

**University of East London**

**An exploratory study: Investigating the  
socio-political and personal factors influencing  
social work decision-making in child  
exploitation cases in England**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the University of East London  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**November 2023**

# Abstract

This thesis adds to the growing body of research relating to the sexual and criminal exploitation of young people in the extrafamilial context. The issue of child exploitation is a relatively recent development in child protection in England. Though a range of studies have explored young people's experiences and the effectiveness of professional interventions, there remains a limited focus on the role of the social worker as the lead safeguarding professional. This study argues that social workers hold a unique position in safeguarding young people at risk of child exploitation because of the legal duties bestowed on local authorities and their social workers.

Using constructivist grounded theory techniques, this study explores influences on social work decision-making. The research presents primary data from two contrasting local authorities in England. The research activities included the analysis of fifteen social work case files, where child sexual or criminal exploitation was a principal concern. The findings from the case file analysis were subsequently shared and developed further during two focus groups. The twelve research participants attending the focus groups were qualified social workers.

The study found that practices usually associated with traditional social work (including bureaucratic and managerialist systems) also influenced social work decision-making in the emerging area of child exploitation. The prescriptive nature of such practices routinely prioritised professionals' views over those of young people, undermining opportunities for participation. Additionally, the study argues that a gender-biased approach to social work legislation and policy development has placed boys and young men, particularly Black boys and young men, at an increased risk of receiving a compromised safeguarding response. This thesis is exploratory and systems-based in its contribution. It explores influences on social workers via their interactions with young people, multi-agency colleagues, managers, and the social work profession. While this thesis aims to contribute towards developments in social work research, policy and practice, the findings may also interest other professionals working in child exploitation.

# Declaration

This declaration confirms that this thesis is a result of my own research, no assistance has been received in completing this thesis, and all other sources are explicitly acknowledged. This thesis, or any part of it, has never been submitted for any degree or examination in any other University.

Signature.....

Date.....

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# Definitions

**Case files** A term used to describe the electronic case files where social workers record and maintain their day-to-day activities, decision-making and assessments. A case file typically includes the service user's personal details, family background and history, and any relevant child welfare legal orders.

**Child** A term used to describe anyone who has not reached their eighteenth birthday (HM Government, 2018a). This definition aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)<sup>1</sup> and civil legislation in England and Wales (CA 1989; HM Government, 2018a).

**Child criminal exploitation** A term used to describe when '...an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.' (HM Government, 2018b, p. 48).

**Child sexual exploitation** A term used to describe '...a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology' (DfE, 2017, p. 5).

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<sup>1</sup> The UNCRC, established in 1989, is an international legal agreement defining every child's civil, social, and cultural rights, regardless of race, religion, or abilities (UNCRC, 1989).

**County lines** A term first officially defined by the National Crime Agency (NCA) in 2015 (NCA, 2015). The NCA defined ‘county lines’ as the extension of drug-dealing operations to new locations using mobile phone lines. In most cases, ‘county lines’ operations involve the exploitation of vulnerable individuals, such as young people (NCA, 2015).

**Gender** A term defined as the social and cultural roles, behaviours, attitudes, and expectations that are associated with being male or female in a particular society or culture. While sex refers to the biological characteristics that define males and females, gender is more fluid and is socially, historically, and culturally constructed.

**Intersectionality** A term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to better understand Black women’s experiences at the ‘intersections’ of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1989). Since its conceptualisation in the late 1980s, intersectionality has been extended beyond the experiences of Black women and girls and is frequently applied to explore how other forms of oppression and privilege intersect.

**Minoritised** A term that refers to the act of being transformed into a minority group through various social, cultural, and political factors, which include marginalisation, oppression, and discrimination. It is worth noting that being a minority group does not always imply that the group is smaller in number than another group, but rather that they have less influence and power within a given society.

**Plan (child’s plan)** A term used to describe a written and agreed plan of actions. The child’s plan should include the views of the social worker, safeguarding partners, the young person, and parents/carers or foster carers. The child’s plan should be reviewed at regular and set intervals to assess that sufficient progress is being made.

**Safeguarding** A term that refers to the set of measures that are in place to protect individuals from harm, abuse, neglect, and/or exploitation.

**Safeguarding partners** A term that relates to professionals working for organisations that have direct contact with children and young people and consequently have safeguarding responsibilities as set out in statutory guidance



(HM Government, 2018a). This includes the police, education, health, youth services, housing, and third-sector organisations.

**Social care** A term used to describe the support and protection provided to children who are at risk of harm, including neglect, abuse, or exploitation. Social care is usually provided by local authorities, who have a legal duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area. Social care extends beyond the role of individual social workers and may include parenting workers and other supporting professionals.

**Traditional social work** A term used throughout this thesis to conceptualise social work practice that focuses on harm caused within the home and is usually attributed to harm caused by parents, carers, or family members. Over the past three decades, the child protection system (supported by national legislation, policy, and guidance) has been primarily focused on addressing this form of harm.

**Young person** A term used throughout this thesis to describe children aged between ten and eighteen years.

# Abbreviations

**A&E** accident and emergency

**ADHD** attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

**AP** alternative provision

**CA 1989** Children Act 1989

**CAMHS** Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

**CAWN** Child Abduction Warning Notice

**CCE** child criminal exploitation

**CGT** constructivist grounded theory

**CSE** child sexual exploitation

**CSPRP** Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel

**DfE** Department for Education

**EFH** extrafamilial harm

**FASD** foetal alcohol spectrum disorder

**GP** general practitioner

**GRT** Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller

**GT** grounded theory

**ICS** Integrated Children's System

**LA** local authority

**LGBTQ+** lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning. The + symbolises inclusivity for all sexual and gender minorities as defined by the individual (Fanner, 2019).

