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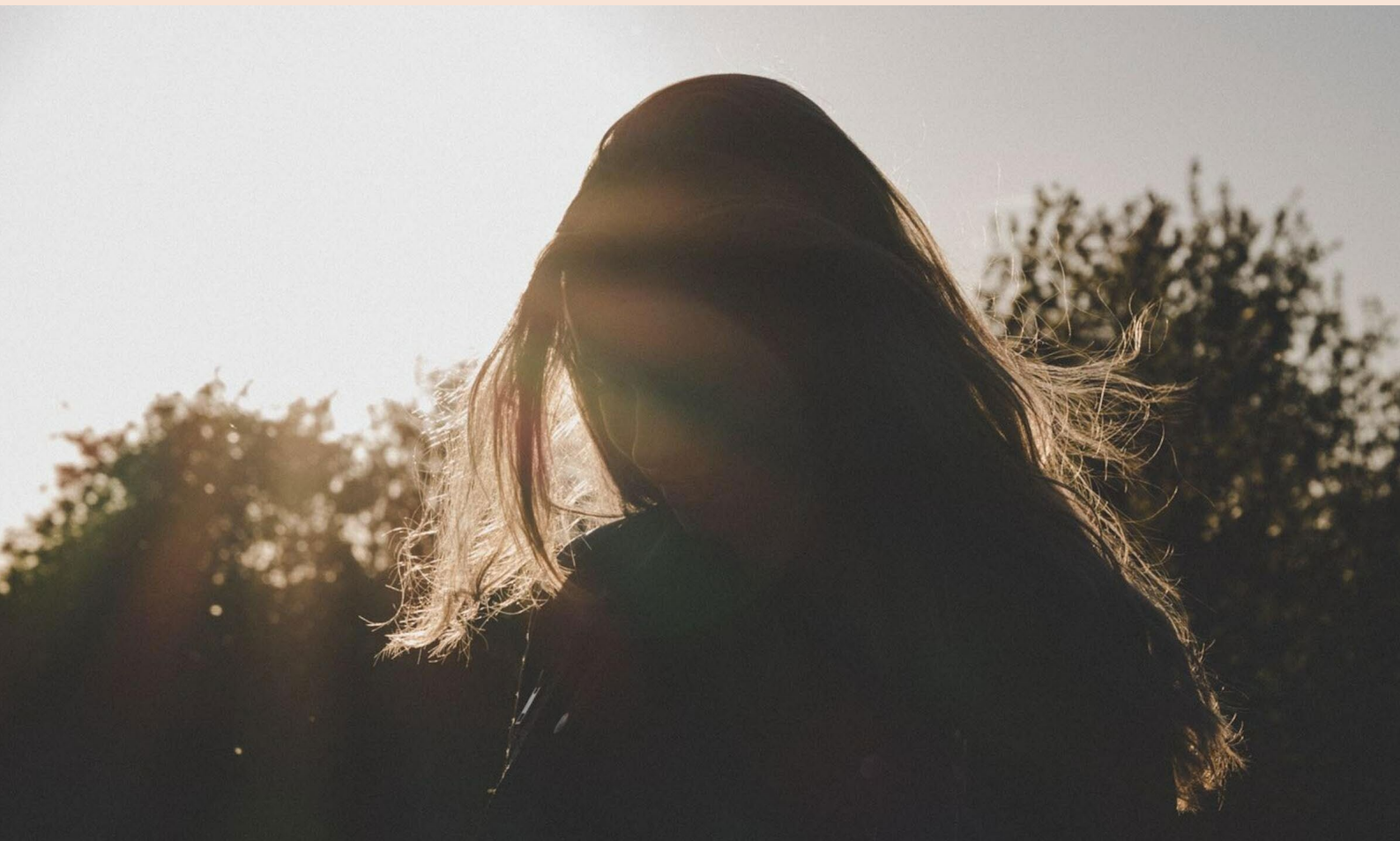
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# Opening Conversations

Improving the early identification of children and young people with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) at risk of modern slavery in England

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# Funding

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1. The NWG Network is a charitable organisation formed as a UK network of over 25,000 practitioners who disseminate our information through their services, to professionals working on the issue of child exploitation (CE) and trafficking within the UK. www.nwgnetwork.org

# Glossary of Terms

## SEND – Special Educational Need and/or Disability

Throughout this report we will use the term 'SEND' – Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities. This is an umbrella term used to identify children and young people who are disabled and/or have additional needs. Such needs could be related to mental health, learning or physical needs, neurodivergence, as well as children and young people whose experiences and trauma significantly impacts their daily life and learning. We use this term 'SEND' as a combination of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (Under SEND Reforms, 2014) and the definition of disability under the Equality Act (2010). It is recognised that many children and young people who have additional needs are undiagnosed and/or are awaiting assessment for diagnosis (Centre for Young Lives, 2024). We also recognise that children and young people with SEND may chose not to identify as being 'disabled'.

'Disability' is a term used in recognition of the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1983) and in terms of The Equality Act (2010) includes mental health and trauma. This therefore predicates definitional challenges associated with disability, and whether a child has a diagnosis/assessment.

## Child/Young Person

In this study, the term 'child' refers to children up to the age of 16, and 'young person' as a person over the age of 15, but under 25 years. Whilst childhood as defined under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC, 1989][2] considers a *child* to be a person up to the age of 18, provision for young people with SEND continues up to the age of twenty-five under the Children and Families Act (2014)[3] if in education. The participants in the study were all over the age of 16 and therefore we use 'young people' in this report when referring to those that participated. Reference will be made to 'children and young people' where findings are relevant to all ages 0 – 25 years old.

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2. https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf
3. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents/enacted

## Modern Slavery

The terminology 'modern slavery' may not be commonly used within schools or other settings where children and young people meet (Franklin et al, 2024). However, this research focuses on prevention of criminal and sexual exploitation of children and young people who may be at risk of becoming involved under the terms of The Modern Slavery Act 2015 [MSA].[4] Evidence from practice suggests that children and young people with SEND are particularly at risk of these two forms of exploitation. The MSA, at Section 2(1), defines the offence of 'human trafficking' as when "[a] person arranges or facilitates the travel of another person ("V") with a view to V being exploited".

## Prevention

For the purpose of this report, prevention refers to stopping harm *before* it occurs. We recognise that measures in identification and prevention of *further* harms through *re-exploitation* are also important to explore, but this is not the focus of this particular research study. This research concerns the early identification of risk and vulnerabilities of children and young people with SEND, *before* exploitation. The study explores the potential for creating protective factors through earlier conversations, when staff first see signs that a child or young person with SEND might be struggling or showing signs of distress. Conversations at these early preventative stages may not be in relation to modern slavery or exploitation at all; they may be exploring bullying, isolation, peer pressure, struggling in school – but they are potentially opening up spaces and creating safe spaces where risk factors can be identified and addressed before harm occurs.

## Professional/Practitioner/Staff

The umbrella term 'staff' will be used throughout this report to identify professionals, practitioners and other staff who work in 'spaces and places'[5] of interaction with children and young people (for example, schools, youth settings, sports clubs, drama groups etc). This is to distinguish other adults in a child or young person's life such as parents, carers or acquaintances. We are aware that adults as a term may also include predators who are wanting to groom children and young people for the purposes of exploitation. Therefore, the term 'staff' identifies adults who have a role in a professional setting and are bound by the standards of conduct and boundaries of the setting.

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4. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/contents/enacted
5. Lloyd et al (2003) also uses the term 'spaces and places'.

