern across a group of young people and raised with the DSL. Through open conversations with the boys, the DSL found that for most, their expressed views were intentionally controversial and challenging: 'They were being teenagers.' These challenges did not seem to reflect their beliefs. However, one young man stood out from the others in seeming to hold genuinely extreme views. A referral to PREVENT was made. Investigation into his social media because of the referral found he was heavily involved in controversial digital activity and pointed towards him being groomed online.

4 Responding to the signs of exploitation

This section discusses participant accounts of how schools respond to exploitation and the rationale for those responses.

4.1 Responding early

Early intervention was described as being the best way of tackling young people at risk of child exploitation due to the challenges of extricating young people once they are involved. This was seen as being of particular importance in relation to criminal exploitation; debt-bondage and the fear of violent repercussions from perpetrators mean that young people struggle to form the kinds of trusted relationships with professionals that could help them (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020). An embedded schools-learning mentor described the following five different stages for involvement for a young person:



The earlier the intervention, the greater the chance to stop the involvement from deepening. It is also an easier stage at which to ‘replace’ with something positive what the young person gets from their involvement or exploitation.

4.2 Responding proportionately

Once risk in this area is identified, participants described the need to respond proportionately. One police officer in the study talked about occasions where schools have flagged a risk around a child. If that child is later involved in a behavioural incident, the school responds differently than it would for a child without any ‘flags’, which can have negative consequences.

‘Some things get escalated for police involvement, which are not appropriate, so we get told about things that a child’s done that another child wouldn’t get a criminal justice response for. Just because of all this risk around it. So, if we’re told child X is at risk of exploitation, then it’s more likely that the school will know that or believe that, and then they’ll phone the police when child X gets in a fight at school. Whereas actually child Y would get in the same fight and the police wouldn’t know about it, so child X is unduly... I’d say criminalized isn’t the term, but is unduly entered into the criminal justice system when he wouldn’t necessarily be if he was at a different school.’

(Interview 09, police officer)

4.3 Responding with expertise

Secondary schools are unlikely to have the expertise or resource to respond to exploitation themselves, and seek instead to refer children to either embedded services within school or to a local third-sector organisation. This has its challenges. Firstly, it assumes that there is specialist provision available in the local area. Secondly, schools have to know what is available, be able to make referrals effectively and coordinate support, which, with limited resources and myriad demands on staff time, is hard to do.

Recognising local variation is important. Even within this small sample, there was a range of experiences of working with local schools. Some emphasised the role that schools have to play in opening their spaces and working to accommodate other services working within their schools.

‘A school’s ability to build relationships with external agencies improves its ability to handle exploitation.’

(Interview 06, third-sector organisation)

Others reflected that schools could seem like ‘fortresses’ that were difficult to get in to:

‘Other agencies find it very difficult to work with schools because those relationships can be quite tense... for various reasons. And I think, if a school can see itself as a hub of the community, where agencies can work from and be offered... a space, and a place to be able to offer support to engage with the local community in a much more meaningful way, to use community organizations that really understand the context of... the community... I think if schools can see and understand that they... have a part to play in facilitating what this support looks like for them, I think they will have much more success in owning what happens with that young person and being part of the local community much more’

(Interview 08, third-sector organisation)

There were also examples of robust and effective partnership working. This highlights the difference in practice and raises the question of whether assessing strengths and weaknesses in a local area could be helpful in order to provide a more equitable experience for young people and their families. Schools could benefit from having a directory of local service providers as well as being linked into their community networks to know what is on offer to support their students.

4.4 Safeguarding responses in exclusion and exploitation

Schools are well-placed to identify early concerns in students’ daily behaviour (Sharp-Jeffs, Coy & Kelly, 2017) and then to refer on to the local statutory safeguarding partnership, where appropriate.

4.4.1 Exclusion as a safeguarding risk

Due to the correlation between exploitation and exclusion, some participants argued that there should be a formal safeguarding response at the point of exclusion. This would involve assessing risk and ensuring that appropriate support was in place, preferably prior to the exclusion taking place. A young person would then receive adequate support at what can be a ‘tipping point’ in the escalation of risk. This could feasibly be planned support, given the frequently predictable nature of exclusion.

This echoes the Timpson Review (2019), which recommended that schools inform social services if a child is about to be excluded.

4.4.2 ‘The gap in the middle’: from logging concerns to referring to the statutory safeguarding partnership

There was broad consensus that when schools identify a safeguarding concern, it must be recorded. Variation in practice was acknowledged. Schools were often seen to log all types of concern, however (apparently) minor, in the knowledge that over time they may build an important picture. These concerns may lead them to keep a closer watch on a situation, to put in place additional support for a child or refer a concern to children’s social care.

School staff talked about ‘the gap in the middle’, explaining that, for the majority of cases, children thought to be at risk of exploitation, do not reach the threshold for referral. However, there is a worrying gap in terms of early intervention provision, which can play a key role in preventing the escalation into exploitation. (See section 4.1.1)

4.4.3 Seeking expertise – gauging the threshold

Participants pointed to the value in schools having strong relationships with police and children’s social care, enabling a collaborative approach to potential exploitation risks. One police officer described an approach whereby an officer is allocated to a group of schools in a locality to provide advice on a ‘no-names’ basis (inviting schools to name children of concern had in the past created confusion about whether a safeguarding referral had been ‘officially’ made or not).

Senior leaders from schools spoke about the importance of the DSL being able to discuss with children’s social care whether or not a case met the threshold for statutory referral. This was helpful in relation to all types of safeguarding concerns, not just exploitation.

