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Tackling Child Exploitation
Support Programme

Tackling Child Exploitation Risk Assessment Thematic Project

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1. Introduction

This report outlines the work of the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Risk Assessment Thematic Project, which took place between November 2021 and March 2022 as part of the TCE Support Programme.

Risk assessment is not a theoretical debate. Conceptions of risk, and how these are assessed and applied to children and young people, have significant implications for how their experiences are viewed, what support is provided and ultimately the longer-term experiences and outcomes of those affected by child exploitation.¹

Challenges and questions around the use of such risk assessments emerged in a number of different ways throughout the TCE Support Programme, including in the thematic scoping reviews that took place at the outset of and during the [Bespoke Support Projects](#) undertaken with local areas during the Programme. At the same time, an increasing critique of their use in relation to child exploitation also emerged from some parts of the research and practice communities, who documented concern as to the negative implications of their use on the responses children and young people received.² Further work to encourage discussion, identify common principles and potentially promising practice therefore seemed valuable and timely.

2. Project aims

The Project aimed to:

- scope existing work on risk assessment – ‘snowballing’ from current contacts / knowledge;
- open up conversation on the concept of ‘risk assessment’ and how this relates to child exploitation;
- be forward facing, i.e., less about critique of existing work than showcasing alternative ways of thinking and doing;
- develop an output that would support the sector to move forward in terms of its understanding of risk assessment in the field of child exploitation.

As a project this is not, therefore, viewed as having the final word on risk assessment. It is a ‘stepping stone’ to a wider debate, and to changing policy and practice on risk assessment in line with evidence and the welfare of children and young people.

1. Beckett, H. (2021). Risk assessing child (sexual) exploitation. TCE Support Programme. <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/risk-assessing-child-sexual-exploitation/>

2. See, for example, Brown, S., Brady, G., Franklin, A., & Crookes, R. (2017). The use of tools and checklists to assess risk of child sexual exploitation: An exploratory study. Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse. <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/our-research/responding-to-csa/risk-tools/> and Beckett, H. (2019). Moving beyond discourses of agency, gain and blame: reconceptualising young people’s experiences of sexual exploitation. In J. Pearce (Ed), *Child sexual exploitation: Why theory matters* (pp. 23-42). Policy Press.

3. Project approach

This was a time-limited Project that aimed to facilitate conversation and surface relevant learning to inform future approaches to rethinking risk assessment in the field of child exploitation. Its aim was not to identify definitive solutions, a task that requires both broader and longer-term learning initiatives. There were three key elements to the Project:

- an initial scoping review
- expert roundtables
- shared learning events.

The key findings of which are explored in sections four to six below.

4. Initial scoping of the literature and TCE learning

The Project began with an initial scoping of the sector in relation to risk assessment in the field of child exploitation. This included some scoping of the literature, in addition to collating learning from the work of the TCE programme. This process highlighted a number of key issues which needed to be incorporated into the work of the Project.

This is summarised below, with a more detailed overview included in Appendix 2. Though much of the research has focused on the use of child sexual exploitation risk assessments specifically, there is a clear correlation to other child exploitation risk assessments; which many have developed directly from child sexual exploitation risk assessments.³

Risk assessment is frequently viewed as a ‘taken for granted’ aspect of practice. Attention has often been focused on developing or improving risk assessment tools, rather than considering the conceptual basis of risk assessment and its implications on practice. This is, in part, a historical legacy; early versions of guidance on child sexual exploitation encouraged risk assessment but did not provide guidance relating to it.⁴ It also reflects a safeguarding system that has become increasingly risk averse,⁵ as well as ongoing questions around how cases of child exploitation and extra-familial harm are responded to within a system designed to protect the (younger) child from harm within the family home.⁶

3. Beckett, H., & Lloyd, J. (2022) Growing Pains: Developing Safeguarding Responses to Adolescent Harm. In D. Holmes (Ed), *Safeguarding Young People: Risk, Rights, Resilience and Relationships* (p. 61). Research in Practice.