# 'I've noticed…is everything ok?'

## Introduction

In England over 1.57 million children and young people are identified as having special educational needs (SEN), over 17% of all pupils.[6] The most identified needs are associated with Autism, Speech Language and Communication (SLC), and social, emotional and mental health. This group of children and young people are more likely to have experienced high levels of isolation, exclusion, and bullying (Centre for Young Lives, 2024, Lamrhari et al, 2022, Chatzitheochari et al, 2016). In addition, existing research indicates that having a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND) can lead to increased risk of being criminally and/or sexually exploited within the UK (Franklin et al, 2015, 2018; Franklin et al, 2022). Although prevalence data is not currently collected, anecdotal evidence from our previous study suggests anywhere between 50- 80% of children and young people identified as experiencing exploitation, on practitioner caseloads, have some form of SEND (Franklin et al, 2024).

Often professionals become aware that a child or young person is being trafficked or exploited when it is *happening*, or indeed *after harm has occurred* (Franklin et al, 2024; Franklin et al, 2018). Exploitation toolkits can be used by professionals to identify risk and harm associated with criminal and/or sexual exploitation, but the effectiveness of such tools in *prevention* before harm occurs is less clear. Opportunities to identify risk/vulnerability when intervention could be actioned earlier are being missed. Our previous research has illustrated clear pathways into exploitation for children and young people with SEND where vulnerability was increased through service omissions and risks were not identified. The study particularly highlighted the links between unmet needs in education, isolation in school, school exclusion and the increased opportunities this created for all forms of exploitation (Franklin et al, 2024). This nuanced understanding allows us to identify possible sites for intervention and support where harm might have been averted. It is at this possible prevention site that this study explores.

Jones et al, (2017) indicated in their study with disabled children and young people, who had experienced child abuse, that they had struggled to be heard, be believed and be taken seriously when disclosing their abuse. Several participants described using behaviour to seek and draw attention, needing and wanting people to notice and ask. Assumptions that distressed or anxious behaviour is linked to SEND needs, as opposed to questioning what it may be communicating, is an issue that has arisen across a number of studies concerning the exploitation of children and young people with SEND (Franklin and Smeaton 2017, 2018; Franklin et al, 2024). Research illustrates that such misinterpretations and a lack of understanding or training in SEND needs can lead to exploited children and young people with SEND not being referred for, or receiving, the right help or

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6. [1] See Special educational needs in England, Academic year 2022/23 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk).

responses. Alongside this, issues when children and young people with SEND are themselves seen as a problem rather than what is happening to them can lead to serious and devasting consequences for both the emotional, psychological and physical safety of children and their parents/carers and siblings (Franklin et al, 2024).

Professionals such as youth workers and teachers can use their relationships with children and young people to build trust and provide a safe space to talk; young people want professionals to be 'interested' in their lives and to be trustworthy so they can seek help when they feel unsafe (Franklin et al, 2019). The importance of early conversations and help is crucial to avoid actual harm, but researchers have raised the concern that for many children and young people early opportunities for recognition and support are missed and go unidentified (Allnock et al, 2013; Hernon et al, 2014; Lloyd et al, 2023; Barnardos 2023). Cultures of waiting for harm to occur, or for a young person to let staff know or 'disclose' mean that harm will have occurred, when in fact research shows that children want adults to notice and respond when they see signs or behaviour showing distress. They would like to be asked 'how they are' and for adults to be 'friendly, approachable and caring' (Allnock et al, 2019 p2). Earlier conversations with staff in educational settings, youth services or first encounters with police/youth justice, could also support earlier identification of risk.

'Working Together' statutory guidance[7] describes the safeguarding duty as belonging to *all* practitioners and is often interpreted in practice as a duty to 'report', or to refer, connected to sharing information and recording. Yet it is the capacity of those practitioners to become aware of information, or concerns or noticing that something is 'not right' which lies at the heart of that duty (HM Government, 2023).[8] The ability to notice, listen, relate and facilitate an air of comfort that normalises and makes it alright to talk and broach difficult subjects, or even just talk or share basic feelings, or a basic 'hello' in a relaxed way sits at the heart of holistic safeguarding.

Although the importance of relationship-based practice is well-established, and of course, children and young people with SEND have the same needs and wants from adults as all children, however, as will be detailed below, they also require staff around them to understand their specific needs, ways of 'being' and of communicating. There is a lack of research as to how *specifically* children and young people with SEND build trust, approach and respond to staff in places where practitioners and professionals interact with children and young people. And importantly, how staff can build those relationships.

This small-scale study aims to address this gap in understanding by providing evidence to support more preventative, relationship-based practice with children and young people with SEND and to understand directly from young people who identify as disabled, and/or have experience of exploitation, what they need from staff when they first feel unsafe or are struggling.

## Aim and research questions

The overall aim of the research was to examine the effectiveness of current tools which seek to identify those at risk of exploitation, and to ask whether opening conversations between children or young people and the staff they have regular contact with can better influence the *prevention* or *early identification* of modern slavery and exploitation for children and young people with SEND. The following questions were considered:

- Do tools currently used in England to identify risk of exploitation address the needs of children and young people with SEND in preventing exploitation and harm?

- What do staff understand by the term modern slavery, and the impact of SEND on risk and prevention measures?

- What would support staff to initiate opening conversations with children and young people with SEND to improve prevention and early identification of modern slavery?

- What do young people feel should be the approach of staff working with them in the prevention of modern slavery?

## Methodology

Data was collected in the following ways:

1. Rapid review of research on prevention of exploitation and∕or trafficking of children and young people with SEND. Samples of available toolkits, tools and online resources were also gathered through recommendations from our advisory group and online searches and then analysed.

2. Online consultations with staff from a range of settings where they may interact with children and young people. Within the online consultations the following were discussed in relation to the early identification of exploitation:

- Flags for concerns

- Approaches to opening conversations

- Resources, barriers, and enablers for opening conversations

- The specific needs of children and young people with SEND.

3. Workshops with young people aged 16 to 25 who either identified as having SEND, and∕or experience of exploitation. 'Adult' was the term used in the young people's workshops to describe any professional in any setting they might interact with. The workshops explored the following questions:

- What makes a trusted adult?

- What should an adult look for to help them identify a cause for concern?

- How should an adult approach a young person they are concerned about?

## Ethics

The research received ethical approval through Manchester Metropolitan University.

## Recruitment

Recruitment for the online staff consultations was through our partnership with the NWG network,[9] known contacts of the wider team and our professional advisory group. A wide range of multi-agency professionals across England were contacted from; health, education, Local Authority, Youth Justice, voluntary and community-led organisations, where early identifiers work. In addition, teachers, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), Pastoral/Inclusion Leads, and Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSL) in educational settings (mainstream, special schools, pupil referral units (PRUs) or alternative provision (AP)), youth workers and community-led services (dance, football, boxing, drama clubs), hospital youth workers and paramedics were also approached. Contacts from across England were invited to ensure a wide geographical spread. A snowball effect began as invited contacts shared their invite across their own networks with colleagues working with children and young people. All those interested in joining the online consultation after receiving an invite (either directly from the research team or via a contact) emailed the research team for further information. Interested participants were sent an information sheet and consent form. Consent to participate was provided before consultation discussions took place by either emailing a completed written version back to the research team, or by completing an online version shared via a secure web link. Meeting information and a Teams link was sent to all participants to confirm places.

Recruitment for young people's workshops was undertaken specifically through existing research groups, or support groups for young people to ensure adequate support for participants. The three organisations were well known to the research team and had established formats and venues for their meetings. The three separate groups were selected to ensure diversity of:

- SEND (regardless of status of diagnosis)

and/or

- Lived experience of exploitation.

9. National Working Group : https://nwgnetwork.org/

Workshops were either held in person or online depending on the organisations usual format for meeting: 2 groups met in person; 1 group met online. Participants had to be between age 16 and 25 years and have capacity to consent. Once young people agreed in principle to participate after being approach by support staff, information sheets and consent forms were provided. Consent was obtained by either completing a written version at the beginning of the in-person workshops or completing an online version shared via a secure web link for those that met online. The support staff who regularly worked with the young people also joined the workshops to ensure support pre, during and post participation. All support staff were provided with an information sheet and asked to complete a consent form agreeing to help the research team host the workshops and provide any support needed by the young people throughout. Working with existing, known groups and being flexible to adapt to their usual ways of operating was vital to ensure young people's comfort and well-being. The young people received a shopping voucher as a thank you for their participation.