4.4.4 Referring a case to the statutory safeguarding partnership

The threshold for referrals into the statutory safeguarding partnership – for any type of safeguarding concern – was seen as high. In relation to exploitation, this could mean that, by the time the threshold was reached, the young person may be entrenched in exploitation, making it much harder to effectively support and help them.

Safeguarding partnerships were seen as having high demand for their service whilst being low on resource. This was part of the reason, participants thought, that the threshold was high.

Understanding the system and the language used in children’s social care could be helpful for schools when making referrals.

Example: reflecting children’s social care language and systems in school

One participant described how he had put in place the Signs of Safety system in his school (see Baginsky, et al., 2017 for an evaluation of this system). A strengths-based approach to assessing risks, Signs of Safety was developed in Australia in the 1990s and is widely used across Australasia, Northern Europe and the UK. Its benefits were, he felt, an asset-based approach to safeguarding but also how well recognised and understood the approach was by children’s social care. This helped when discussing potential referrals with them. His familiarity with social care’s tiered approach to service delivery also helped manage expectations about what support could be offered.

5 School exclusion and exploitation

5.1 Low exclusion or no exclusion?

The Timpson Review stated that there is ‘no optimal rate’ of exclusion. Local context is important. A high rate of exclusion could reflect local context and strong leadership. A low rate may be due to provision of early intervention services.

Participants advocated for lower exclusion rates with increased use of alternatives to exclusion (early intervention, managed moves and the short-term use of alternative provision).

There were, though, times when exclusion was acknowledged to be the most appropriate course of action, in circumstances where there was a real risk to the safety of other pupils or staff. What this research has identified is a gap in support at this critical moment for both the student who is excluded and their families.

5.2 Avoiding exclusion

Each annual cohort of permanently excluded children has been estimated to cost the government £2.1 billion in education, provision of health services, benefits claimed and criminal justice costs (Gill, Quilter-Pinner & Swift, 2017). Life chances and academic achievement after permanent exclusion are lowered. For example, only seven percent of permanently excluded children got good grades in English and Maths GCSEs in 2014/5 (Timpson, 2019).

Avoiding permanent exclusions was highlighted by some participants as a way to improve these young people’s outcomes and reduce the risk of them becoming entrenched in criminal exploitation.

In interviews, a headteacher described an increasing emphasis on having a ‘low exclusions approach’ in schools. He explained that no school *wants* to exclude students, but that reducing exclusions required additional resource to allow them to be able to provide appropriate support, i.e. early intervention in primary and behavioural or learning support in secondary.

Ensuring that a child at school is engaged and feels part of a school community was also seen as key to avoiding exclusion. The Children’s Society research on children’s subjective wellbeing found that a sense of belonging is a significant aspect of wellbeing for young people (Lamrhari & Maitland, et al., 2021). Interview participants agreed. Feeling part of the school community was seen as fundamental to children’s engagement with and behaviour in school.

‘What we found was developing an asset-based approach, and having young people engaged actively using their assets in the school community and in the local community as well, helped keep young people safe and actively engaged in their community, and feel valued in their school community as well. And I would argue... that being on the margins, even if you haven’t been permanently excluded, and developing that kind of... counter-community in the school is just as harmful.’

(Interview 08, third-sector organisation)

School staff underlined the importance of having a code of behaviour and accompanying expectations in place - an essential part of managing over a thousand children and adolescents. Without clear behavioural expectations, a school environment would ‘quickly become chaos’. Additional training and support, enabling all classroom staff to respond more effectively to disruptive behaviour, was argued for by participants. ‘Persistent disruptive behaviour’ was the reason given for over a third of exclusions in the school year 2018/19 (DfE, 2020).

How schools respond to changes in behaviour is important. Participants advocated trauma-informed or coaching-based responses, where staff ask themselves what is driving the behaviour rather than immediately responding with punitive measures outlined in behaviour codes. These punitive measures (such as isolation, removal from the classroom or fixed-term exclusion) were seen to marginalise and separate a child from their school community. Without addressing the underlying factors driving changes in behaviour, they could alienate the young person and exacerbate the situation.

‘What we’d need to change is not to have an archaic authoritarian approach to discipline, which doesn’t actually improve behaviour. I’ve spoken to young people that said time and time again, “I got sent out of the classroom. The next day I was doing the same thing. I got put in isolation. The next day I was doing the same thing.”’

(Interview 06, third-sector organisation)

A review of the literature on disproportionality in school exclusions identified some small-scale qualitative studies that highlighted differential treatment for Black children and those from Gypsy Roma Traveller communities (Graham & White, et al., 2019). The data is also very clear on the longstanding and persistent nature of higher rates of exclusions in these groups (Parsons, 2008). Unconscious bias and systemic racism were raised in some participant interviews too. The importance of ensuring a consistent response to behaviour across all groups so that all students can believe themselves to be equally valued in their school community cannot be underestimated.