4. Jago, S., Arocha, L., Brodie, I., Melrose, M., Pearce, J.J., & Warrington, C. (2011). What's going on to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation? how local partnerships respond to child sexual exploitation. University of Bedfordshire. <https://www.beds.ac.uk/media/84543/wgoreport2011-121011.pdf>

5. Parton, N. (2011). Child protection and safeguarding in England: Changing and competing conceptions of risk and their implications for social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(5), 854-875.

6. Firmin, C. (2017a). *Abuse between young people. A Contextual Account*. Routledge

Research has highlighted a number of difficulties associated with risk assessment. Specifically, there are problems associated with the assumptions made about what risk means, and, in turn, what practice is deployed to address it. Reviews of risk assessment tools⁷ have highlighted:

- Different risk assessment tools are used within different agencies and across the country.
- There is a lack of evidence for many of the ‘risk indicators’ which are present in these tools.
- Use of risk assessment tools encourages a focus on ‘risky’ behaviours rather than physical and emotional safety.⁸
- Risk assessment tools fail to consider the interconnected conditions of abuse,⁹ and, in doing in doing so, assess risk primarily on the behaviours of a child, rather than also considering the sources of harm and (lack of) protective structures at play. They do not support professionals in balancing individual factors with structural and contextual factors, which may inform the nature of risk¹⁰ or identifying wider patterns of abuse.¹¹
- Risk assessment tools are often predicated on particular (outdated / adult) models of harm / abuse.
- Children and young people are often subject to multiple assessments, which are not joined up.
- Risk assessment is often based on a single point in time and, while there are variations, the work of a single individual.
- Children who don’t meet indicators are often ‘screened out’.

7. Brown, S., Brady, G., Franklin, A., & Crookes, R. (2017). The use of tools and checklists to assess risk of child sexual exploitation: An exploratory study. Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse. <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/our-research/responding-to-csa/risk-tools/>

Hallett, S., Verbruggen, J., Buckley, K., & Robinson, A. (2019). Keeping Safe? An analysis of the outcomes of work with sexually exploited young people in Wales. Health and Care Research Wales, and Brown, S., Brady, G., Franklin, A., Bradley, L., Kerrigan, N., & Sealey, C. (2016). Child abuse and exploitation: Understanding risk and vulnerability. Early Intervention Foundation. <http://www.eif.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Child-Sexual-Abuse-andExploitation-Understanding-Risk-and-Vulnerability.pdf>

8. Shuker, L. (2013). Constructs of safety for children in care affected by sexual exploitation. In M. Melrose & J. Pearce (Eds), Critical perspectives on child sexual exploitation and related trafficking (pp. 125-138). Palgrave Macmillan.

9. Beckett, H., Holmes, D., & Walker, J. (2017). Child Sexual Exploitation. Definition and guide for professionals. Department for Education. www.beds.ac.uk/sylrc/publications

10. Saker, A. (2020). Practitioner Responses to Child Trafficking: Emerging Good Practice. Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. <https://www.antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1775/child-trafficking-report.pdf>

11. Firmin, C. (2017a). Abuse between young people. A Contextual Account. Routledge

Whilst their presence on a website does not tell us how they are being used in practice, exploration of safeguarding websites indicates that the majority of local areas continue to utilise child sexual exploitation risk assessment tools.

More recently, many have developed similar tools for child criminal exploitation, or child exploitation more generally, but there has been a tendency to relabel and adapt existing child sexual exploitation tools for this purpose, despite the documented difficulties.¹²

5. Roundtables

Two expert roundtables took place in December 2021 and January 2022. These aimed to bring together experts who had significant research or practice experience relating to risk assessment. These experts came from a range of professional and disciplinary backgrounds, reflecting the importance of new learning and developments in different areas of practice and the need to ensure the Project was informed by a multi-agency approach. Appendix 1 lists the experts who participated in the roundtables or, if unable to attend, sent resources or other information that has contributed to the Project.