## Research Participants

### Online staff consultations:

As discussed, invitations for consultation were emailed (and further shared) to a wide number of organisations where early identifiers supported children and young people. However, most of the staff that attended the online consultations were from the education sector. The invitations provided details of two online consultations hosted on consecutive days, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, to maximise participation based on availability. Professionals only needed to attend one consultation which followed the same format on both days.

In total, 26 staff attended an online consultation:
- 16 from Education
    - 4 – Mainstream Primary
    - 3 – Mainstream Secondary
    - 1 – Mainstream Sixth Form College
    - 3 – Combined Primary, Secondary, and/or Sixth Form
    - 2 – Special schools
    - 3 – Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) or Alternative Provision (AP)
- 5 from Youth Justice Services
- 3 from Voluntary Sector
- 1 from Health.
- 1 from Local Authority.

**Young Peoples' Workshops**

In total, 10 young people aged 17 to 24 attended at least one of two workshops delivered for each of the three groups (9 attended both; 1 attended one).

It was paramount that the workshops were adapted and delivered to suit each of the group's preference, how they usually met (in-person or online), length of time they usually met, and with the specific needs of the young people in each group considered. As such, the research team worked closely with each organisations support staff to adapt how the content of the workshops should be delivered:

- Across one or two sessions (depending on length of time of usual meetings).
  - One group choose two sessions.
  - One group choose one session (workshop 1 and 2 combined).
- In-person or online (depending on how they usually met).
  - Two groups met in-person; one group met online.
- As a group or individually for each organisation.
  - Two groups met as a group; one group met individually.

## Analysis

The online consultations with professionals, and individual online workshops with young people, were video recorded and then audio transcribed. The in-person workshops with young people were audio recorded and transcribed. The two data sets were coded and thematically analysed separately; the data was then subsequently triangulated.
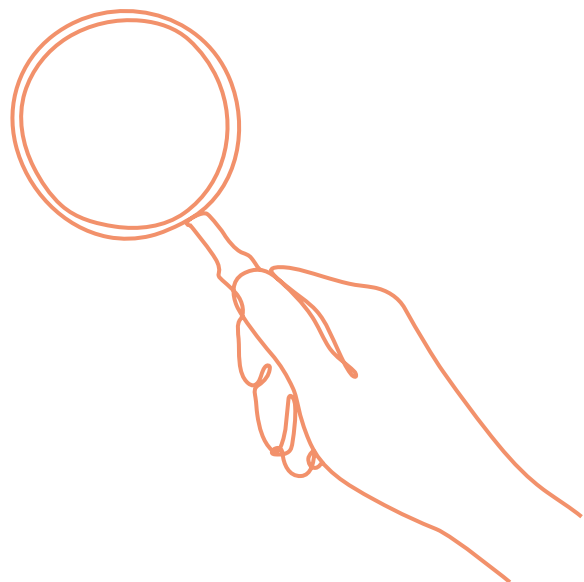
# Findings

## Section 1: Identification and Prevention: tools, resources and understanding of staff

### Tools and Resources

Building upon our previous research in this area (Franklin et al, 2018) our updated analysis of a sample of toolkits currently used within local authorities to identify their usefulness in the *prevention* and *early identification* of risk of exploitation and trafficking illustrated that they are useful for multi-agency professionals to understand aspects of modern slavery, and the legislation covering various offences and protections. However, these toolkits were not designed to support the opening of conversations or early preventative work with young people. In line with our previous research (Franklin et al, 2024) many toolkits were still identifying *harm* rather than *risk*.

We additionally considered whether these toolkits recognise, assess, and address the SEND needs of children and young people. Early toolkits such as the Barnardo's Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (SERAF) and NWG Network Child Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Tool identified in the earlier work of Franklin, Brown and Brady (2018) were found to not recognise the significance of learning, communication and/or neurodivergent needs of children and young people in terms of risk of exploitation. The fact that many of the sample toolkits gathered in 2023 do now acknowledge and record additional needs (whether educational, emotional, mental health or other disability as a 'vulnerability' factor to exploitation) demonstrates progress. However, many still operate a tick box approach which cannot give sense of a child or young person's individual needs or provide space for further details of how a disability might impact their life, communication, presentation and/or behaviour. Opportunities to record the specific nuances of change in a child or young person with SEND that may indicate increasing risk also appeared missing. As will be shown below, knowing the child or young person well enough, and being observant enough to be able to recognise changes of appearance or behaviours are important factors which may indicate sometimes subtle changes in a child's life and provide important indicators where early support and preventative work are needed.

Whilst the concept of 'contextual safeguarding'[10] featured in several toolkits, the context of specific risks and vulnerabilities associated with diagnosed or undiagnosed SEND within the community was not explored as a potential contextual safeguarding issue (see forthcoming paper from Franklin, Bradley, Goff and Greenaway for a full discussion of these concerns).

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10. https://www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/

Some early identification tools are in use within some local authorities – such as Dorset's child criminal exploitation screening tool[11] which is to be used by non-specialists prior to full assessment. However, like many risk assessment tools, this is not a tool to consider early risk, nor as a preventative resource, but to identify children aged 10 –17 and assess need for further assessment to evidence exploitation that is already occurring. Our review of tools and resources identified that the focus of most 'toolkits' was disruption of exploitation and assessment of risk. These tools may not necessarily be used by staff commonly in children's lives such as teaching assistants, support workers, learning mentors or those who have regular and sustained contact with children and young people and might be the first people to spot signs of change as precursors to exploitation. Thus, a wider range of resources, materials, conversation starters or pro-forma that could be used by a wide range of staff and early support agencies were examined. Therefore, samples of 'tools' in the wider sense to include resources used to stimulate conversations around criminal and sexual exploitation were gathered from online searches and with advice from our advisory panel. Education of people working with children and young people within a local authority as to the nature of identification and prevention of exploitation in different forms was evident within some websites, such as *Newham's Keeping Safe Campaign Toolkit*[12], and the *North Lincolnshire's Children's Multi-Agency Resilience and Safeguarding Board's' 'Change the Narrative- 'Language Matters'*[13] video resource linked within their Hidden Harm tools and resources' document.

When the search widened to consider 'tools' in the broader context, including third sector agencies, a variety of resources such as lesson plans and YouTube videos were found, such as '*Trapped' Lesson Plans*' and resources by '*not in our community*' organisation. [14] However, these were not specifically targeted or did not necessarily recognise the diverse communication and learning needs of children and young people with SEND. Once more this is illustrative of the decreased opportunities for noticing and opening spaces for children and young people with SEND to receive early, preventative information and support. Resources about opening conversations with children and young people were available, often around mental health concerns, such as the practical tools for support in schools published by Young Minds.[15] Again, the accessibility and usefulness of generic tools to open conversations may not be of use with some children and young people with SEND who have specific communication needs or challenges with social interaction.

Within the consultations, some staff spoke about the creative methods they used to support the opening of spaces for talking with children and young people with SEND around issues of concern. This included using arts and crafts, drawing and writing, using illustrations, colouring and *Lego*, alongside more

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11. https://pdscp.co.uk/working-with-children/child-exploitation/child-exploitation-toolkit
12. https://www.newham.gov.uk/downloads/file/2233/18-keeping-safe-campaign-toolkit-v4
13. https://www.northlincscmars.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Change-the-Narrative-CE-Document-July-2020.pdf
14. https://notinourcommunity.org/all-lesson-resources/
15. https://www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/resources/

targeted approaches through use of tools such as the *Three Houses Tool*[16] which enables exploration of wishes, worries, good things and dreams. Those within the consultations who had more experience of working directly with children and young people with SEND spoke about the importance of tailoring approaches through understanding the needs of individual children – something repeatedly echoed by the young participants.