Both the statutory guidance on school exclusion (DfE, 2017a) and the statutory guidance for local authorities on promoting the education of looked-after¹² and previously looked-after children (DfE, 2018) emphasise the importance of avoiding exclusion for this group. A virtual head participant in this study described how she worked hard to build good relationships between the school and the virtual team, by asking schools to call in the virtual team before they got to decision-making on exclusion and getting them to think about the ABC approach¹³ to challenging behaviour. In September 2021, the under-secretary announced plans in parliament to extend the virtual head role to all children who have social worker involvement in their lives.¹⁴

Example: exclusion avoidance

One example given in interviews was of an exclusion avoidance programme run in north London (although the participant knew of other similar programmes). This programme worked with children at risk of exclusion and placed them, for 12 weeks, in alternative provision. In that time, the alternative provision ran assessments that identified learning needs and safeguarding concerns that had not been picked up in mainstream schools, made referrals for additional support and placed students back into their mainstream school after 12 weeks, with ‘an incredible success rate’. Students in this programme were in Key Stage 3; intervening earlier was seen as helpful to the success of turning things around.

12. Looked-after children are children and young people in the care of a local authority. They are usually resident in foster homes, children’s homes or residential secure units.
13. The antecedent, behaviour, consequence approach is designed to facilitate thinking about why challenging behaviour happens; what precedes or triggers it, what happens during it and whether the consequences play any role in determining behaviour. See <https://www.highspeedtraining.co.uk/hub/abc-chart-for-challenging-behaviour/> as example for further details.
14. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-09-16/debates/E709F125-60C0-454E-A2A0-1757409567F7/TimpsonReviewOfSchoolExclusion>

5.3 How schools make decisions around exclusions

Headteachers can make the decision to exclude students from their school, either for a fixed-term or permanently. Permanent exclusion decisions are often reviewed by governors. The Department for Education's statutory guidance (DfE, 2017a) states that permanent exclusion should only happen a) in response to a serious breach or persistent breaches of the school's behaviour policy or b) where allowing the pupil to remain in school would seriously harm the education or welfare of other pupils in the school. The guidance sets out that mitigating circumstances should be considered and particular attention paid to groups with disproportionately high exclusion rates and those where existing vulnerabilities could compound the impacts of exclusion.

As highlighted in the Timpson Review, how these decision-making powers are used in practice varies considerably. The 'climate on exclusions is set by the head.' (Interview 05, education sector).

Schools, especially those that have become academies, were seen as able to make decisions on exclusion relatively independently, with the local authority seen as having little leverage.

'Local authorities are in this weird situation where they're accountable for exclusion in their area, but they can't actually exercise any control over academies. So, they would kind of come in once a year with your exclusion figures and frown at you and wave a finger a little bit and you would summarily ignore them because you know that they can't exert any pressure over you, really.'

(Interview 12, education sector)

A report looking at young people's experiences of exclusion emphasized their lack of involvement in decision-making (Lamrhari & Maitland, 2021). This is a complex issue. The quasi-legal nature of the exclusion process means that, although it is a school decision, there is an appeals process that families and carers have a right to pursue. However, as highlighted in section 5.1 above, if exclusion is necessary in order to protect the other young people in the school, there is currently a gap in safeguarding support for the excluded young person at this point.

5.4 The factors involved in decisions to permanently exclude

In practice, multiple factors were seen to drive decision-making on permanent exclusion. Some participants described how, at times, a head's decision has to be made fast and under pressure from multiple sources. They may only become involved late-on in an escalating situation and may make judgements, 'based not on the need of the child... They'll be based on the political needs of the school.' (Interview 03, education sector)

Decision-making was described as taking into account a range of factors. These included:

- > the nature of the incident and perceived risk of harm to students and staff
- > the student's ability to engage and access what is on offer in the school
- > on occasion, pressure from parents.

Heads often referred to the needs of the majority of children in relation to decision-making on exclusion. They 'see it as their job to accommodate the majority, not the minority' (Interview 10, education sector). This arguably does raise the question of how the needs of those students who struggle to cope in mainstream schools are met.

A 'perverse financial incentive' relating to permanent exclusion was discussed in interviews. Schools are financially responsible for all students on their roll and as such have to fund half the cost of temporary placements in alternative provision – around £12,000 a year.¹⁵ However, school funding formulas mean school budgets are often around £4,800 a year per pupil.

If a child is permanently excluded, their school repays a proportion of allocation of the per pupil fund (based on the time left in the academic year), and the local authority then becomes responsible for that child. This means that it is much less costly to permanently exclude a student than it is to co-fund a temporary placement in alternative provision, or to fund a place in a local college, for example, even if that looks like the best option for that student.

15. Bryant et al (2018) carried out a market analysis of alternative provision and found from a survey of 101 local authorities that in 2017-18 the average full cost of a place at a PRU was £17,600 per academic year. Costs per place per year ranged from £10,000 to £44,253 across authorities.

'It's genuinely cheaper to exclude a student than provide them with a decent alternative... of all the perverse incentives inbuilt in education, I've never had a positive conversation with anyone about that one.'

(Interview 12, education sector)

5.4.1 Persistent disruptive behaviour

Excluding students due to persistent disruptive behaviour was seen as a difficult decision to make. If a school felt that they had tried unsuccessfully to support the student and understand the reasons for the disruptive behaviour, there came a point where a child is 'essentially unable to access what the school can offer.' In these situations, there was arguably little benefit for that child in keeping them on roll. Participants talked about the risk of 'babysitting' a child who is not engaged in learning or setting a child up to fail by repeatedly asking them to conform to a system that is clearly not working for them.

The challenge described in these situations was making a judgement about when that line was reached.

5.4.2 A zero-tolerance behaviour policy

Serious breaches of behaviour policies included physical violence toward other children or staff, carrying a knife or carrying or supplying drugs. These were typically behaviours that would result in 'zero tolerance' permanent exclusions (and may be reported to the police).