The roundtables took place in a spirit of open discussion and debate, but were guided by the following questions:

Roundtable 1:

- From your perspective, what is the most pressing challenge relating to risk assessment in the field of child exploitation?
- In your view, how can the agenda on risk assessment for child exploitation be taken forward? What practice do you see as ‘promising’ and what evidence is available about this?

Roundtable 2:

- Following on from our discussion at the first roundtable, what kind of output or activity would be helpful to the sector in ‘turning the dial’ on risk assessment?
- In your view, where does the conversation need to go next, in terms of stakeholders, audiences and key messages?

A notable feature of the roundtables was the high level of consensus amongst participants. The key learning emerging from the discussion can be summarised in relation to the following themes.

12. Beckett, H., & Lloyd, J. (2022). Growing Pains: Developing Safeguarding Responses to Adolescent Harm. In D. Holmes (Ed), *Safeguarding Young People: Risk, Rights, Resilience and Relationships* (p. 61). Research in Practice.

What trends are evident in current thinking about risk assessment?

Participants felt the history of thinking about risk assessment in practice relating to child exploitation and extra-familial harm had been problematic, and was not confined to the area of child exploitation. It was noted that children, young people and families were often subject to multiple assessments through their involvement with different services. The purpose of these was often unclear, and the information they contained rarely joined together. There was a shared recognition within the group that this was changing, and that there were encouraging signs nationally. This was reflected in a growing body of research discussing the issues with existing risk assessment approaches, and key organisations such as Barnardo's and the National Working Group producing frameworks for assessment that emphasise the use of principles rather than risk indicators, as is the case in most child exploitation risk assessments.

At the same time, these 'green shoots' notwithstanding, group members asserted there continued to be a 'proliferation' of issue-specific risk assessment tools, and that, despite their documented shortcomings (participants agreeing with all the issues identified in the scoping review above), they continue to represent the primary mechanism in determining levels of risk and associated responses; an issue of significant concern.

The identification of 'new' forms of exploitation seemed only to continue this trend, with existing child sexual exploitation risk assessment tools 'tweaked' for use in relation to child criminal exploitation or child exploitation more generally.

It was argued, therefore, that there was a need for more fundamental rethinking about assessing and managing risk of child exploitation and extra-familial harm across the social care and criminal justice sectors, although participants were also cognisant of a degree of sector anxiety around what moving away from existing tools would mean for how risk would be assessed and held.

Whose voice is present in talking about risk?

Participants emphasised the importance of ensuring that children and young people's voice is present in thinking about risk assessment. It was noted that young people may contextualise and describe exploitation differently, while professional language – and some of the risk indicators included in assessments – can pathologise normal adolescent development / activities. Participants also highlighted the importance of considering the voice of parents and carers, observing this to be an area in which safeguarding partnerships could lack confidence.

They noted a dissonance between intent and reality, reflecting that, whilst many risk assessments refer to obtaining the views of children, young people and their parents, few are constructed in a way that meaningfully supports this. A focus on risk can make young people feel more strongly that they are at fault, or increase frustration when meetings about assessment do not appear to be accompanied by other actions that are viewed as being helpful. It is also important to view young people's feelings about risk assessment in the context of a wider body of evidence relating to 'what matters' to them in terms of practice responses, including evidence of care, persistence, an absence of judgement and involvement in decision-making.¹³

How can change take place in practice relating to risk assessment?

Participants were clear that change was, in many areas, underway. The problem was the variability in thinking and understanding. Practice relating to child exploitation and extra-familial harm is complex, and risk assessment tools often mask the multi-layered nature of the issues involved.

It was emphasised that a significant difficulty lay in the pressure placed on practitioners to document and justify their decisions around risk levels and associated responses, and the perceived usefulness risk assessments provided in this regard. This pressure was noted to come from national inspectorates as well as from senior management in local areas.