*'I tell people you have to change your techniques depending on what person… 'cause they're all not gonna be the same. Doesn't matter if they're in the same year and diagnosed with the same thing… completely different'*
**Staff participant**

This often meant utilising and maximising opportunities to explore specific scenarios of concern or dangers so that children and young people could understand the issues in different contexts. However, this was a cause of conflict for these experienced staff because the ability to do this successfully required their time and 'staying with the child' over long periods of time, an issue which will be discussed further below.

Other school staff shared how they were using school or class-based opportunities, such as within PSHE (personal, social, health and economic) lessons, to raise issues generally and encourage help-seeking. Thus, trying to create a culture within the school which encourages children and young people to seek support.

Whilst the development of specific tools and creative practice are positive developments, the use of these tools must be combined with staff's knowledge of knowing what and when to be concerned, so that when conversations are opened and possible signs of risk of exploitation are identified early. Exploring this formed the opening section of the staff consultations.

## Knowledge of Flags and Indicators by Staff

As already indicated all staff across all settings where children and young people spend time have a duty to safeguard those within their care under Working Together guidance (2023). This includes being alert to possible signs of risk and harm. It is the responsibility of staff to spot signs and ask questions, not and never should the responsibility be on the child to disclose. Thus, the onus is on staff to notice. As such, the consultations explored as an opening question what indicators would flag them to be concerned about a child or young person with SEND. Answers included:

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16. https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/the-three-houses-template/

- Changes in behaviour.
- Challenging behaviour including being aggressive, irritable.
- Exaggerated behaviour, escalation in behaviour.
- Lethargic/looking tired/changes in physical appearance.
- More/less talkative.
- Dips in performance and progress.
- Erratic or reduced school attendance.
- Missing lessons.
- Increased isolation.
- Changes in peer groups and friendships.
- Changes in physical appearance which may indicate substance abuse.
- Presentation in terms of wearing expensive new trainers or items.
- Indicators of self-harm.

(It should be noted that a number of these indicators are also signs that harm, and/or exploitation may already be happening or has occurred).

When staff participants were questioned as to how they ensure such flags and indicators were noticed within their settings, unsurprisingly this required a number of factors to be in place; a whole school approach, remaining alert, knowing your students and having positive relationships with students, training across the whole school staff and having solid mechanisms for reporting information of concern.

Specifically in relation to children and young people with SEND, it was about '*picking up on seemingly smaller things"* such as new friends in a young person's life. As one staff participant described in relation to a pupil with learning disabilities:

*'I did have a case of a young lady where she had a new friend and the family thought it was great and the social care thought it was great. Everybody thought it was great. So then we ended up finding out that it wasn't just a friend, it was somebody that used to wait for her at the bus stop every day when she was going to school... So it was those little things that sometimes people don't pick up. There [are] some things that can be very blatant with some teenagers. But if you're dealing with people with certain disabilities or difficulties as well. Those little things actually really mean a lot'*
**Staff participant**

All these important protective factors are discussed in greater detail below.

## Flags and indicators young people thought staff should notice

Similarly, the young people were asked what staff should look for as a sign that there might be something happening in a child or young person's life that they should speak to them about. Consistently, they shared '*changes in behaviour*' should be seen as '*red flags*', a form of communication, and an ask for help. This supports the young people's request for staff to start conversations and approach them rather than them being expected to seek out staff (as discussed below). It also places the responsibility of safeguarding with staff (not the child or young person as can often be the case) in accordance with Working Together guidance (2023).

The young participants identified that the key to understanding '*changes in behaviour*' was in knowing a child or young person's '*baseline*'. For example, being outgoing and sociable changes to being quiet and withdrawn and vice versa. This is particularly pertinent for children and young people with SEND who may communicate and express themselves through their behaviour. Being able to spot such changes, especially if subtle, they felt was dependent on there being an established relationship and staff '*genuinely knowing*' a child or young person. This is explored further below. The young people shared some possible changes, many being those also identified by the staff:

- Not as talkative, or more talkative.

- Aggression or withdrawal as a defence.

- Changes might be positive and negative, just because changes are positive does not mean all is OK.

- Changes can be masking – 'positive affect could be hiding something bigger.'

- Child or young person stops doing things they enjoy, such as sport or perhaps enjoying their special interests.

Staff also need to be aware of other ways children and young people may be communicating through other means than just words. As the young people identified, this could include;

- Masking – many children and young people with SEND are known to mask to help them cope with social situations and associated anxiety. Masking behaviours may include features such as being monotone and hiding facial expression to not reveal emotions underneath, including happiness.

- Not seeing behaviour or change simply as being due to SEND but rather ask if a behaviour or change is '*usual*' for that particular child or young person.

- Medication (new or changes in dosage) may be a factor to consider.

The point being made by the young people we listened to was that any change could be something and as such should be followed by an open conversation and professional curiosity. This is in line with the principles underpinning *Working Together guidance* (2023) which states that safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children includes 'providing help and support to meet the needs of children as soon as problems emerge' (HM Govt, P7).

### Hear what is being said?

The importance of noticing change to opening conversations has been highlighted, but also important was the need to '*read between the lines*':

> *'what someone actually says and how they present themselves are two different things'*
> **Young person**

Therefore, the need to consider factors such as body language and to '*look at the whole thing not just what someone is saying*' is key. The young people described this as needing to be '*instinctive*' for staff so things that may not seem obvious at the time become so in retrospection and can then be learnt from going forward:

> *'Turning up late, wearing loads of makeup, having an 'attitude', being funny, secretive, acting like you don't think you need to be there'*
> **Young person**

These were the kind of changes the young people felt should be considered. They also felt it was often the '*naughty*' ones that got noticed meaning only certain kinds of behaviour were seen and changes in behaviour that are quieter or less disruptive might be missed:

> *'I was naughty, I had been quiet, isolated, skiving, then I was sent to safeguarding leadership team. If I had been quiet, they wouldn't have noticed'*
> **Young person**

Although such changes were described by many of the young people as '*a cry for help*' for one young person changes in their behaviour '*wasn't a red flag for anyone*':

*'Everyday you see your tutors, but they didn't clock that I wasn't in tutor time, my uniform, – it's just simple things like that that can – going from one extreme to another. It was a cry for help. Attention to get help'*
**Young person**

It seemed staff may have interpreted these changes as 'typical teenage behaviour'. Although, the young people also spoke about some staff's willingness to **hear what is being said or communicated.** They felt this was a barrier when some spoke about concerns, they felt they were not heard until staff were compelled to act because risk *had become* harm, and outside agencies raised a safeguarding concern. When change could be interpreted as either 'a cry for help' or typical teenage behaviour, an opening conversation could proactively enable staff to identify which it is. Lack of staff training may be a factor here if staff are not given the skills to be confident to hear what is being said and communicated and know what to do next (see 'Lack of training' and 'Lack of specialist support' below).