**MASH** Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub

**NCA** National Crime Agency

**NPM** new public management

**NSPCC** National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

**Ofsted** Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

**RBP** Relationship-based practice

**SBP** Strengths-based practice

**SGO** special guardianship order

**SIPPS** Systemic Investigation, Protection and Prosecution Strategy

**SLB** street-level bureaucrat

**UNCRC** United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

**UREC** University of East London Research Ethics Committee

# Acknowledgements and dedications

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the fifteen young people whose experiences and interactions with social workers have informed this research. I dedicate this research to each of you. I hope that this research contributes to meaningful change, however small.

I want to thank the social workers who attended the focus groups and showed vulnerability and honesty. My thanks also go to the two local authorities that granted permission for me to conduct this research.

My supervisors, Professor Darren Sharpe, and Professor Stephen Briggs, thank you for the challenge, valuable insight, and guidance you have shown throughout my research. A special thank you goes to Darren, who provided encouragement from the first telephone call and every step that followed. Without your support, the finish line would have felt much further.

Thank you to Gail Hopper, Damian Dalamore, The ACT Team, Camille Warrington, Abi Billingshurst, Sue Botcherby and Dez Holmes. You planted the seed.

I want to express my gratitude to Jahnine Davis. The ideas, challenge, and long conversations we shared will always be appreciated.

Thank you to Dr. Kim. Your kind words and encouragement kept me going.

Saf, your daily cheerleading has been much appreciated. You're next!

To my wonderful friends and family, thank you for all the listening, reading, nodding of heads, and smiling you have provided me over the past five years.

To my dog, Louis, I apologise for walking you so much. The years, months, days, and hours we wandered aimlessly helped shape many ideas. You have been a fantastic study buddy.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Paul. Your love, encouragement, and unwavering support made this possible.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

This thesis aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge relating to child sexual and criminal exploitation. This research explores the central influencing factors on social work decision-making and interventions in the context of child exploitation in England. This includes examining the impact of traditional social work practices and national and local policy and guidance. Additionally, this study considers individual social worker discretion and the role of young people in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. This research explores how these factors interact and contribute to the potential effectiveness of social work interventions. This thesis centres on two complementary qualitative data sets: fifteen social work case files where child exploitation was a primary concern, and two focus groups. Each focus group was attended by six qualified social workers, all with varying degrees of experience of working with young people at risk of, or experiencing, child exploitation.

Although the exploitation of children and young people in England is not a new issue (NSPCC, 1912; Hallett, 2013), the past two decades have seen its emergence as an urgent national safeguarding priority (Commission on Young Lives, 2022). The issue of child exploitation has gradually been forced into the spotlight by the persistent exposure of young people's experiences of exploitation by peers and adults throughout the country (Coffey, 2014; Jay, 2014; NCA, 2015; Longfield, 2019). The exploitation of children and young people can involve coercion, physical and sexual violence, rape, sexual assault, and trafficking (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013; DfE, 2017; Home Office 2023). Child exploitation, particularly criminal exploitation, can include the use of knives and guns, resulting in young people being seriously harmed or killed (CSPRP, 2020).

It is not the intention of this thesis to sensationalise young people's trauma, but it is important that research in this area acknowledges the risks and experiences that young people face. Researchers should shine a light into the darkest corners of this issue by listening to and acting upon the experiences and perspectives of those affected by child exploitation. This must include young people, parents, carers, families, communities, and professionals. By

exploring social work decision-making and listening to social workers' views, I hope this thesis provides a thoughtful and balanced perspective of child exploitation in England. The aim of this study is to contribute to the advancement of social work research, practice, and policy.

## **1.1 Defining the research parameters**

The parameters of this study are defined below. The first section clarifies the term 'young people' as used in this study. The second section explores the two types of exploitation examined in the study.

### **Young people**

There is no agreed or legal definition of the term 'young people'. However, in literature, the term 'young people' is frequently used and is largely associated with adolescence (Coleman, 2011; Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Briggs, 2019). Adolescence is a process of human development in which individuals transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood (Steinberg, 2015). In relation to practice and policy, due to the greater neural plasticity associated with adolescent development, it is possible that enhancements in social and learning environments may reverse the impact of early harmful experiences (Briggs, 2019). Therefore, as a distinct area of human development, the adolescent developmental process is a unique 'window of opportunity' to provide well-informed and effective interventions (Steinberg, 2015).

A young person enters adolescence at approximately ten years and transitions into adulthood around twenty-four years (Sawyer *et al.*, 2018). Adolescence is described as starting in biology and ending in sociology (Blakemore and Robbins, 2012), commencing with the onset of puberty and ending with markers such as the conclusion of formal education and the eventual transition to independence (Steinberg, 2015; Blakemore, 2018). In this research, the term 'young person' includes individuals between the ages of ten and eighteen years. The lower age limit recognises individuals who are entering adolescence, as described above. The upper age limit reflects the legal definition of a child in England (CA, 1989; HM Government, 2018a).

Being explicit about who is included in the term ‘young people’ is important in this thesis because, although any child or young person can become a victim of criminal or sexual exploitation, regardless of age, research suggests that it is primarily individuals aged twelve to seventeen years who are most vulnerable (Coy *et al.*, 2017; Maxwell *et al.*, 2019; NCA, 2019). This is not to suggest that younger children are not being exploited or are not vulnerable to this form of abuse. Indeed, there is evidence of children as young as seven years old being targeted for exploitation (The Children’s Society, 2019). Nonetheless, from the available data, adolescents appear to be the majority of victims. There are various possible reasons why young people appear to be particularly vulnerable to sexual and/or criminal exploitation. These include the increased amount of time young people spend free from adult supervision, the increased draw and influence of their peers, increases in risk-taking and a developing sexual maturity (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Coleman and Hagell, 2022; Firmin and Knowles, 2022). The National Crime Agency (NCA) reports that young people aged between fifteen and seventeen years are frequently targeted as they ‘provide the level of criminal capability<sup>2</sup> required for the offending model, but remain easier to control, exploit and reward than adults’ (NCA, 2019, p. 4). Therefore, it is my intention to use the terms ‘young person’ / ‘young people’ in recognition of the distinct experiences, opportunities, and possible vulnerabilities associated with this age range. Other terms such as ‘child’ or ‘youth’ may also be used to reflect the language in academic literature, or the terminology used by official bodies and institutions.