There was extensive discussion about how a supportive environment can be created to open up discussion regarding risk assessment. One element of this, it was suggested, is in thinking about 'safety' and what this means for young people. In other words, attention should be given not just to avoiding risk, but to attending to wellbeing more broadly and ensuring young people have a sense of self-efficacy in relation to their futures.

There was also considerable discussion about how services and individuals could be supported to challenge existing cultures, including the sense of needing to 'cover your back'. The alternative would be a learning culture where it is possible to evidence the distance travelled, greater safety and wellbeing, and the associated reduction in risk.

13. See for example, chapter 6: Lewing, B., Doubell, L., Beevers, T. and Acquah, D. (2018). Building trusted relationships for vulnerable children and young people with public services. [www.EIF.org.uk](http://www EIF.org.uk)

It was suggested that commissioners play a key role in this. It is important that the role and value of frontline professional working is recognised and promoted. Examples were given from the group about ways in which professionals had been encouraged to think in non-linear ways, including [Contextual Safeguarding](#), [Circles of Analysis](#), and local examples that have brought different groups of professionals together, removed or changed the language of 'risk assessment', and encouraged relational approaches to support young people's voice in decision-making. These examples highlighted that change is taking place in regard to risk assessment, but there can be challenges in sharing this.

Participants identified a number of shared characteristics of innovative practice across the country:

- The need for sound analysis of the problem, and how risk assessment tools are being used in practice, before planning for change can take place.
- New approaches are co-produced, in support of the existing knowledge and expertise of a wide range of professionals, and the critical insights that children and young people and their parents and carers can offer.
- Ensuring risk-assessment is holistic, considering not only the presentation and needs of the child, but also the sources of harm, the (lack of) protective structures around the child and the wider contextual factors at play.
- Keeping practice child and young person-centred, recognising and responding to children and young people's needs not only as professionals see them, but also as children and young people (and those supporting them) do, and ensuring a strengths-based approach to both assessing and responding to this.
- Recognition of how other aspects of identity – age, gender and sexual identity, race, culture, ethnicity, disability, and so on – will be important in assessing individual needs.
- Policy and practice aims to be inclusive and flexible. Where assessment tools are used, there is awareness of their limitations and weaknesses and room to challenge standardised conclusions based on the absence or presence of risk indicators. There is clarity about the need for narrative, input from different agencies, and professional curiosity and reflection are encouraged.

- Any developments are accompanied by an appropriate package of training and support, underpinned by a commitment to assessing in a way that is relational and child and young person-centred.

How can work on risk be taken forward?

There was strong enthusiasm in the group for taking forward the discussion and thinking initiated by the time-limited TCE Programme. Participants felt there was scope for a larger piece of work that could build on the learning that emerged from the group, and could be taken to a wider audience.

There was general agreement that there was a need to prioritise influencing decision-makers, including, for example, Inspectorates and policy leads across both social care and criminal justice. It was also emphasised that discussion needed to move away from a focus on victims to include better consideration of the sources of harm, including the complexities that exist where this may come from another young person.

Participants also felt it was important that any future work on risk assessment should recognise the challenges for practice in the child exploitation sector.

It was therefore important to find ways of supporting organisations and individual professionals to think critically and courageously about current approaches, to ensure new approaches are evaluated and to share new thinking.

6. Shared learning events and resources

In November 2021 and February 2022, two learning events were facilitated by the Project, as part of a [learning event series](#). Further reflections were ascertained through a Children's Society event on risk assessment. Discussion at these events provided important insights, albeit anecdotal, into thinking across the country, and areas of shared concern or trends in practice.