Noticing is the first important, vital stage. However, the young people repeatedly stated that any approach to opening a conversation would be met with immediate shut down if they did not trust, or feel in some way connected to, the staff who had approached them. In school settings, which were a dominating feature of the young people's discussions, the right sort of staff 'faces' were vital.
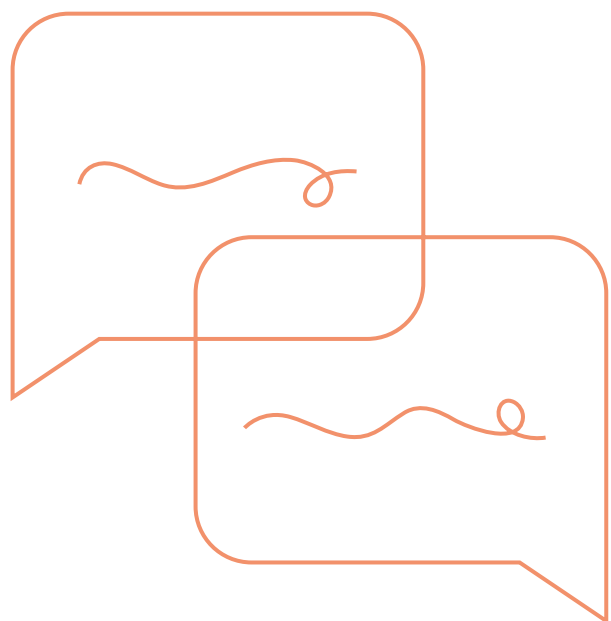
## Section 2: Staff faces – The importance of knowing and being known

'Faces' refers to the qualities and '*ways of being*' that staff should adopt to help children and young people feel safe and comfortable to talk. For the young people having someone who was trusted and was a known 'face' to them creates the conditions needed to build trust for an open conversation. Key principles relating to 'faces' were around '*relationships', 'trust*' and '*talking*' but the young people were very clear that '*talking'* was only considered possible if a *trusted relationship* had first been established:

> ### *'If you don't trust them, you won't speak to them'*
> **Young person**

Trust was something that needed to be built with '*safe people*' and the young people clearly indicated that if their needs associated with SEND were not understood, accepted, and supported there would be a breakdown of trust. This can be especially challenging for those young people who have not had their needs recognised, do not have a diagnosis and/or have not received an assessment of their needs:

> ### *'Lack of support means trust can be damaged'*
> **Young person**

The young people shared various ways staff can build and maintain a trusted relationship, describing those that '*go out of their way*' and '*show they care*', which for them meant:

- Getting to know the whole person – for young people with SEND this often meant not just seeing the 'label' or 'diagnosis' they may have been given.

- Remembering little things about them.

- Talking about your life, not just the difficult bit.[17]

- Reflects on what you say and how you feel.

- Asks you what you want or need.

- Clearly sets out the remit and potential outcomes of discussions, this should include when and who information will be shared with. (For example, one young person shared that their parents were contacted about something they

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17. The 'difficult bit' could be in relation to SEND needs or in relation to exploitation/abuse the child had experienced.

shared with a staff member without them being first told this would happen which damaged the trusted relationship).

- Not making you feel ashamed – this could be in relation to having a SEND, and/or ashamed when abuse had occurred.

- Giving you eye contact – knowing the child or young person is important here as not all those with SEND will feel comfortable with eye contact. The key is to approach accordingly to ensure conversations feel comfortable and safe based on individual need.

The young people wanted staff to '*be human, be friendly*' but maintain '*mutual respect*' as this was a professional relationship. They wanted staff to be '*non-authoritative*' which meant '*not patronising or talking down*' but instead be '*reassuring*'. If staff did not follow through on promised actions, the young people said this would '*break down trust and then we stop talking*'. The need for staff to be '*honest*' was key for them:

> **'No secrets, lies, speak uncomfortable truths'**
> **Young Person**

They also reported that for children and young people with SEND, a lack of action around meeting their support needs had often started to, or already severed, trust they had in school staff.

As already discussed, the young people shared how they are often the ones told to seek someone out to speak to or ask for help, but they wanted staff to '*start conversations and be the ones to approach*'. They wanted staff to be proactive rather than reactive:

> **'Being available. You shouldn't have to go and find them, they find you. It comes down to that pro-active rather than reactive'**
> **Young person**

Being proactive is particularly important for children and young people with SEND who may struggle with communication, anxiety, or confidence which affects their abilities to proactively seek help especially if the method of reaching out is not accessible to them. In addition, as had been the case with the young participants in the workshops, being proactive and asking for support within their education previously, or indeed disclosing harms, had not led to action thus leaving a sense of help seeking being worthless. They wanted staff to notice and care, suggesting the following open questions:

*'I notice you….is everything ok?' or 'Do you need to talk?' or simply 'Are you alright?'*
**Young person**

The young people felt it was important to share that when staff approach, they want them to '*make it a conversation not an interview'* and be sensitive to the words used. One young person said if words are not considered then children and young people can become '*defensive*' and '*shut down*'. Being sensitive to words used was also specifically spoken about in relation to exploitation and harm. One young person shared how using a perpetrator's name (or being forced to use it by staff) or addressing them as a '*victim*' can be triggering, and that was important for staff to understand this. Avoiding words related to harm such as '*rape*' or being scared to use such words was also described as not being helpful. Being explicit and specific with language is also important for children and young people with communication and learning needs as analogies, inference, vagueness, and words that are not explicit in meaning and context specific can be challenging to understand.

We asked the young people if there was anything specific that staff should do which would support trust and relationship building. The key here was to '*see them as an individual*', they required tailored approaches which recognised their individual needs, experiences and circumstances but did not '*treat differently altogether*'. Important factors the young people identified included:

- Consider the impact of trauma and complex layering of this in relation to SEND. Many children and young people with SEND may have experienced levels of trauma associated with not having their needs acknowledged, assessed, diagnosed and met.

- Young people with SEND may communicate in a different way but they should still be listened to, heard, and believed.

- See mental health and SEND as separate but understand the impact (and possible interplay) of both.

- Build relationships, if possible, with parents/carers/family as it allows discussions with parents/carers/family about who the child or young person might approach. Building relationships was also important to break down separation between professionals and families as the young people felt there was not enough talking and working together between the two.

**Young people's views on barriers to trusting staff around them:**

The young people were asked about what they thought created barriers to them developing trust in staff, and what behaviours and approaches led to immediate breakdown of trust.

- Minimising or being dismissive of their situation through the language used – *'it's not that bad'*, *'you'll get over it'*, '*Sometimes you just need someone to say, "that's pretty bad isn't it"* '

- Giving false hope.

- When staff do not:
  - Listen ⁄ let me speak
  - Tell the truth
  - Follow through.

- When staff make assumptions about how you feel, what has happened, and what is happening.

- Not being patient.

- Not making time:
  - *'I can't speak to you right now'*, *'I've got to rush off'*, *'I've got a really important meeting'*.

- '*Gossips*' to other staff.

- Refers to the young person as '*victim*'.

- Is '*cold*' and makes them feel like they are '*just doing their job but no more*'. One young person shared their experience:

*'I have heard leaders joke about it, tick it off, 'done for the week''*
**Young person**

In these ways the young people are describing a lack of the qualities that they would look for in a trusted adult, for example, not being honest, not making time, not showing they care, not considering what language is used and the impact of that.

Being pro-active in approaching children or young people may be influenced not only by staff training and understanding of modern slavery and SEND, but whether the setting – 'the place and space' – in which they work allows them the time and contact to genuinely get to know the young people, be known to them, and to develop the trusted relationship the young people were crying out for. The importance of place and space are explored in detail below. But first, we explored

with participants in the staff consultations what they considered important in terms of building trusted and relationship-based approaches.

## Staff views on what can facilitate their building of trust with young people

Staff too, recognised the importance of familiarity with a child and often deferred to the role of a form tutor, pastoral support or specifically a designated safeguarding lead (DSL) as being key roles; some schools reported having a DSL for each year group hoping this would lead to closer relationships with pupils and their parents/carers. However, as shown through the young people's views, it was not necessarily a particular role that was seen as important but rather the personal qualities, understanding, trust and approach that an individual brought. Some young people reported damaging experiences with form tutors and DSLs. Other participants in the staff consultations recognised this and spoke of how there needed to be a more open culture and recognition that it might be 'faces' rather than 'roles' that determines who a child will talk to:

> *'Some of our children will really open up to some, a member of staff and not to others. So for us, that's important'*
> **Staff participant**

Being 'tactical' about who should open conversations, and considering who the child or young person felt most comfortable with was a frequent theme; this however requires a school culture that supports, facilitates and prioritises wrap around care across all staff. Put succinctly, staff considered it was;

> *'better to use the person the child knows best'*
> **Staff participant**

Consistently, the staff in the consultations spoke about their efforts to build trust with young people, recognising too that children and young people needed to feel comfortable, relaxed, and not to be in fear but to feel safe. They echoed the young peoples' views:

> *'If you don't do it their way, they're not going to open up to you'*
> **Staff participant**

Staff spoke of needing to 'shift modes', be humble and validate the feelings of the child and young person. In one setting, wellbeing passports[18] were used to boost young people's sense of self, agency and control which was seen to act as a facilitator to more talking. Two schools represented at the consultations routinely undertook specific work with all pupils at the start of term aiming to help children and young people reflect on who they could go to.