Whilst having a zero-tolerance policy made the potential consequences clear to students, some participants questioned this approach. It allowed no room for a trauma-informed response, or for consideration of any contextual factors, including possible criminal or sexual exploitation. A young person may be carrying drugs or a knife *because* they are being exploited. Having a zero-tolerance policy means it has to be used in the event of a breach and becomes a 'weapon a school has no choice but to use'. The safety of other children was paramount but being able to have some discretion in certain circumstances was also seen as important.

5.4.3 Fixed-term exclusion

The overall rate of fixed-term exclusions (suspensions) increased from 5.08 in 2017/18 to 5.36 in 2018/19. This continues an increasing trend from 2013/14. In secondary schools the rate is higher - 10.75 or 1,075 per 10,000 students (DfE, 2020). The effectiveness of fixed-term exclusions was questioned by some of the research participants. They do not come with the offer of any alternative placement for the first five days while temporarily removing a young person from the protective factor of attending school. Participants (particularly those in third-sector organisations) felt that young people did not view fixed-term exclusion as a punishment – a finding echoed in the literature (for example, Children’s Commissioner, 2017). Instead, fixed-term exclusions can serve to reinforce a negative self-perception and a sense of being marginalised.

They were also described as having a potentially negative impact on the relationships between young people and their parents or carers and between the parent / carer and the school due to the pressure on a parent or carer to take time out of paid employment to supervise their child. This may be difficult to do, particularly for repeated fixed-term exclusions and is also a significant factor in relation to placement disruption for children in care. One participant reported having worked with families where jobs had been lost due to repeated fixed-term exclusions. Students eligible for free school meals are overrepresented amongst excluded children. Fixed-term exclusion may further increase the risk of poverty in the household.

Fixed-term exclusion was also described as further marginalising a child from effectively accessing the curriculum, contributing to the process of them being excluded. On returning to school, a pupil may have missed up to a week’s work (schools are required to provide a full-time curriculum after day five) and may struggle to catch up or re-engage with gaps in their learning.

5.4.4 Restorative justice approaches

The traditional system of punitive consequences for breaching behavioural policies was described by some participants as ‘archaic’. A case was made for the use of other approaches in their place, especially for fixed-term exclusions. Using restorative justice approaches was seen as a constructive alternative: whilst still focusing on the consequence of the behaviour, they ask a young person to listen and understand the harm caused by their behaviour and to work to repair that damage. Schools need skills and support to do this. Participants pointed to examples of having worked with third-sector organisations within schools to do exactly this kind of work.

5.5 Permanent exclusion as a last resort

The permanent exclusion of children from their mainstream school should ‘only be used as a last resort’ (DfE, 2017a). In practice, what ‘last resort’ means was seen as variable. In an ‘organised and experienced’ school this may mean that a well-established series of measures have been tried, such as:

- > additional support (e.g., a mentor)
- > alternative provision in-house (e.g., a reduced timetable and a smaller class size)
- > a supported managed move to a different mainstream school
- > temporary placement in alternative provision
- > assessment by an educational psychologist (if struggling academically) or a speech and language therapist.

Participants explained that working through all these options could take a full academic year. In other schools, a ‘last resort’ may mean some additional support and several fixed-term exclusions. Greater clarity and accountability for what ‘last resort’ means and looks like would be one way to address the current inconsistencies in the system.

5.6 Consideration of exploitation in exclusion decisions

Consideration of exploitation in decision-making about exclusions was described as variable, but a key issue was that the behaviours that breach school behaviour policies are exactly the same as may indicate exploitation. Taking calls during school hours, becoming frustrated, aggressive and struggling to maintain relationships with people in authority were given as examples of these behaviours.

It is important to note that although the focus of this report is on exploitation, we know that many of these young people will also be experiencing other challenges in their lives. Knowing that young people were being exploited – or experiencing other types of risk – did not stop them being excluded, as the following quote highlights.

'I remember working with a school that said to me, "9 out of 10 of our children that we're excluding have also been exploited." So then I think, well, it's funny, because then you recognise the risks around exploitation. But you also recognise that you're excluding children that are currently being exploited as well.'

(Interview 06, third-sector organisation)

This then produces a situation where risk and negative impacts are compounded. In these situations, behaviour policies were described as being in conflict with safeguarding. If a young person carrying a knife or drugs under coercion is excluded, this 'furthers that young person's exploitation and punishes them further for what is clearly a critical safeguarding issue.' (Just for Law Kids, 2020)

5.7 Supervision after exclusion

Exclusion can work as a tipping point or an escalation in risk for children at risk of exploitation (see section 2.1). One of the factors contributing to this is a lack of supervision that can occur following an exclusion. The period without supervision can be short-term in fixed-term exclusion but potentially longer in permanent exclusion.

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel highlighted the importance of ‘teachable’ or ‘critical’ moments (2020). These are significant life events such as exclusion, arrest or seeking treatment for a physical injury when a young person and their family may be *more* likely to engage with services and therefore an important opportunity to reduce the risks ahead. The review cites some programmes that are working with young people at the point of arrest and in A&E that are showing promising results. Exclusion is also a critical moment when support could be transformative.

In 2018/19, 98% of fixed-term exclusions were for 5 days or less (DfE, 2020). A headteacher reported taking a family’s ability to offer supervision into consideration in deciding about fixed-term exclusions. For some students, fixed-term exclusion would be inappropriate *because* it would be difficult for a child’s family to provide adequate supervision. Decision-making based on the available supervision would be helpful in reducing risk and in ensuring a fixed-term exclusion does not have a disproportionately big impact on the child, their family’s (and especially adults’) employment, or the child-adult relationships at home.