Key points from these sessions, which demonstrated strong parallels with the issues raised in the roundtables, included:

- a high degree of variability in approaches to risk assessment
- a recognition that current approaches to risk assessment were, at best, inadequate in themselves and often needed to be supplemented by other approaches

- the importance of professional confidence to adapt approaches to risk assessment in light of the needs of the individual child or young person
- the importance of managers in supporting professional curiosity and judgment
- interest in alternative ways of working.

7. Key reflections and next steps

The Risk Assessment Thematic Project was only ever intended to be one part of the jigsaw, a starting point for how we might move ‘the dial’ forward on risk assessment in the field of child exploitation. The conversation about risk assessment needs to continue, though, encouragingly, there is evidence of a high level of consensus across all elements of the Project regarding the need for both further thinking in this field and exploration of alternative means of risk assessment.

Consensus also exists around the need for child and young person-led approaches to assessment that, as well as taking account of risk, also consider strengths and the rights of the individual concerned, and are contextual and holistic in approach.

The need for a system-wide understanding of the necessity of ‘moving the dial’ on child exploitation risk assessments also emerged as a strong theme in the Project, with participants recommending that learning from the Project be shared with Inspectorates and policy makers. It is important that those who hold decision-making power, or responsibilities for quality assessment and monitoring in child care and criminal justice services, are also engaged in discussion about different approaches to risk assessment.

‘Risk assessment’ continues to be a live theme for TCE, and learning from this Project will be integrated into the development of the Practice Principles being developed in Year 4 of the Project. Beyond the work that TCE can do in the field, roundtable participants identified a need for wider and longer-term collaborative work that would help develop a blueprint for understanding how approaches to child exploitation risk assessments could be improved in future. This could include: for wider and longer-term collaborative work that would help develop a blueprint for understanding how approaches to child exploitation risk assessments could be improved in future.

This could include:

- building on the innovation that is currently taking place by reviewing patterns of practice across England and different agencies, and synthesising evidence
- scoping the conditions within services that enable the development of an environment that allows for changes to assessment practice and embeds these in institutional culture
- exploring what better 'risk assessment' in the field of child exploitation looks like for children and young people, and those who support them.

TCE consortium members will continue to liaise with roundtable participants to explore potential collaborations for progressing this work, as funding and influencing opportunities arise.

Appendix 1: List of experts who have participated in the Project

Project team (Consortium members and University of Bedfordshire staff)

Dr Helen Beckett

Dr Isabelle Brodie

Alice Yeo

External experts

Phil Ashford (National Policing Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme)

Dr Craig Barlow (University of Hull);

Professor Sarah Brown (University of the West of England)

Dr Sophie Hallett (Cardiff University)

Dr Kristie Hickle (Sussex University)

Larisa Hunt (Avon and Somerset Police)

Katie Jones (The Children's Society)

Nick Marsh (Listen Up)

Bina Radcliffe (National Working Group) Charlotte Staniforth (St Andrew's Healthcare)

Suzanne Taylor (Barnardo's)

Appendix 2: Summary scoping review of the literature

Method

This was a scoping review of the literature, with the aim of identifying key sources across a range of disciplines and services. Searching was undertaken using the University of Bedfordshire's DISCOVER search engine, SOCINDEX. The searching of grey literature also took place. Additionally, the experts who came together for the roundtable events also contributed recommendations of key sources. The review explored all forms of child exploitation, but the evidence base relating to child sexual exploitation is significantly greater than that relating to child criminal exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery. This reflects what is known about the evidence base more generally.¹⁴

Child exploitation and risk assessment

Child exploitation is a form of child abuse.^{15 16} Identification of child exploitation as a form of abuse has emerged during the 21st century, with attention initially focused on child sexual exploitation.

More recently the concept has been expanded to include child criminal exploitation and trafficking, and reference to exploitation is often made alongside discussion of 'extra-familial harm', or harm that takes place outside the family home. Definition of these different forms of child exploitation has focused on abuse arising from unequal power relationships between the abuser and the abused, i.e. the idea of some form of 'exchange' taking place through the exploitation, which may take either tangible or non-tangible form. However, defining different categories of abuse has proved to be problematic, to the extent that questions have been raised about the usefulness of the concept as a distinct category.¹⁷ At the same time, the evidence is clear regarding the extreme level of abuse suffered by children and young people who are identified as exploited.