Another key factor was persistence; *'for months we knew something was there'*. Such persistence and 'interest' in a child or young person can be especially important for those with SEND who for reasons discussed throughout may find it particularly challenging to open up in one or two sessions, or within a time limited period (Franklin, Bradley and Brady, 2019). Persistence meant not being deterred when a child is not immediately responsive and/or may push you away. Persistence also relates to the need for staff to help children and young people understand what is happening in their lives, to support them in talking about and recognising possible harm. Previous research shows that this is particularly important for children and young people with SEND who are often not aware that harm is happening until after it has occurred due to the manipulative nature of grooming, and the lack of education in this area (Franklin et al, 2015; Franklin et al, 2024). Therefore, staff's persistence and encouragement to engage in open conversations really can be preventative as they can support the recognition of possible harm.

In this section, we examined the importance of building trusted relationships between staff and the child or young person within the boundaries of the professional dynamic. However, the relational dimension of enabling opening conversations based on the concept of 'knowing and being known' is impacted by the spaces and places in which staff and children and young people interact. In this sense, 'faces' speaks to individual characteristics needed by staff for open conversations to be had, while 'spaces' and 'places' speaks to structural and organisational characteristics. The concept of 'space' and 'place' will be discussed in turn below.

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18. Wellbeing passports can be cards or tools for children and young people and their supporters to help them to share information about their mental health and emotional wellbeing. They can be used in many situations and settings, where it is important for young people to feel confident to share information about themselves. See for example https://wellbeingpassport.org.uk/|

## Section 3: Spaces – time and environment

'Spaces' refers to the structures and organisations in which staff interact with children and young people. 'Spaces' includes the provision of time, and the creation of a conducive environment to support the building of trusted relationships and open conversations. Therefore, 'spaces' is the second key ingredient identified alongside 'faces' that allows open conversations to take place.

### Time in 'Space'

The most appropriate time to have open conversations was discussed with all young people. Whilst some felt being approached at the end of the day was not good (when they might be exhausted, have sensory overload, transport considerations for example), others felt it was the best time. Similarly, the thought of being approached by staff during lunchtimes or before school received mixed responses. What was commonly shared was that conversations should take place at a time when individual children and young people felt most comfortable. This echoes a previous request shared above by the young people we spoke to, '*ask me what I want or need*'.

The majority of young people agreed that some lessons were preferable to miss than others. Therefore, being given the choice of time and having some agency appeared crucial to the young people. For staff participants, finding the time and being able to offer flexibility to pupils was a challenge in heavily timetabled days, and extensive workloads. Within one consultation, a Deputy Head of a large academy spoke about the importance of school leadership in recognising the need to actively change the '*pace*' within school to counter this challenge for staff. There was an identified need to facilitate and recognise the space and time that needed to be created in staff workloads so when a child or young person needed individual time it could be given:

*'That ability to actually [change plans] when you get a curveball moment or when a young person wants to really talk to you, do you have the skill set to help yourself pause to really listen actively to what the young person is saying'*
**Staff participant**

This approach clearly highlights that when school leadership understands and supports the need to create space for staff to have open conversations with children and young people, it can be achieved through culture change.

## Environment in 'Space'

Creating a 'safe space', knowing where to go, and knowing the children and young people's presence would not be questioned by other staff was vitally important to ensure children and young people felt confident to talk. The young people felt there needed to be flexibility within schools to allow them to seek out who children and young people feel is a trusted adult regardless of whether that was the Safeguarding Lead – 'faces' not 'roles' as discussed above. The young people strongly advocated that the structures and organisation of school should create private spaces that allowed them to continue talking with the person they trust. The challenges to achieving this in school settings, however, are discussed below.

Fear of children and young people being seen as a '*grass*' and very real fears of reprisals from gangs and/or exploiters was noted by staff participants as a serious concern. One which required sensitive handling and safeguarding through a multi-agency approach. Most importantly was the need to create a safe space in which to approach young people:

> *'They don't want to sort of be giving anybody in authority any information about their peers or their friends. And it isn't always because they don't want to be helpful. It's fear. You have to understand that they are under a lot of pressure themselves… And the worst thing here is that the other children will inform on them. Basically, you know that you have to be careful how you approach a child to even question them. You know, sometimes you have to make the excuse that you're pulling them out of a class or something or pulling them away from the friends to talk to them about attendance issues or something'*
> **Staff participant**

Young people, particularly those with sensory needs or anxiety, spoke at length about the importance of the spatial environment in which conversations might take place – this could include, for example, being forced to sit opposite someone, bright lighting, smells, or outside noise. Confidentiality of the space was important to young people. A room with large windows that other pupils can see into, or hear through, was not considered a comfortable space in which to talk, especially if it could be known by other pupils that a potential 'safeguarding' issue was being discussed. Staff participants also identified a lack of suitable confidential spaces as a barrier. The young people suggested alternative ways of communicating through email, writing, drawing a picture or going for a '*walk to talk*' rather than be sat in a room with staff member.

## Barriers to 'Space'

As discussed, most of the professionals who took part in the consultations were from the education sector. Likewise, the young people we spoke to mostly shared their experiences at school. Both recognised several barriers within the structure and organisation of schools for creating and maintaining 'space' for open conversations:

### Lack of Time

The young people were mindful of the pressures on teachers, workload and timetables. These pressures within the school system impacted how confident the young people felt children and young people can become known and able to build trusted relationships:

> *'Teachers forget we are people, so many time constraints, got 30 kids in a class-... really difficult'*
> **Young person**

> *'You have to know that person, to know what the standard for that young person or child is to be able to identify if something is out of the scope of the norm. It's the lack of time'*
> **Young person**

> *'No professional goes into it to 'not give a shit'. Give them the power to say 'the system is broken, but I care''*
> **Young person**

### Lack of access

Other systemic barriers alongside time were described by many of the young people that described gatekeeping protocols preventing them from gaining access:

> *'If you ever want to talk to a safeguarding lead, just go and tell them at the receptionist desk but they ask, 'so why are you here?' in front of everyone'*
> **Young person**

The allocation of a named person, or person within a particular role, meant children and young people have a (perceived or real) lack of choice regarding

which member of staff they can approach. The consequence of this being that the young people felt others would not feel able to talk to that person if they were not their trusted person:

*'Teachers say 'if you've got concerns, speak to such-and-such, or go to here. But some people who have autism or whatever might not want to go to that person. So if they take it literally and think they have to go to that person, they are not going to disclose to that person if they don't want to talk to them…closes a door then'*
**Young person**

## Lack of training

Some young people felt a lack of staff training meant staff were not always confident, able or willing to hear and respond to early risk indicators. Thus, reducing the spaces and opportunities in which to talk. Likewise, the necessity of training, and spaces and time for discussion and reflection was repeatedly discussed by staff participants. The importance of having both knowledge and confidence '*to actually ask*' echoes what the young people said.

One head teacher in the consultation had organised safeguarding training across the whole school to all staff, including canteen staff and librarians, that may have any contact with children and young people:

*'because it's that response bit, if they don't respond in a way which actually opens conversations and closes (the) conversation, then that could be that one moment [of opportunity to prevent exploitation] gone and lost'*
**Staff participant**

## Lack of specialist support

Leading on from lack of safeguarding training, a further barrier for staff participants was around what to do once conversations had been facilitated. Of concern was some discussion about '*where do you refer children and young people to for specialist support once concerns have been identified?*' This was in relation to needing access to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) rather than a child protection referral per se. Long waiting times, and the need for parental consent for referrals for some services (which might not always be forthcoming) were highlighted barriers.