## **Exploitation**

Young people may experience various types of abuse both inside and outside the home environment. The types of abuse described within statutory guidance include neglect; physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; and exploitation (HM Government, 2018a). Though exploitation can occur inside the family home, child sexual and criminal exploitation is mostly associated with harm that occurs outside the young person’s home (DfE, 2017; HM Government, 2018b). This

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Criminal capability refers to the awareness, knowledge and physical capability required to effectively fulfil a criminal role within the offending model’ (NCA, 2019, p. 4).

research is focused on exploitation that occurs outside the home environment, often referred to as extrafamilial harm (EFH) (HM Government, 2023).

Exploitation can be broadly categorised as either child sexual exploitation (CSE) or child criminal exploitation (CCE) (HM Government, 2018a; Huegler, 2021); both types of exploitation are defined within government publications. Although there are various other forms of EFH and contexts in which young people are exploited, such as peer-on-peer abuse and gang violence (Firmin, 2018), however, to keep this research manageable and focused on social work decision-making, this thesis concentrates on CSE and CCE as defined above (see p. vi) and recognised in social work practice.

## **1.2 Motivation**

My introduction to child exploitation, specifically CSE, dates to 2002. I was undertaking my social work degree and working in a local authority children's home during this time. Although CSE was yet to be defined or officially recognised as a child safeguarding issue, it was obvious to me and all other residential staff at the home that adult males were manipulating the vulnerability of the females living within the home for sex. Men would sit in their cars outside the children's home, engines running, waiting to pick up and exploit the girls. The men would sit outside the children's home several nights a week, with residential staff, me included, doing our best to confront the men whilst simultaneously attempting to keep the young people safe inside the house. These interactions were tense and chaotic and often ended with the men driving a few streets away to avoid continued confrontation. Nevertheless, despite our best efforts, the young people frequently managed to leave the building and meet the men. The young people would push past staff members, force locked doors open, and climb out of windows. The police were often called to speak to the men; however, the excitement, risk, social kudos, promise of gifts, cigarettes, and alcohol, and peer pressure would often result in all five young people who lived in the home leaving to meet the men before the police arrived. This included both boys and girls. When the young people returned home, they would frequently be under the influence of alcohol or substances. They would have cigarettes and McDonald's given to them by the perpetrators in exchange for sex with one or two of the girls.



Whilst I could see that the residential staff were doing everything in their power to stop the exploitation of young people, as a social work student, I was particularly struck by the bewilderment and ineffectiveness of the young people's social workers. Rather naively, prior to this, I had assumed that social workers, as agents of the state, would have the expertise, knowledge, and resources to keep young people safe. However, in contrast to my expectations, I observed social workers struggling to provide appropriate support and displacing responsibility to residential staff members and young people. Blaming young people for the abuse and exploitation they experienced was common among professional attitudes at this time (Coffey, 2014; Jay, 2014). CSE remained a dominant and distressing feature of my role during the three years I worked at the children's home. On reflection, I was relieved when I qualified as a social worker, and I did not have to come face to face with the frequent sexual abuse of girls and young women I cared for and with whom I had built meaningful relationships. Looking back, I think the sense of relief was due to an overwhelming feeling of helplessness, which I could see reflected throughout the safeguarding system.

In 2005, I secured my first role as a qualified child protection statutory social worker. I worked on a busy duty and assessment team. Most of my time in this role was spent focused on traditional social work<sup>3</sup> safeguarding issues, which centred around harm within the home and mostly younger children. It was not until 2009, when I became a senior practitioner and later a team leader, that CSE started to feature again as a significant part of my professional life. In 2009, the government published *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation* (HM Government, 2009). This publication introduced the first official definition of CSE and challenged the concept of a willing 'child prostitute', clearly stating that 'Children who may be forced into prostitution will be treated by the CPS [Crown Prosecution Service] as an abused child and victim who needs help rather than as a defendant.' (HM Government, 2009, p. 32).

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase 'traditional social work' is used throughout this thesis to conceptualise social work practice that focuses on harm caused within the home, which is usually attributed to harm caused by parents, carers, or family members. Over the past three decades, the child protection system (supported by national legislation, policy, and guidance) has been primarily focused on addressing this form of harm (Firmin and Knowles, 2022).

Following the first official government CSE publication (HM Government, 2009), an increasing number of young people were referred to the child protection team, where I was a team leader, due to concerns of CSE. While in this role, I started to reflect and appreciate the challenges the social workers must have experienced when trying to support the young people in the children's home five years earlier. I was experiencing the same limitations of the social work systems, processes, and resources. I was trying to gain meaningful support for young people abused outside the family home in a system constructed primarily to protect younger children from harm in the intrafamilial context (Firmin and Knowles, 2022). Consequently, it often felt that young people were being forced into an ill-fitting system that did not account for their evolving and holistic needs as adolescents (Coleman and Hagell, 2022). Furthermore, the system also appeared to lack the necessary flex and space to effectively facilitate young people's meaningful participation in decision-making, especially in the context of the abuse and chaos they were experiencing (Warrington, 2013).