14. See, for example, Maxwell, N., Wallace, C., Cummings, A., Bayfield, H., & Morgan, H. (2019). A systematic map and synthesis review of child criminal exploitation. Cardiff University. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/131950/1/Child%20Criminal%20Exploitation%20Report%20Final.pdf>

15. Beckett, H., Holmes, D., & Walker, J. (2017). Child sexual exploitation: definition & guide for professionals: extended text. University of Bedfordshire.

16. Home Office (2018). Serious Violence Strategy. HM Government https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/698009/serious-violence-strategy.pdf

17. Beckett, H., & Walker, J. (2017). Words matter: Reconceptualising the conceptualisation of child sexual exploitation. In H. Beckett & J. Pearce (Eds), Understanding and responding to child sexual exploitation (pp. 9-23). Routledge.

It is, therefore, a complex area of practice. Serious case reviews and official enquiries have highlighted a lack of awareness of the scale and nature of exploitation, and the challenges associated with identifying those who may be at risk.¹⁸ The influential report into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham recommended that senior managers should ensure there were high quality, up-to-date risk assessments on all children affected by child sexual exploitation. At the same time, it was also noted that the numeric scoring tool should be kept under review, and that professional judgement was critical.

To this extent, the development of risk assessment tools can be viewed as an understandable response from organisations working in the field of exploitation to heighten awareness and to support the development of more consistent practice. This has been especially important in England where guidance has encouraged better awareness and identification, but where this has not always been accompanied by resource or related tools.¹⁹

The level of demand for help in undertaking risk assessment has therefore been high.²⁰

There is also a difference between what a risk exploitation tool might aim to achieve, and how it is implemented in practice. In Wales a national protocol, the Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework, was developed and implemented.²¹ However, the protocol did not link assessment to any specific service responses or interventions and the assessment of risk could 'become an end in itself' (Hallett, 2020, p.3). This tool has now been recognised as having outlived its original purpose and of being in need of review. Barnardo's, who developed the original tool, has also undertaken consultation regarding alternative approaches to risk assessment.

18. See, for example, Mason-Jones, A.J., & Loggie, J. (2020). Child sexual exploitation. An analysis of serious case reviews in England: poor communication, incorrect assumptions and adolescent neglect. *Journal of Public Health*, 42(1), 62-68.

19. Jago, S., Arocha, L., Brodie, I., Melrose, M., Pearce, J.J., & Warrington, C., (2011). What's going on to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation? How local partnerships respond to child sexual exploitation. University of Bedfordshire.

<https://www.beds.ac.uk/media/84543/wgoreport2011-121011.pdf>

20. See, for example, Beckett, H., Firmin, C.E., Hynes, P., & Pearce, J.J. (2014) Tackling child sexual exploitation: A study of current practice in London. University of Bedfordshire.

21. See WAG (2008). All Wales Protocol: Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Children and Young People who are at Risk of Abuse through Sexual Exploitation; WAG (2011) Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation: Supplementary guidance to Safeguarding Children: Working Together Under The Children Act 2004.

Risk assessment and safeguarding

The history of risk assessment has attracted considerable attention within the history of safeguarding in the UK, in part due to a wider social context in which concern about risk to children and young people from a range of sources has become increasingly prominent.²² From the 2000s onwards, child protection experts drew attention to increasingly managerial and risk averse approaches to practice, frequently driven by social and governmental responses to child death. The idea that effective risk assessment can enable the consistent identification of children who are being or might be harmed therefore became highly prevalent and integrated into local and national policy.²³

At the same time, the evidence demonstrates that concerns about the concept and practice of risk assessment are long-standing and not restricted to child safeguarding. The evidence highlights long-held and shared concerns in, for example, mental health services, domestic abuse, and services for disabled children.²⁴

Recurrent themes include:

- the static nature of risk assessment
- the emphasis on individual problems at the expense of the wider context of children and families' lives
- a lack of interest in strengths and resilience
- the tendency for paper-based risk assessment to dampen professional curiosity.