Similarly, staff participants highlighted barriers linked to the reduction in availability of school nurses in recent years, and the reduced numbers of what

used to be key frontline practitioners available in school settings.[19] The importance of these roles stretched to them having expertise in knowing their geographical patch and their school populations and families. Instead of being around for early conversations these practitioners were reported in many areas to now be coming in much later at the point when multi-agency panels are held to talk about pupils already considered at risk. Or, indeed when pupils are already being exploited because of going missing, as opposed to earlier when prevention of harm might have been possible. This was identified as a key gap both in who was available for children and young people and who was there to notice and pick up patterns.

This lack of early support when concerns are first identified was explored in our previous study on modern slavery. In this research, many parents/carers reported asking for support for years around their child's SEND needs, not receiving this and subsequently seeing their child increasingly deteriorate, become more isolated, sometimes self-medicate and become a target for exploitation (Franklin et al, 2024). This lack of specialist support for schools means schools end up 'holding' the child (i.e.: trying to meet their needs without specialist support available), and although not explicitly stated, it could be inferred from the consultation discussions that there were concerns this leads to some school's preference to not 'open up pandora's box', perhaps due to lack of resources to deal with the issues, meaning that opportunities to prevent or identify concerns early on are potentially being missed.

In a similar vein, some discussion within one consultation group centred on an over-reliance on the need for evidence and high thresholds for safeguarding concerns. As an issue, it hints at whether this over-reliance may lead to a dulling of staff's motivation to 'stay with the child', pursue and be persistent at the level of initial conversations. This obviously being critical to prevention of harm, or further harm. This is of significance, particularly with children and young people with SEND, as it may take them longer to understand, process and communicate what is happening to them. Higher thresholds for noticing and reporting harms in children and young people with SEND has been previously highlighted in research on disabled child abuse (Franklin et al, 2022).

### Lack of awareness of modern slavery and SEND

Being aware of indicators of risk and the SEND needs of children was spoken about by some of the young people:

*'Maybe for professionals to revisit the signs and symptoms of specific types of abuse or exploitation...it might affect people with disabilities in a different way, but if they are familiar with signs and symptoms, they can pick it up easier'*
**Young person**

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19. NHS England's latest workforce figures indicated a decrease in the school nursing workforce of around 33% between 2009 and 2022, from 2,915 to 1,945. https://www.nursingtimes.net/news/public-health/school-nurses-face-perfect-storm-as-numbers-dwindle-13-04-2023/

Young people also felt that their own awareness of risks, exploitation and harms impacted their ability to reach out to staff:

*'They can't bring that up to somebody because they don't have the knowledge of what that is to make sense of it first'*
**Young Person**

As detailed in Section 1: Identification and Prevention, schools may use numerous resources to open up conversations and educate children and young people about risk and harms. However, several of the young people we spoke to that attended mainstream schools felt the education they had around exploitation had not been communicated effectively in consideration of SEND. This echoes similar findings from 2018, where Franklin and Smeaton in their study on child sexual exploitation highlighted that children and young people with SEND wanted help to understand relationships and safety, including online safety and grooming:

*'If it [information about exploitation] was adapted – I didn't listen- so it wasn't adapted to my needs'*
**Young person**

If a young person attended a Special School, they felt they had not had access to education programmes concerning issues such as exploitation and personal safety because of the fact they attended a Special School. The urgency and need for all schools to deliver education around prevention of exploitation is clear. However, the specific communication needs of a child or young person with SEND must be known and responded to appropriately in the creation of an aware space. This has also been highlighted by Kelly et al (2023). When words and awareness to describe and recognise risks are known, staff, children and young people are empowered to start conversations. Therefore, the creation of a space in which both staff *and* child or young person are aware of the risks and grooming process of modern slavery *and* SEND is significant in the prevention of harm. However, awareness alone cannot aid conversations to prevent harms without the relationships with trusted staff members who know and understand the child's needs, ways and means of communicating and presenting. As such 'spaces' and 'faces' together start to build the key ingredients needed to allow open conversations to take place. The third and last key ingredient is 'places'.

# Section 4: Places – to be heard and to hear

'Places' refers to the geography and physical places where staff, children and young people meet and interact where open conversations may take place, as opposed to 'Spaces' which speaks to the creation of a conducive environment to support the building of trusted relationships and open conversations. Therefore, 'places' is the third key ingredient alongside 'faces' and 'spaces' that allows open conversations to take place.

## 'Places' for young people to be heard

Although most of the staff who attended the consultations were from education, children and young people interact with professionals and practitioners in a wide range of contexts; from health to scouts, drama club, football club, and other out of school clubs.

However, the young people we spoke to told us that clubs run outside of school:

a. may not be attended by children and young people with SEND

b. may be the first thing they stop if they are struggling

c. and if they did attend clubs, they did not feel that this was a place they would want to, or feel able to, have open conversations with staff. It was often a place for fun, downtime, and socialising with friends – they did not want that space to become something else.

It was evident from the young people that the most significant geographical place for conversations with trusted staff were to be facilitated within the school setting, indicating the priority for spaces to be opened up for these conversations prior to any child or young person with SEND being excluded – as a holistic safeguarding approach.

## 'Places to hear'

Young people in the study felt that the school as a place was significant for staff to be able to hear and act upon emerging concerns. The place of the school also extended to the community and setting outside (but related) to the school, and they want staff to:

- Listen out for school rumours. Sometimes they may not be true, but people should listen out for and act on any rumours that cause concern.

- Be aware of the impact of social media in the context of safeguarding in schools.

- Schools should be aware of harms in their area (e.g. gangs, groomers) so they can tailor their teaching/learning based on the specific harms faced by the children and young people in that area/school.

This suggests that a 'it's not happening in school so it's not a school concern' approach is not what young people want or need. For them, if school was to act as a protective factor, then it needed to address/recognise concerns within and outside their gates. For the young people their lives do not compartmentalise into school versus outside school –the lines blurred.

## Barriers to 'Places'

In most cases, being in education can act as a protective factor, yet children and young people with SEND are more likely to be excluded from school (Lamrhari et al 2022). Staff participants highlighted that in their experience, exclusion from school presented risk, or increased the risk, of exploitation for children and young people. Research evidence supports this (Lloyd, 2024; see Franklin et al, 2024 specifically in relation to children and young people with SEND). As one participant noted:

*'Their behaviour is seen first rather than what is sitting behind that behaviour. So a lot of exclusions have occurred before they actually realise that exploitation has been happening'*
**Staff participant**

For participants working with children and young people with SEND, many highlighted the need to understand the individual child and their needs and help develop strategies to support them to remain in school. However, delays in assessment and diagnosis for children and young people can lead to the young person facing increasing difficulties which are not recognised, understood, and so their needs remain unmet within a school system that does not support them (British Medical Association, 2019; Barnardo's, 2023). These situations were experienced by some of the young people in this study, and further underlines how getting it right in school and opening conversations is vital in the prevention of harm for children and young people with SEND. Repeatedly experiencing punitive measures in school were highlighted in our previous study as a distinctive feature of the pathways of many of the young people with SEND who were exploited (Franklin et al, 2024). Isolation rooms were particularly singled out by the young participants we listened to as a risk factor. These practices were seen to immediately sever the trust the young people had in school being a protective place, and where they could trust the staff around them. As can be seen from the words of one young person, they felt dehumanised.

## 'Isolation is the problem' – exclusion to exploitation pathway

One young person described their experience of isolation. The room described had 10-15 black 'boxes' or cubicle-like structures where young people would be sent during the school day.