When young people are permanently excluded, they should be offered an alternative placement. Participants had seen this take time. Some reported that schools may wait for the 6-week appeal period to elapse before finding an alternative placement, or for the 15 days required to take a child off the roll. A police officer participant had also seen exclusions happening near the end of a term, with alternative provision placement starting after the holidays. This may mean a child is without placement for over a month at a critical moment. Once in alternative provision, a pupil’s timetable may be part-time, leaving them partially unsupervised during school hours. Ensuring these gaps did not happen was one important recommendation from participants about how risks could be reduced.

Ensuring adequate supervision was a finding also emphasised in the Children’s Commissioner’s review of experiences of exclusion.

'We cannot emphasise strongly enough the learning from this review about the impact on children of exclusion from mainstream school. Leaders of local safeguarding agencies and headteachers must work together to ensure an immediate response in providing suitable fulltime (25 hours) education a week. This is vital in preventing the escalation of risk of harm.'

(Children's Commissioner, 2017, p. 25)

5.8 Educational provision after exclusion

In other research, children have reported a strong sense of rejection because of exclusion, contributing to a sense of being marginalised. Participants emphasised the importance of offering children placements that could meet their needs, ensuring their inclusion in a learning environment and, crucially, offering them an education with the same resources and opportunities as the one they left.

'The worst thing you can do is just exclude them from additional support. What you want to do is prevent that from happening again in the future, instead of shifting the responsibility and the harm elsewhere.'

(Interview 08, third-sector organisation)

Facilitating a young person's re-engagement after exclusion is therefore a key role that may require perseverance to avoid a young person falling away from education at a key point of heightened risk.

6 The strategic response: the role of education in local safeguarding partnerships

A range of challenges were identified in the literature reviewed and participants interviewed about current responses to children at risk of or being exploited from the education sector. These challenges can be grouped into five broad themes:

1. A lack of awareness and understanding of child criminal exploitation.
2. The child protection system was designed to respond to intra-familial risk; change is needed to effectively safeguard against risks outside of the family home.
3. The ‘unharnessing’ of schools from the local authority and the implications of this for safeguarding and exclusion practices.
4. Schools’ role in safeguarding.
5. The need to improve early help and early intervention.

In addition, there were some barriers and recommendations highlighted at a (local) practice level and some at a (national) systemic level. These are discussed later in this chapter. It is important to bear in mind the fact that this was exploratory research. Further work that focuses on innovative practice would be beneficial in helping to identify approaches to overcome key challenges.

6.1 A lack of awareness of child criminal exploitation

Schools were described by participants as having more awareness of child sexual exploitation than child criminal exploitation. The emphasis on young people having agency and choice that underpins much behaviour management in schools, meant that criminal involvement was more likely to be seen as a choice, with consideration of whether a young person was being coerced or manipulated less front of mind. As highlighted in this report, the behaviours associated with child criminal exploitation, such as carrying a weapon or drugs, can result in immediate permanent exclusion from school. The exclusion can then act as a ‘tipping point’, accelerating risk. Later identification of child criminal exploitation is particularly problematic for effectively helping a child. Entrenchment ‘can happen fast’ and when criminal exploitation is entrenched it can be particularly difficult for services to effectively help or extricate a child from the exploitation (Child Safeguarding Practice Review, 2020).

This is not to suggest that child sexual exploitation is more effectively identified and responded to, rather that it is more widely known about as a phenomenon, arguably associated with infamous cases in places like Rotherham and Rochdale. The research also highlights the different exclusion trajectories for different groups of young people, with girls more likely to disengage gradually through absenteeism, which can in itself be seen as a choice (Girls Speak, 2021).

6.2 A child protection system designed for intra-familial harm

The child protection system in England was not set up to address extra-familial harm (Chard, 2015, Violence & Vulnerability Unit, 2018). It focuses on the private spaces of family life rather than the public spaces where adolescent risks ‘percolate’ (Firmin, 2019). As a result, there are key gaps in effectively responding to harm that happens outside of families, which includes child exploitation.

Lloyd and Firmin’s work (2020) highlights the fact that although the risk of harm related to child exploitation can be significant, the fact that it is not attributable to lack of parental care or control means that within current legal parameters, too often it is not progressed. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review (2020) highlighted the important role that family members can play alongside local area safeguarding partners in protecting young people at risk of or experiencing exploitation.

6.3 The ‘unharnessing’ of schools from local authorities

From 2010, the government in England embarked on a policy of academisation of schools, which in effect removes those that become academies from local authority oversight. By 2019, nearly three-quarters of secondary schools were academies (West & Wolfe, 2019). Reflecting national debate, some interview participants felt there was benefit in the academy system because Trusts could act more effectively and efficiently in functions previously run by local authorities. Others, however, felt that much had been lost in terms of the relationship between local authorities and academies. Local authorities were described as having responsibility but little leverage in engaging schools on a range of strategic issues including school exclusion and inclusion policies and practices.

6.4 Schools’ role in safeguarding

Schools are not one of the designated statutory safeguarding partners (health, the police and the local authority are the statutory triumvirate). In his review of the new safeguarding arrangements, Wood (2021) argued that this was appropriate. The number of schools covered by multi-agency safeguarding partnerships in local areas ranges from 50-500 (Wood, 2021). There is, in his view, no ‘command and control lever’ which makes seeking a ‘collective or consensual view from headteachers difficult’. As a result, a sole representative from one school cannot speak with authority for all schools or hold all schools to account. He also argues that the lack of strategic role for schools is consistent with their safeguarding responsibilities.