Due to the experiences highlighted above, when I was given the opportunity to lead the development of a research-based CSE service, which was also co-designed with young people who had experienced CSE and professionals working in the field, I unequivocally committed to the role. This pilot project was part of a grant of approximately £1m provided by the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, a programme designed to help local authorities '... get better value for public money spent to support vulnerable children... and... to create conditions in which local systems are better able to innovate in future to drive sustained improvements in outcomes for vulnerable children.' (DfE, 2014, p. 7). During the two-year pilot, I witnessed how effective CSE social work practice could be when informed by young people and underpinned by research. The academics and researchers who supported this project provided a wealth of theoretical knowledge in accessible and practical formats. Their child-centred focus significantly altered my perception of what services and social work practice could look like. Although the pilot was independently evaluated and received positive feedback (Scott *et al.*, 2017), a possible critique of this service could include the lack of engagement and support of young people from marginalised and minoritised backgrounds. This included a bias towards female experiences and input, with less than 20% of the young people

supported by the project being male. Nonetheless, following the conclusion of the pilot, the service continued to develop and has since been rolled out across Greater Manchester. The experiences described above, particularly developing the CSE service, motivated me to seek out research opportunities that explored social work practice further and focused on developing responses to child exploitation.

### **1.3 Policy and practice context**

Although CSE and CCE are defined in contemporary statutory guidance (HM Government, 2018a), they are not equally understood or developed. This is due to uneven approaches to policy and practice developments. For instance, CSE started to conceptually evolve as a safeguarding concern during the 1990s when the use of the term 'child prostitute' and the responsibility and stigma it placed on children started to be questioned (Adams *et al.*, 1997; Barrett, 1997). However, it was not until 2009 when the government replaced the publication *Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution* (DoH, 2000a) with *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation* (HM Government, 2009) that official text used the term 'sexual exploitation' and social work practice routinely started to consider CSE in terms of safeguarding. In contrast, the first official definition of CCE was published in 2018 (HM Government, 2018b), although the development of criminal exploitation as a safeguarding concern can be traced back to gang-related policy from 2016, in *Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation* (HM Government, 2016). This report explicitly linked gang activity, the exploitation of vulnerable young people, and the organised distribution of drugs through the criminal exploitation of young people. The *Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation* report was underpinned by the NCA's Intelligence Assessment (2015), which introduced the notion of 'county lines' (p. viii).

While CCE was emerging in government publications, academics and researchers started highlighting the evolving nature of urban street gangs and organised crime groups, exploring the expanding business models of such groups and the exploitation of young people in the distribution of illicit drugs across the country (Andell and Pitts, 2013; Windle and Briggs, 2015). The nine-year gap between CSE being recognised as a safeguarding concern and CCE

being recognised is observable in the dearth of research relating to CCE (Maxwell *et al.*, 2019). This uneven approach between CSE and CCE is also evident in safeguarding practice: with less understanding of CCE, practices and policies remain in the relatively early stages of development (Maxwell *et al.*, 2019; CSPRP, 2020).

Recognising and understanding the impact of the later response to CCE is important because current data indicates that girls are the primary victims of CCE, whereas boys appear to be the primary victims of CCE (Coy *et al.*, 2017; CSPRP, 2020). As a result, there is a more developed understanding of CSE and girls' and young women's experiences. Furthermore, many CCE and EFH responses and services have developed from the initial response to CSE, which are largely underpinned by a gendered lens, whereby girls and young women are understood as the victims and boys and young men are considered as perpetrators (Cockbain *et al.*, 2017). Both the research sites that took part in this research have developed their CSE responses to include CCE.

Applying a gender-critical lens to child exploitation can provide useful insights into the different experiences of boys and girls and can consequently assist in developing more inclusive interventions. Whilst gender is possibly the most obvious characteristic to explore gaps and possible inequalities in child exploitation research, practice, and policy developments, other aspects of a young person's identity can also provide much needed and useful perspectives. This includes understanding the interplay of ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and whether the young person has additional learning needs or disabilities. Although there is limited research relating the experiences of marginalised and minoritised young people and child exploitation (Bernard, 2019), the available literature does suggest that marginalised groups may face increased risks. For example, young people with learning disabilities may be more vulnerable to CSE due to social isolation and societal attitudes that refuse to view young people with learning disabilities as sexual beings (Franklin *et al.*, 2015). Studies have also shown that Black people may also be at increased risk of child exploitation due to being disproportionately affected by structural inequalities such as poor housing and socio-economic disadvantages (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013; Firmin 2018; Bernard, 2019).

The difficulties of systems and professionals in responding to child exploitation may also relate to the specific age range of the young people most affected by child exploitation. As highlighted above, child exploitation mostly involves the abuse and exploitation of adolescents (Coy *et al.*, 2017; C SPRP, 2020). This has resulted in two interrelated issues for current service responses. First, the abuse and exploitation of young people across England has not occurred in a vacuum; it is tied to decades of attention on early intervention, early childhood development theories, and subsequent government policy, all of which have contributed to a system that is designed primarily to protect younger children (zero to ten years) from harm within the home (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Firmin and Knowles, 2022). This bias towards younger children and early intervention has not only been reflected in social work theory, legislation, and government spending, but it has also influenced social work practice. This is possibly most evident in the services provided to adolescents, which are often less extensive than those aimed at younger children (Thornberry *et al.*, 2010; Hanson and Holmes, 2014) and are usually extensions of interventions designed for children or adults (Weisz and Hawley, 2002; Thornberry *et al.*, 2010; Hanson and Holmes, 2014). Consequently, services do not always reflect the specific needs of young people as they enter their second decade of life, in which significant changes occur anatomically, socially, psychologically, and neurochemically (Spear, 2000; Blakemore and Mills, 2014).

## **1.4 The study**

This study focuses on young people who are either at risk of, or experiencing, criminal and/or sexual exploitation outside the family home. The aim of this thesis is to provide a critical understanding of the factors that influence social work decision-making and interventions in these cases. This will be achieved by answering the following research questions.