> *'sat in isolation in the 'black box'…I can't look left, I can't look right…you can't see none of your peers inside the isolation box…the only way you can see something is if you put your chair out and we're going to tell you you can't…see why people don't want to go to school when they sat in a box all day like dogs"*
> **Young Person**

The young person was told if they didn't take their medication (ADHD) they would be put in isolation despite reporting the medication made them feel ill. They described the vicious cycle of being placed in isolation and falling behind, 'I'm learning nothing cause there's nothing learning in nothing':

> *'Maybe isolation is the problem, maybe that needs deleting out of schools actually, because that's when people stop turning up school'*
> **Young Person**

This young person's experiences echo findings from our previous report and the 'exclusion to exploitation' pathway discussed (Franklin et al, 2024) as well as other research (Lamrhari et al, 2022; Research in Practice, 2022).

School is a protective place for young people and if the principle of 'isolation' was seen as a safe place – rather than a form of punishment – conversations could be undertaken with young people to identify possible harms and support needs to create a 'culture of conversation' as discussed below.

# Section 5: Creating a 'Culture of Conversation'

When designing this research, our starting point was to examine practice at an individual level – what is a trusted adult? What should an adult look for to recognise signs of concern? How should an adult approach a young person they have concerns about? What soon became clear was that the relational dimension of 'knowing and being known' is significantly impacted by the faces, spaces and places in which staff, children and young people interact. Individual characteristics and 'ways of being' for staff (faces) are fundamental but it needs to be recognised that staff can only successfully build trusted relationships with young people if structural and organisational barriers are removed to enable this (spaces and places). And additionally, that young people remain in positive places which can be a protective factor.

## Barriers identified that prevent a 'culture of conversation':

As highlighted above, the following which can operate at both structural and individual levels, creates barriers to the implementation and operation of a 'Culture of Conversation'.

- Time

- Space

- Flexibility

- School systems and punitive cultures

- Lack of awareness and training about harms for young people

## Facilitators identified that enable a 'culture of conversation':

There may be many facilitators that can be identified, and changes that can be made within an organisation to enable conversations, the following are some examples of what such facilitators may be:

- Ensuring **time, environment** and **space** is created to build trusted relationships to foster conversations between staff, children and young people.

- Allow children and young people the **flexibility** to seek out the staff they identify as being trusted. This may not be the safeguarding lead, for one young person it was a school pastor. As has been shown, without a trusted relationship, conversations will not take place. Or, according to the young people we spoke to, will cease if the person chosen to trust is replaced by another member of staff (e.g. safeguarding lead) the **school system** has allocated. The allocated person can advise, support and supervise entrusted staff but they should not replace the person the child or young person has chosen to talk to.

- **Communication is key**. Again, as has been shown, **talking about harms** and sharing knowledge if not communicated in a way that children and young people understand according to their needs will prevent them from recognising potential harm:

> *'They're not given the right tools that they need to communicate properly. They're not taught in schools what these sorts of harms look like…They (young people) can't bring that (harm) up to somebody because they don't have the knowledge of what that is to make sense of it first'*
> **Young person**

- **Awareness** – schools need to know what risks children and young people face in their communities and local area, for example, gang activity, known traffickers and groomers as part of a contextual approach (Firmin et al, 2022). Having a relationship with police/youth workers and multi-agency working to ensure such knowledge is known and shared is vital.

- **Training and supportive opportunities for all staff for reflection and discussion** – outside agencies were identified as being a key partner to deliver regular workshops. It was also suggested that such agencies may provide drop-in support once a month with a support worker, this could provide another trusted relationship for young people. In addition, opportunities for all staff in a school setting to be supported to be heard and be supported in their own uncertainties about how to open up conversations or proceed when a child approaches them.

- Ensure conversations, discussions and messages about possible **harms** are regularly and consistently adopted in a safe and healthy way. Remove the silencing of harm and abuse often encountered to normalise and encourage children and young people to talk about and share possible experiences of harm.

## Any change could be something and as such should be followed by an open conversation and professional curiosity.

Whilst this study had a particular focus on the prevention of modern slavery and exploitation, the learning has applicability regarding any well-being or safeguarding concern for children and young people with SEND – the importance of 'faces, spaces and places' as a sight of early help and intervention can support the protection of children in multiple situations. Much can be learnt from the often-simple messages the young people shared about what they required to form trusting relationships with staff in settings (schools) which they saw should be protecting them and offering them support.

# Recommendations

The following presents a series of important recommendations for national government, school leadership and all staff working with children and young people with SEND.

## National government:

1. All recommendations below indicate an urgent need for **joined up government policy** and approaches to modern slavery and harm to children and young people with SEND, more inclusive educational policy and an urgent need for implementation of improved support and additional resourcing for children and young people with SEND. This would support school leadership to implement the recommendations within their settings.

2. The Department for Education need to support all school leaders to have the resources, scope and guidance to create more inclusive, open spaces conducive to creating cultures of conversations which create important sites for early help and preventative intervention to address child exploitation.

3. The Department for Education needs to reduce the use of restrictive practices such as isolation through updated guidance of *Reducing the need for restraint and restrictive intervention* (2019) and its extension to mainstream educational settings.

4. The Department for Education needs to recognise that exclusion is a safeguarding concern and requires a multi-agency response, recognising that prevention via inclusive school policies is a protective factor. This needs to be recognised within safeguarding policies and guidance.

## School leadership:

1. School leadership needs to support the development of 'cultures of conversations' within their school through creating a flexible environment for time, spaces and places to facilitate trust and opening up of conversations between all school staff and pupils.

2. School leaders need to support teaching and other staff in their settings to eliminate punitive disciplinary approaches, isolation and exclusions. Policies need to be based around understanding individual pupils and making sense of behaviour as communication, and often a demonstration of unmet needs.

3.  Schools should develop individual 'wellbeing/safety' plans with all pupils which identify a staff member of the child's choice, and an accessible way to approach them if they need to speak to someone. Through anonymised mechanisms seek pupil voice to understand their experiences of school culture and of trusted relationships within the school.

4.  School leadership needs to implement training for all staff across their school to raise awareness and understanding of modern slavery, exploitation, and SEND to support identification of early indicators and flags for concern. This needs to be accompanied by a culture where staff can discuss and reflect and feel supported to be professionally curious.

## Frontline staff across the children's sector including within schools:

1.  Staff across the children's sector need to:

    a.  Recognise behaviour as communication, be prepared to listen to all forms of communication, and open up conversations. Put simply, ask children and young people how they are? What they may need? Be interested in their lives so that they feel valued.

    b.  Notice changes in children and young people even subtle changes, this requires genuinely knowing a child. Recognise that its ok not to be sure, but it is always important to talk to other colleagues about how a child with SEND is presenting.

    c.  Approach children and young people, and not expect them to seek out help or disclose. Staff also need to reflect on the time and place when they approach a young person – is it a safe, accessible environment?

    d.  Be aware of their own facial expressions, language and choice of words, manner, approachability, and recognise regardless of role that they may, or may not be, the right trusted person that an individual child might need – who does the child trust?
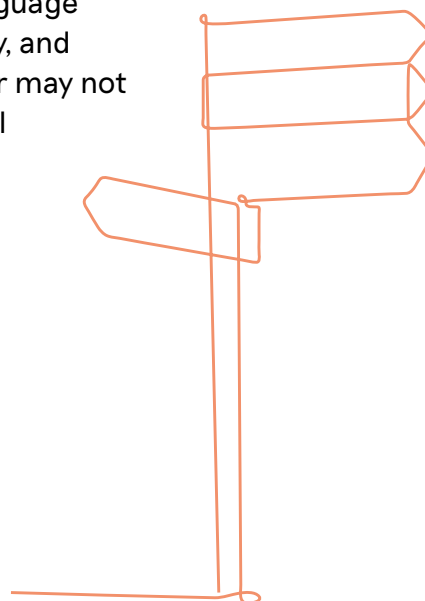
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# MODERN SLAVERY & HUMAN RIGHTS

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