There was disagreement from some participants who saw the lack of statutory safeguarding role for schools as a ‘massive, missed opportunity’. Requiring schools to have strategic involvement could have a significant impact on their role in the system, moving them from being reactive partners who refer into the safeguarding system toward being proactive contributors to a whole-system approach.

The education sector was seen to have a key role to play in relation to understanding local issues and identifying the opportunity for early intervention (for example, with a contextual safeguarding approach). Police, social care and health typically become involved in adolescents’ lives at crisis point whereas schools are a core part of their lives prior to crisis. Without a mechanism for engaging the perspective of education settings in this wider understanding of the context of young people’s lives, one participant felt that ‘whole areas of children’s lives remain invisible’ and ‘so much is missed’.

In an example of this, one participant described a pilot programme that wrapped early help around schools and offered them the opportunity to work with child social care in this capacity in order to reduce child exploitation. In one local authority area, when they tried to introduce the early help team to the schools, they could not engage them. Schools felt they had too much on their plates, this was one more thing and they did not want to do it. In the second local authority area, the programme had planned a phased roll out but had 75% of their schools ‘knocking on their door on day one’. That’s ‘partly about how supported they felt otherwise in the local authority... the heritage of the last 10 years and how that’s all gone.’ (Interview 02, policy specialist)

Other participants agreed with Wood’s analysis. This was highlighted by one comment about schools being self-contained ‘empires’. To be in an effective strategic partnership would require establishing ‘150 strategic relationships with the leadership in each school’, a feat neither practical nor achievable.

These discussions can be seen as part of a wider debate about the role of educational settings more broadly, i.e. the extent to which they can and should focus on wellbeing as well as delivering a rigorous academic education. While some schools do have a strategic and proactive whole-school approach to safeguarding, other schools do not see themselves as having a role beyond *responding* to safeguarding issues that come up and referring these cases on. These schools were likely to perceive expectations to support and develop the ‘whole’ child as requests for them to ‘be social workers’. Participants emphasised value in changing attitudes for schools to see their role as providing both an academic education and a development of the whole child, arguing that without wellbeing you cannot deliver effective learning. A head recommended that this needed to start in teacher training and should focus particularly on secondary classroom teaching staff as well as having designated leads for areas like mental health.

Because of the fragmentation of the system, the system not being geared to meet extra-familial risk and the lack of recognition of exploitation, the current system was described as needing a ‘headteacher to put their hand up and say “I’ve got exploitation happening in my school”’. This was described as requiring bravery, implying that there are reputational risks related to such an action.

6.4.1 Schools attendance at statutory safeguarding meetings

Participants thought that the current system can mean that some schools do not attend safeguarding meetings to discuss a child they have raised concerns about. This is unhelpful as they will sometimes be the only person in the room who has spent time with the child and will be the agency likely to know a child best. Schools' attendance in safeguarding meetings will depend on the school as well as on the MASH's (or equivalent body's) approach.

Engagement was also seen as an issue. Sometimes schools might attend but not necessarily actively participate in meetings. This may be in part because they are not a partner with statutory responsibility. Finding a 'hook' or benefit for schools to attend was suggested as crucial. A head pointed out that members of senior leadership teams in schools are time-poor and necessarily selective about what meetings they attend beyond their school. Schools will tend to go along to meetings where they feel likely their school will benefit, either in the outcome for a particular child or in resources for a child or children more widely.

Ensuring consistency across different schools and areas was seen as important, even if schools are seen as having a responsive and non-strategic role. Currently, there is significant variability. One participant argued for national guidance that compels schools to attend safeguarding meetings to which they are invited, although the practicality of how such an approach could be implemented is unclear.

In the most serious safeguarding cases around exploitation, a participant pointed out that there is often not a school (or alternative provision setting) to include in discussions. A child coming to the notice of the statutory safeguarding partnerships around exploitation may already be entrenched and 'so removed from the social fabric,' i.e. excluded from school and alternative provision, without a placement or being considered as 'missing' from any registered educational setting. Children in care in England may have been moved to another local area where no educational placement was set up.

A different participant felt that previous schools may still have a key information-giving role to play here. Depending on how long a young person was at their school, they may have rich information about a child that could help safeguarding practitioners, even though the child is no longer at their school. Making use of important information and thinking about the role played in safeguarding by schools, from which children have previously been excluded, may be useful.

6.5 A lack of early help or early intervention.

Children who are excluded from school are more likely to be from low-income families, have special educational needs or be children in need (see section 2). Children who are exploited are often those who have heightened vulnerabilities. Addressing children's needs earlier was seen as the most effective solution to avoiding both exploitation and reducing school exclusion.

Early help and intervention have been stripped out as budgets across services have experienced cuts over the last decade. Youth work has been particularly affected by cuts. Participants pointed to waiting lists of up to a year for 'crisis' intervention in CAMHS as indicative of all the strain in the system. Without the support that early help can provide, services and systems downstream are overwhelmed by more acute service needs (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018).

When participants discussed early intervention, they meant two things. One was intervention early on in a child's life (in primary school). The other was supporting a child as soon as challenges are recognised later in their childhood or in early adolescence. Both would be needed to support a lower exclusion culture and lower the risk to children more likely to be exploited.