### **The research questions**

1. What are the central factors that most influence social work decision-making in determining interventions when working with young people considered at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context?

While the aim of this research and the overarching research question outline the study's main purpose, it is also important to provide context and depth to the topic area. Four sub-questions have been designed to break down the overarching question and help guide the investigation. The sub-questions are as follows:

- What practice concepts and theories help develop an understanding of influences on social work decision-making and interventions when working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context?
- Do social workers use adolescent development theories to help shape and/or inform their response when working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context? If so, to what extent?
- Do established children's social work practices influence social work decision-making and interventions when working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context? If so, to what extent?
- To what extent do social work decisions and interventions reduce the original concerns (i.e., reasons the young person was referred to the specialist team)?

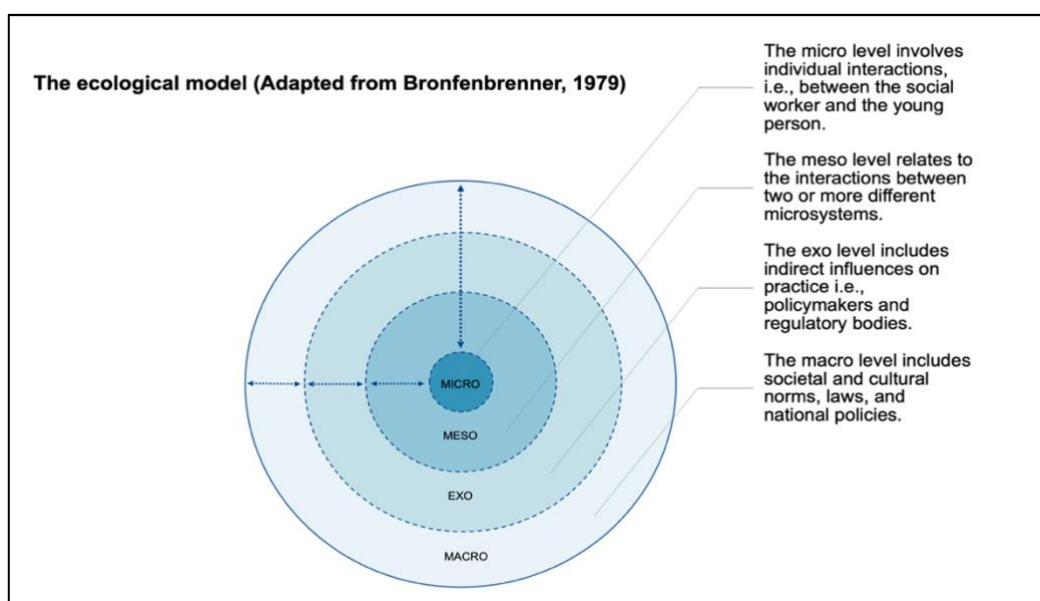
## **Theoretical framework**

As highlighted throughout this chapter, multiple overlapping and interconnected factors exist when considering influences on social work decision-making. These can include developments in national policy and legislation, national and local responses, and the availability of resources. Social workers and services may also respond differently to young people based on their intersecting characteristics, such as age, gender, and ethnicity. Therefore, this research is underpinned by an ecological theoretical framework. This is because an ecological framework recognises the multi-layered factors affecting social phenomena and allows all 'dimensions' of decision-making to emerge (McCormack *et al.*, 2020).

The ecological framework used in this research has been adapted from Bronfenbrenner’s early work on ecological systems, which examined the properties and interactions between the person and the structure of environmental settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although Bronfenbrenner’s work was developed to focus on the frequency and intensity of interactions between children and the adults and environments around them (known as proximal processes) (Bronfenbrenner, 2001), this study uses the earliest model of the ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is because it provides an accessible and tried-and-tested theoretical framework in social work decision-making (Dolan and McGregor, 2019; McCormack *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, social work practice in England has long been underpinned by an ecological approach, informing social work assessments as part of the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DoH, 2000b). The assessment framework, as it is colloquially known, is ‘a long-standing tenet of social work practice in children’s services in England’ (Baginsky *et al.*, 2021, p. 2572).

As highlighted in Figure 1, Bronfenbrenner’s initial systems ecological model comprised of four levels/systems and was developed to understand the dynamics and impacts of various systems. This model acknowledges the interconnections between systems and the ways in which they affect each other in a multidirectional manner.

**Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model**



For this study, the macro level includes cultural norms, laws, and national policies. The exo level includes contexts that do not have a direct relationship with the subject, but their influence can still be felt, such as institutions, researchers and academics, policymakers, and regulatory bodies. The meso level relates to the interactions between different microsystems such as the police, home, and school, and the micro level involves personal and individual influences. This may include young person–parent and young person–social worker interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

## **1.5 Thesis structure**

This chapter introduced and summarised the main factors and debates relating to child exploitation. It also introduced the notion of system-wide influences on social work decision-making, such as structural inequalities, the influence of national policy and legislation, and societal and professional biases. These are important considerations in relation to the research question. Understanding these problems and how they influence social work responses could enable professionals, services, and organisations to better develop policies and practices to optimise the support provided.

In Chapter 2, I review key literature to help locate this thesis in the broader social work and child exploitation text. I also explore the main topics relating to child exploitation and social worker decision-making, building the case for the importance of this study. This includes reviewing topics such as the development of child exploitation national policy, examining recognised approaches to supporting young people affected by child exploitation and identifying and conceptualising the experiences of young people through the prism of adolescent development. In Chapter 3, I provide a detailed and chronological explanation of the research design and methodology. This includes rationalising research decisions relating to data collection methods and analysis. I also report on the ethics of the study and the processes undertaken.