The Munro Report (2011) emphasised the need for both systemic change and a social work culture that recognised complexity and uncertainty, and promoted respect and support for professional judgement in decision-making.

22. See, for example, Sales, R., Thom, B., & Pearce, J.J. (2007). *Growing up with Risk*. Policy Press.

23. See, for example, Ayre, P., & Preston-Shoot, M. (2010). *Children's Services at the Crossroads: A Critical Evaluation of Contemporary Policy for Practice*. Russell House Publishing.

24. Skyrme, S.L., & Woods, S. (2018). Researching disabled children and young people's views on decision-making: Working reflexively to rethink vulnerability. *Childhood* 25(3), 355-368.

Current approaches to risk assessment and child exploitation

Evidence in subsequent years indicates that a variety of risk assessment tools have been designed and implemented by a range of organisations and services. These have had the stated aims of helping practitioners with little knowledge of child exploitation (usually sexual exploitation) to better understand the issue and equip them to spot the signs.²⁵ Over recent years, reviews of risk assessment tools by researchers²⁶ have come to the conclusion that use of such tools does not adequately capture the complexity of exploitation within young people's lives and contributes to a narrow emphasis on their victimisation.²⁷ At the same time, there is inadequate conceptualisation of the role of perpetrators.²⁸ There is ongoing evidence of the variability and multiplicity of risk assessment tools in different agencies and across the country.

In terms of the tools themselves:

- There is a lack of evidence for many of the 'risk indicators' which are present in these tools.

- Use of risk assessment tools encourages a focus on 'risky' behaviours rather than physical and emotional safety.
- Risk assessment tools encourage a focus on the individual and do not support professionals in balancing individual with structural and contextual factors, which may inform the nature of risk.
- Risk assessment tools are often predicated on particular (outdated / adult) models of harm / abuse.
- Children and young people are often subject to multiple assessments which are not joined up.
- Risk assessment is often based on a single point in time and, while there are exceptions, the work of a single individual.
- Children who don't meet indicators are often 'screened out'.

The service response or, indeed, whether a child or young person receives a service at all, may well rest on the outcome of a risk assessment.²⁹

25. Clutton, S., & Coles, J. (2008). Child sexual exploitation in Wales: 3 years on. Barnardos Cymru.

26. Brown, S., Brady, G., Franklin, A., & Crookes, R. (2017). The use of tools and checklists to assess risk of child sexual exploitation: An exploratory study. Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse. <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/our-research/responding-to-csa/risk-tools/>

27. Beckett, H. (2019). Moving beyond discourses of agency, gain and blame: reconceptualising young people's experiences of sexual exploitation. In J. Pearce (Ed) Child sexual exploitation: Why theory matters. (pp. 23-42). Policy Press.

28. Barlow, C., Kidd, A., Green, S.T., & Darby, B. (2021). Circles of analysis: a systemic model of child criminal exploitation. *Journal of Children's Services*, 17(3), 158-174. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-04-2021-0016>

29. Beckett, H., & Lloyd, J. (2022). Growing Pains: Developing Safeguarding Responses to Adolescent Harm. In D. Holmes (Ed), *Safeguarding Young People: Risk, Rights, Resilience and Relationships* (p. 61). Research in Practice.