While more resources for early intervention were seen as necessary to reverse the upward trend in exclusion, participants felt better use could be made of existing services, especially those in the third-sector. Participants described how helpful it would be for schools to have a directory of local services. Another idea was that schools could pool resources to have better access to provision like counsellors, educational psychologists or mentoring services across a geographical area. Local authorities could play a key role in coordinating this which may act as a helpful 'lever' when engaging schools.

In turn, schools need to 'open up' to working with other organisations. A third-sector participant (who had previously worked in a senior leadership role in a mainstream secondary) reported that schools can be 'like fortresses' to third-sector organisations, creating what can be a 'tense relationship'. To facilitate a more outward-facing approach, it would help if schools could be designated as community hubs that facilitate and coordinate additional support.

6.6 Suggestions for change: systems and practice level ways to improve safeguarding in exclusion for children who are exploited

'We need to be proactive and consistent. We need to be transparent. We need to recognise the full scope of the young person's needs. We need to resource that need. And we need to respect these young people just as we respect ourselves.'

(Interview 11, third-sector organisation)

6.6.1 Developing an effective and consistent lower exclusion practice at a national level

According to interview participants, reducing school exclusions would mean improving consistency, early help provision and ensuring schools have challenge and accountability in their decision-making around exclusions. This is in part about the role of local authorities (see section 2), but is also about national policy and guidance on exclusion.

The Department for Education is due to consult on updated guidance on exclusions later in 2021.¹⁶ Participants hoped it would better emphasise the value of early intervention, support schools to be more inclusive and bring better consistency to what is meant by 'last resort'. It will be important to frame exclusion as a safeguarding risk and ensure that there is a system response if children are permanently excluded to prevent the safeguarding risks that may escalate as a result.

Ofsted (2018) has called for schools to consider the well-documented links between missing education and safeguarding when considering school exclusions. This is supported by the Home Office (2019) who have encouraged schools not to exclude or reduce the timetables for children at risk or experiencing either sexual or criminal exploitation. It also seems logical that future guidance considers what happens immediately after exclusion and works to ensure children are not left without help or supervision at a potentially critically vulnerable and 'reachable' moment.

16. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-09-16/debates/E709F125-60C0-454E-A2A0-1757409567F7/TimpsonReviewOfSchoolExclusion>

Rethinking the 'perverse' financial incentive

The Timpson Review highlighted the current funding system as an issue, reporting that it 'cannot be right to have a system where some schools stand to improve their performance and finance through exclusion but do not have to bear the cost of expensive non-mainstream provision... nor be held accountable for the outcomes of children they permanently exclude.' School leaders in the study felt schools were unlikely to be able to fully resource the needs of children at risk of exclusion within current funding formulas.

6.6.2 Working together: information sharing, relationship building and working across system gaps

Gaps in the system were identified around 'siloes' elements of policy and local authority approaches. Schools may have strong strategic relationships with the local authority around inclusion, for example, but not around safeguarding or SEN. This could relate to their status as either maintained schools or academies as well as different commissioning arrangements around SEN. Ensuring partnership working and a strategic joining up across these closely related areas would be helpful.

Other specific system gaps were identified as the 'absence of system leadership' for excluded children. There was, it was argued, little accountability in the system for children who have been excluded, rather they are 'passed on' to the next educational placement, if there is one. The fragmentation in the current system means little joining up between inclusion, exclusion, alternative provisions and outcomes. The fragmentation of the system may mean that effectively safeguarding – let alone educating – this group of young people is challenging.

Working across different local authority areas was described as a 'nightmare'. The virtual head in the study described acute difficulties when an EHCP assessment lands on the desk of a team outside her local authority for one of the children her team were responsible for. Out of area would mean delays and difficulties accessing services. Within area, the relationships and systems were in place to ensure looked-after children were quickly supported. Accessing the best school placements to go with a move across a local authority boundary could also be difficult. She contrasted this with the Scottish system where a local authority finds a child a residential placement or foster carer and guarantees a place in the most appropriate local school to the placement – the residential and educational placements come together.

Underpinning effective work to reduce exclusions and effectively safeguard children at risk of exploitation were strong professional relationships and intelligent information sharing, the hallmarks of good partnership working. Facilitating information sharing (about specific cases and more widely about exploitation risk) was important and no participant could yet point to an example where this was working as well as it could be – an area for further research. Schools have a wealth of knowledge and understanding about their students and are well placed to share wider contextual intelligence. In turn, they need intelligence back to help them recognise risks and give the appropriate level of priority to any issue. Having the technology and capability to do this well was sometimes described as in process but yet to be perfected.

6.6.3 Safeguarding practice designed to help children at risk of exploitation

The Children's Society (2018) have recommended designing and implementing a safeguarding model specifically for adolescents to safeguard extra-familial risk. They recommended a contextual safeguarding model. Part of recognising that the current safeguarding system does not work well for children at risk of extra-familial harm requires re-thinking how to effectively help those children most at risk. Three pilot programmes were given as examples by participants.

One was a pilot of an extra-familial multi-disciplinary intervention package for children on the edge of care who have come to the notice of the MASH. The pilot was in its early days at the time of interview but showed promise.

The second was having a dedicated police officer who works with every child or young person arrested for possession of illicit substances (or intent to supply). This officer gets to know the young person and then looks into which charities and services may be best placed to suit them. The officer will look specifically for services that will recognise and support a risk of exploitation.

The third was an area where the local authority had provided early help to wrap around schools. This was led by children's social care and was designed to deliver the early intervention identified in this research as a key gap.