Chapters 4–7 share the research findings. The chapters are loosely organised in line with the study's theoretical framework. In Chapter 4, I present the findings relating to the macro influences. This includes the impact of established traditional social work processes on the emerging area of child exploitation. In



Chapter 5, I examine the findings broadly relating to the exo and meso influences, which include exploring how social workers cope with the pressures and emotional strains of working closely with young people who are criminally and sexually exploited. I also discuss how social workers use discretion to navigate complex multi-agency and bureaucratic systems. The final two findings' chapters focus on micro influences, specifically the relationship between young people and their social workers. In Chapter 6, I examine the levels of participation afforded to young people. Chapter 7 reports the findings relating to the influence that young people's individual characteristics can have on social work decision-making, including gender and ethnicity.

In Chapter 8, I provide a comprehensive overview of the critical research findings before synthesising and conceptualising the findings from across the thesis. In Chapter 9, I discuss the findings in response to the stated research questions. I also explore the study's strengths and limitations and identify further research areas. The final section details potential implications for child exploitation social work research, practice, and policy.

## **Chapter 2 Social work, child exploitation, and decision-making – a review of key literature**

This chapter examines the literature that informs the development of the research questions and theoretical approach. Conceptualising key text from research, policy, and practice, this chapter provides a concentrated review of the literature relating to social work practice and decision-making in the context of child exploitation.

The initial four sections of this chapter broadly reflect the thesis' theoretical framework, as set out in Chapter 1. The first section explores legislative and policy developments in children's statutory social work in relation to child exploitation. The second section examines the role and legal responsibilities of social workers. The third section considers operational and practice-based approaches to tackling child exploitation. The fourth section reflects on young people's needs and vulnerability to exploitation. This includes an examination of the literature on adolescent development. The fifth section draws together messages from the literature review to provide a rationale for the research and theoretical framework adopted.

### **2.1 An uneven and biased approach to child safeguarding legislation and policy development**

#### **A critical analysis of the developing legislative framework**

Since the introduction of the Prevention of Cruelty to, and Protection of, Children Act 1889, commonly known as the Children's Charter, the English government has had a recognised role in safeguarding children and young people. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) led the way in supporting and enforcing this early legislation to safeguard children and young people from mistreatment, neglect, abandonment, or harmful conditions that could cause unnecessary suffering or injury (Waugh,

1889). Although child exploitation was not explicitly mentioned, the Children's Charter did address child exploitation in the extrafamilial context. For instance, in the 1912 publication *The Cruelty Man*, which provides a first-hand account of child cruelty as observed by an anonymous NSPCC inspector<sup>4</sup>, the term 'exploiters' is used to describe extrafamilial exploitation (NSPCC, 1912). This label was assigned to vagrants who 'hired out' children from their parents with the intent to exploit the child for money. Exploiting children and young people for financial gain remains one of the primary reasons young people are still exploited today (DfE, 2017; Home Office, 2023). Although the Children's Charter did not define or outlaw child exploitation, the anonymous NSPCC author praised the Children's Charter, stating that since its passing, the NSPCC had been able to deal 'much more firmly' with vagrants who exploited children (NSPCC, 1912). While this early piece of legislation perhaps started to recognise the state's role in protecting children from exploitation in the extrafamilial context, many argue that this remains an aspiration and is yet to be fully realised (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Beckett, 2019; CSPRP, 2020; Firmin and Knowles, 2022; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a).

Like England, countries, including many European countries, the USA, and Australia, are still developing their legislative and national responses to child exploitation and EFH. (Pearce, 2000; Barnert *et al.*, 2016; McGuire, 2018; Firmin and Rayment-McHugh, 2020; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a). While England has established nationally recognised definitions for CSE and CCE (DfE, 2017; HM Government, 2018a; 2018b), the absence of a legal definition for criminal law purposes has created a challenge for prosecuting perpetrators. Prosecutors rely on legislation such as the Sexual Offences Act 2003, the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, the Child Abduction Act 1984, and the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to prosecute those who exploit young people. Professionals working in the field have called for changes in the legislative framework to better protect young people from exploitation and EFH (Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018; Firmin and Knowles, 2022). Several leading UK children's charities, such as the NSPCC, The Children's Society, Barnardo's, and Just for Kids Law, are also

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<sup>4</sup> NSPCC inspectors were amongst the first professionals authorised to investigate child abuse (Waugh, 1889). Remnants of the NSPCC's historical role remain present in the Children Act 1989, which provides the NSPCC with statutory powers. This is the only charity to hold these powers.

campaigning for a statutory definition of CCE to be established (The Children's Society, 2021).

In contrast, the USA has legal definitions for CSE but lacks federal legislation or a definition for CCE like that in England and Wales (US Department of Justice, 2023). Furthermore, state laws, known as 'Safe Harbor legislation', which were first introduced in 2012 to stop the criminalisation of young people who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation, have been criticised for being used in isolation from other interventions and not being effective in eradicating the prosecution of young people for 'prostitution offences' (Barnert *et al.*, 2016; Cole and Sprang, 2020).

While academics and children's charities are advocating for changes to legislation and policy, as described above, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (CSPRP)<sup>5</sup> is more cautious about championing change at this time. In its high-profile report, *It Was Hard to Escape: Safeguarding Children at Risk from Criminal Exploitation*, the CSPRP explicitly states that it is refraining from recommending specific changes to statutory guidance in recognition that the 'sector is still working through best practice responses' (CSPRP, 2020). The stance taken by the CSPRP indicates a period of transition in England's child protection and safeguarding practices, gradually shifting focus from younger children and harm within the home to a system that can effectively respond to the needs of young people and harm in the extrafamilial context (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Firmin and Knowles, 2022).