Criticism of current risk assessment tools also demands attention to what constitutes an alternative approach. Research that has taken place as part of the WISE Partnership highlights the need to recognise the significance of risk assessment tools for professionals and, correspondingly, the need for a thoughtful and nuanced approach when reconsidering whether or not / how they are used. Specifically, the partnership notes that risk assessments are used for a wide variety of purposes including as a source of information, to communicate with their managers and partner agencies, and to assess and guide practice. Despite evidence casting doubt on the effectiveness of risk assessment, some professionals (and senior leads) still take comfort in them. The removal of risk assessments may result in gaps in reporting and monitoring mechanisms.

'Although risk assessments can be a useful tool, they should only support practitioners in identifying possible risks a child may be facing. By co-creating assessments with young people who are directly impacted by them, practitioners can move away from a pathologising approach, which has previously been relied upon when building assessments and procedures. Change needs to be directly informed by what the young people say.' (WISE partnership, 2020, p.16)

Research into child exploitation has long highlighted that exploitation is usually only one of many different contexts affecting children who are exploited. Samples of children known to be exploited have found that children and young people may be involved with a range of agencies, all of which may have different assessment processes.^{30 31} Laudable though these intentions have been, the fragmented and piecemeal implementation of risk assessment tools has not always resulted in more effective responses. Hall (2017) in reference to discussions with practitioners, commented:

'A level of confusion exists about the purpose of tools. Are they for screening, or are they more oriented to a detailed assessment process? How can practitioners with minimal time or contact with a young person undertake a lengthy assessment? On the other hand, do screening-type tick boxes encourage assessments lacking in relational content?'

30. Warrington, C. (2013). 'Helping me find my own way': sexually exploited young people's involvement in decision-making about their care. Professional Doctorate Thesis, University of Luton.

31. Hallett, S. (2017). Making sense of child sexual exploitation: Exchange, abuse and young people. Policy Press.

At the same time, caution must be exercised in generalising about indicators of risk from samples of children already known to agencies. The evidence base for these indicators is weak.³² While most of this evidence relates to child sexual exploitation, in a qualitative study reviewing 21 cases of children involved in child criminal exploitation, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020), found that supposedly 'known' risk factors relating to vulnerability did not act as good predictors of risk for these young people. They note, for example, that most of the children were not known to children's social care and only two were looked after. The only indicator that was borne out in these cases was that of exclusion from school, which seemed to act as a trigger for further exploitation.

There is relatively limited evidence on children and young people's views regarding risk assessment, and their voices have often been absent from the tools themselves.³³

The evidence that exists suggests that there is poor understanding of what risk assessment is and why it takes place. Children and young people may also view their situation through a very different lens. They may not view their exploitation as the most serious concern, but rather one of many issues and problems they are dealing with in their lives.³⁴

Recent research with young people in care identified as being at some level of risk in relation to child sexual exploitation felt that a response focused on risk was narrow and unhelpful, saying that they felt they knew about risks and the potential consequences of risky behaviours.³⁵ Factors adults feel are associated with risk (e.g. peer groups) have also been identified as protective for some young people.³⁶ A practice response that prioritises risk assessment at the expense of a flexible, relationship-based approach is unlikely to identify the breadth and depth of individual needs, or support longer-term engagement with services.³⁷

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33. This is also reflected in sectors such as youth justice. See Case, S., Haines, K., Creaney, S., Coleman, N., Little, R., & Worrall, V. (2020). Trusting children to enhance youth justice policy: The importance and value of children's voices. *Youth Voice Journal*, 25-40.

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35. Hallett, S., Verbruggen, J., Buckley, K., & Robinson, A. (2019) *Keeping Safe? An analysis of the outcomes of work with sexually exploited young people in Wales*. Health and Care Research Wales.

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Conclusion

There is a high degree of consensus in the literature about the rationale for the development of risk assessment tools in the field of child exploitation. And a parallel level of consensus with respect to the difficulties associated with responses to child exploitation driven solely by concerns about risk. The significant growth in the evidence base regarding child sexual exploitation, and the development of the categories of child criminal exploitation, mean this is a timely moment to 'reassess' approaches in this area of practice, and to explore the promising work taking place throughout the UK.

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