6.6.4 Safeguarding in exclusion practices

One of the key issues around school exclusion was seen as the variability in practice and the lack of safeguarding considerations as a) a core part of making a decision on exclusion and b) in what happens to a child when they are excluded or suspended from school.

While reforming the system around exclusions was seen as important (see chapter 5), participants talked about a key mindset shift being necessary, so that exclusion is considered through a safeguarding lens in both decision-making and what happens afterwards. This was important not only because of the correlation between exclusion, criminal involvement and poor educational outcomes but also because exclusion can act as a crucial tipping point in the trajectory of involvement in child exploitation.

6.6.5 Bolstering the local authority's role in school exclusion practices.

In Scotland, the rate of exclusion is significantly lower than in England. The system is very different by virtue of not having academies or free schools (there is only one exam board and the rural nature of much of Scotland means that alternative school placement is not a viable option).

Although this makes it hard to translate research findings to other parts of the UK, there were some interesting findings in McCluskey et al.'s 2019 study, which compared and contrasted the Scottish system with the other UK nations. They found that the close working between local authorities and schools is a key factor in preventing children going missing from education in the Scottish system. Schools are in touch with local authorities in advance of exclusion decisions and have to explain from a risk management perspective why a child's needs cannot be met in school. The local authority then looks at what else it can put in place to support the child to stay in school. By contrast, in England, the study found that the 'unharnessing' of schools from LAs meant that they don't have the same level of either accountability or challenge.

One participant described a strategic review of school exclusions undertaken in his local area. The local authority had set up a strategic group to do this, consisting of leaders from local schools, high quality alternative provision, the local authority and a local councillor. One of the outcomes was that an educational psychologist was engaged to write an inclusion policy for all secondary schools in the local area. The strategic group was working across the area to get all schools to adopt the policy. Part of the aim of the policy was to have needs better recognised and supported and to lower school exclusions.

6.6.6 Ensuring fair access panels are consistent and transparent

One participant described a sense by which fair access panels can feel like ‘playing swapsies’ without full disclosure of the needs of the child or their current behavioural challenges being discussed. This, he argued, was unfair to schools but, moreover, unfair to the child as it may prevent the full range of their needs being quickly recognised in a new school. If local authorities could work to strengthen consistency and transparency, this would be helpful. However, this is again challenging *because* schools have largely been unharnessed from the local authorities.

6.6.7 Ensuring the quality of all alternative provision

High quality alternative provision settings can be protective and facilitative, and for some children can give an educational experience that is more able to meet their needs than mainstream school. However, the current variability of quality was highlighted as a concern, with poor quality provision having the potential to increase risks for young people (see section 2.4). More needs to be done within the current systems to ensure the consistent high quality of this sector.

The Timpson review recommended that local authorities are enabled to facilitate and convene local forums that all schools are expected to attend regularly, to share best practice, take collective responsibility for collecting and reviewing data on pupil needs and moves, and for planning and funding local alternative provision.

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Technical appendix – methods

In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted from March to June 2021. Participants were suggested by the TCE Support Programme as those who had particular strategic expertise or who were involved in delivering examples of good practice. Each participant was asked for recommendations for other interviews and were approached to take part where they did not replicate the roles or experiences already in the sample. 12 data collection encounters were included in the research, with 16 participants in total. These were made up of 11 in-depth interviews and one focus group. There were 6 participants in the focus group, 2 of whom went on to do further in-depth one-to-one interviews.

Participants had backgrounds in either education, the police force or third-sector organisation. Those in education included headteachers, specialists in inclusion, further education and a virtual head (with responsibility for looked-after children in her local authority area). Two different social care projects were recommended for inclusion in the study. Despite several attempts to contact each project (including via mutual contacts), we were unable to secure interviews over the study period.

Interviews took place via telephone or online, used a topic guide outlining the key themes for discussion and lasted around an hour. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and summarised using the framework approach, i.e., a matrix with each column representing discrete themes and each row representing an interview or group, which allowed for systematic and comprehensive analysis. Different participants were more or less able to speak to different areas of the topic guide. While all topic areas were discussed with all participants, some focused on particular areas in more depth than others.

Literature review

The literature review focused on primary research or other literature reviews published between 2006 and 2021 and pointed to the UK or English context and included a discussion on both exploitation and school exclusion.

The following table shows the terms used, places searched and results returned. Searches started with Google scholar, with additional later searches carried out on the University of Bedfordshire's database and SocIndex to look for additional texts:

Exact term	Google scholar results	University of Bedfordshire results	SocIndex results	TOTAL RESULTS
'School exclusion' and 'child exploitation'	63	30	0	93
'School exclusion' and 'criminal exploitation'	35	0	0	35
'School exclusion' and 'child sexual exploitation'	132	0	2	134
'School exclusion' and 'modern slavery'	108	0	0	108
'School exclusion' and 'human trafficking'	73	0	5	81
2006-2021				

Some of these search results included duplications. Unique abstracts were screened for relevance and substantive content. Those not relating to the UK context were screened out. Those that mentioned school exclusion and exploitation only in passing, or did not contain a paragraph or more on the two subjects together were also removed. 26 texts remained and were included in the literature review.

These texts were summarised into the framework used for analysis in the interviews and are reported thematically alongside the interview data throughout the report. Key policy documentation (such as the statutory guidance on school exclusions and safeguarding) was included in the research, as were official statistics published by the Department for Education on exclusions and school populations.



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using TCE resources and tools.
Connect via Twitter using #TCEProgramme to share your ideas.**

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