When considering England's and Wales' developing approach to tackling child exploitation and EFH, academics and researchers have started to explore the shortfalls of the child protection system (Hallett, 2013; Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Firmin, 2015; Coy, 2016; Eaton, 2017; Firmin *et al.*, 2019; CSPRP, 2020; Wroe, 2020). However, it is perhaps Firmin and Knowles who have most forensically scrutinised the legislation in terms of its capacity to address EFH,

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<sup>5</sup> The Children and Social Work Act 2017 established the independent CSPRP. Although the Department for Education funds the panel, it operates independently of the government. The panel has the authority to commission reviews concerning children whose situations and experiences of harm may be of national importance. The CSPRP synthesises and publishes review findings to improve national safeguarding practice.

including, though not limited to, CSE and CCE (Firmin and Knowles, 2020, 2022). This includes highlighting that the Children Act 1989 (CA, 1989), which provides the legislative foundations for the English child protection system, has never been revised despite the growing body of knowledge relating to EFH. Firmin and Knowles' scrutiny of the legislative framework also demonstrates how the English child protection system has been stretched over the past three decades to accommodate CSE, CCE, and other types of EFH (Firmin and Knowles, 2022). One of the limitations of the CA 1989 is that it is designed to address the unmet needs of children in the intrafamilial context, whether they are children with unmet health needs, children with disabilities, or those who are being abused and/or neglected by family members (Firmin and Knowles, 2022).

When considering the limitations of legislative frameworks to meet young people's needs in the context of EFH, Firmin and Knowles' evaluation focuses primarily on age and adolescent development, in terms of young people's increasing autonomy and the lessening of parental influence (Firmin and Knowles, 2020; 2022). The role of gender is largely absent from their analysis; this is despite the statutory protections afforded to boys and young men often falling short when compared with the safeguards extended to girls and young women. The gender disparity in legislation commenced with the Children's Charter in 1889, with the most obvious example being the legal protection afforded to girls up until the age of sixteen and boys up until the age of fourteen. This was raised to the age of eighteen for both boys and girls with the introduction of the Children Act 1948. Another example of the established gender bias in safeguarding legislation was the Children Act 1908, which provided legal protections to girls under the age of sixteen from adult 'seduction' or being 'enticed' into 'prostitution', whereas the vulnerability of boys was overlooked. It was not until the Sexual Offences Act 2003 that boys were provided with complete parity in legal protections in relation to sexual abuse. This imbalance in approach indicates a gendered bias in how organisations and institutions have understood and responded to the sexual abuse and exploitation of boys, a disparity that many argue is still present in contemporary practice (Lillywhite and Skidmore, 2006; Nelson, 2009; Cockbain *et al.*, 2017; Mitchell *et al.*, 2017; Moynihan *et al.*, 2018; Fanner, 2019).

## A critical analysis of the developing policy framework

In addition to the inequity in safeguarding legislation discussed above, safeguarding policy has also developed in an uneven manner, albeit arguably more discreetly. For example, CSE started to conceptually evolve during the 1990s when academic and practice-based discourse started to question the use of the term 'child prostitute' and the responsibility and stigma it placed on children (Adams *et al.*, 1997; Barrett, 1997). In comparison, CCE, including 'county lines', was not identified as an issue until 2015 (NCA, 2015) and was not officially recognised as a safeguarding concern until 2018 (HM Government, 2018b). This is important to note as the current evidence base indicates that most victims of sexual exploitation are girls (Coy *et al.*, 2017), whereas boys appear to be more vulnerable to criminal exploitation (Maxwell *et al.*, 2019; CSRRP, 2020). The eventual recognition of CCE is perhaps a further indication that practitioners and policymakers struggle to recognise the vulnerability of boys and young men and the risks to which they are exposed; this appears to be particularly true for boys and young men from ethnic minoritised backgrounds (Davis and Marsh, 2020; Firmin *et al.*, 2021).

Since the publication of *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation* (HM Government, 2009), national guidance has promoted a gender-neutral approach to language, whereby publications do not explicitly discuss the disproportionate representation of either gender observed in sexual and criminal exploitation. Adopting this approach arguably neglects to recognise the different gendered experiences of exploitation (Cockbain *et al.*, 2017; Fanner, 2019). Although the 2009 CSE guidance did detail minor gender-based differences, such references were largely limited to the challenges in detecting indicators of CSE when working with boys (HM Government, 2009). This included stating the following:

... it can be more difficult to detect when boys and young men are at risk of sexual exploitation or are being sexually exploited, as they are generally harder to work with and less willing to disclose this type of information. They may also find it harder to disclose that they are being abused by other men because of issues about sexual identity.

(HM Government, 2009, p. 45)

Statements suggesting that boys and young men are inherently more difficult to work as part of national guidance reinforce gender-based narratives and stereotypes. These sentiments neglect to highlight the societal issues that have contributed to boys and young men appearing to be 'harder' to work with or 'less willing to disclose' their abusive experiences. These include the dominant discourses of masculinity (i.e., males are strong and should be able to protect themselves from abuse) and issues of societal homophobia, which can be internalised by young people who may, or may not, be questioning their sexuality (Nelson, 2009). Furthermore, young people's sexuality is only referred to in terms of males and as a potential aggravating risk factor, such as visiting high-risk venues such as 'gay clubs' (HM Government, 2009). Again, this perhaps focuses too heavily on the role of the young person and negates the responsibility of the professional to be more cognisant of how their approach, language, and tools may unintentionally exclude LGBTQ+ young people (Marsh, 2022; Schaub *et al.*, 2022).

In each of the recent CSE and CCE practitioner guidance (DfE, 2017; Home Office, 2023), the impact of intersecting characteristics in relation to ethnicity and disability receives only a passing mention. Indeed, in the Home Office's guidance on criminal exploitation and county lines, the only reference to ethnicity is as follows:

Ethnicity: people from all ethnicities and nationalities are targeted and the demographics of victims of exploitation vary across England and Wales. In some areas, there is an over-representation of people from black and mixed ethnic groups, while in others, victims are mainly white.

(Home Office, 2023, p. 6)

The superficial discussion of race and ethnicity in national guidance does not reflect the broader debate in practice relating to typographies of abuse and exploitation (CSPRP, 2020; Brown, 2019; Maxwell *et al.*, 2019; Wroe, 2020). For example, the CSPRP highlights that 'boys from black and minority ethnic backgrounds appear to be more vulnerable to harm from criminal exploitation' (CSPRP, 2020, p. 8). Others refrain from contributing to the establishment of typographies and reinforce the notion that any child can be a victim of exploitation (Maxwell *et al.*, 2019; Wroe, 2020). Brown (2019) argues that

focusing on individual characteristics, such as race and ethnicity, disability, and gender, may identify societal and structural factors but does not stop policy and practice from individualising risk and focusing on young people's behaviours, having the perverse effect of accentuating 'the pathologies they seek to challenge' (Brown, 2019, p. 625).

In the most recent CSE guidance, there is only a light-touch approach to understanding and responding to the experiences of young people from marginalised and minoritised backgrounds (DfE, 2017). This is despite CSE literature repeatedly highlighting the limitations of policy and practice in promoting the needs of children and young people from marginalised groups (Lillywhite and Skidmore, 2006; Ward and Patel, 2006; Bernard, 2019). Other limitations of the CSE guidance include the lack of consideration regarding ethnicity (DfE, 2017). Research indicates that girls' and young women's experiences of CSE and, more broadly, child sexual abuse, including detection and support, can be affected by an individual's ethnicity, religion, and/or cultural background (Ward and Patel, 2006; Bernard, 2019; Davis, 2019; Ali *et al.*, 2021). Research and national policy relating to CSE in the UK has long been reproached for its narrow focus on the experiences of young White females (Ward and Patel, 2006; Bernard, 2019; Davis, 2019). Consequently, little is known about how different groups may be affected and how best to tailor support services.

Young people with learning disabilities are also only briefly mentioned in the CSE guidance and CCE guidance (DfE, 2017; Home Office, 2023). This is a concern, particularly for CSE, because, as highlighted in the seminal report *Unprotected, Overprotected*<sup>6</sup>, young people with learning disabilities are at increased risk of CSE due to social isolation and societal attitudes that refuse to view young people with learning disabilities as sexual beings (Franklin *et al.*, 2015). The report also highlights gaps in CSE national policy and guidance, which is criticised for not being clear enough in relation to the needs of young people with learning disabilities (Franklin *et al.*, 2015). Despite the

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<sup>6</sup> The report titled *Unprotected, Overprotected* (Franklin *et al.*, 2015) presents the results of research funded by Comic Relief. The research investigated ways to address the needs of young people with learning disabilities who are at risk of, or experience, CSE. The report highlighted the gaps in national legislation, policy, and guidance.



recommendations made in the *Unprotected, Overprotected* report, the national guidance on CSE, published two years after the report, only briefly mentioned the needs of young people with learning disabilities. (DfE, 2017).

When considering young people's needs, it is important to recognise that an individual's identity is multifaceted. For example, young people with learning disabilities will have other intersecting characteristics that also shape and influence their experiences. These include ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. In *Unprotected, Overprotected*, the ethnicity of the sample population is discussed (most were White British), but young people's sexual orientation is not discussed. This appears to be at odds with the text, which highlights that societal attitudes find it hard to see young people with learning disabilities as sexual beings.

When considering the uneven developments of legislation and policy in relation to CSE and CCE, it is important that young people's experiences and needs are considered through an intersectional lens. As a framework, intersectionality recognises that people's lives cannot be understood one-dimensionally, through race, sex, gender, class, disability, or sexuality (Hill-Collins and Bilge, 2016). Indeed, individuals experience the overlapping of oppression and privilege simultaneously and with 'fluidity', whereby, depending on the social and historical context, an individual's status is subject to change (Hancock, 2007). This appears particularly pertinent to adolescents who encounter state agencies and professionals, such as the police and social workers. Interactions with state institutions and agencies may be influenced by discriminatory and biased factors that do not acknowledge the compounding impact of gender, ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, and age. This appears particularly evident in terms of state institutions and race and ethnicity (Sharpe, 2005). For example, Amnesty International's report into the Metropolitan Police's Gangs' Matrix found that the police racialised perceptions of urban youth culture by conflating youth urban culture, ethnicity, and race with serious and violent crime. This resulted in the Metropolitan Police racially profiling Black boys and young men as potential gang members. The report found that such discriminatory acts put young people's rights at risk (Amnesty International, 2018). Adopting an intersectional framework when considering national child exploitation policy may help guard against such harmful profiling, as highlighted by Amnesty

International (2018). Furthermore, applying an intersectional lens may also assist in identifying the structural inequalities that can increase the risk of exploitation. For instance, Black young people in the UK may be exposed to additional societal factors such as socio-economic disadvantage, poor housing, and racism, which can increase vulnerability and the risk of being exploited (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013; Firmin, 2018; Bernard, 2019; Firmin *et al.*, 2021).

## 2.2 The role of the social worker

It is accepted that no one agency or ‘... practitioner can have a full picture of a child’s needs and circumstances’ (HM Government, 2018a, p. 11), and that the duty placed on local authorities to safeguard children can be achieved only with the support of safeguarding partners<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, it remains the legal responsibility of local authorities and their social workers to lead multi-agency assessments and plans and to conduct child protection enquiries (HM Government, 2018a). Since the 1950s, formal procedures have been established to facilitate multi-agency collaboration and decision-making, which have become a cornerstone of the English child safeguarding system (Munro, 2011b). Indeed, in response to the CSE scandals in Rochdale and Rotherham, local services were praised for their focus on establishing multiagency teams to address CSE within and across local authority boundaries (Coffey, 2014; Jay, 2014). This contrasts with previous high-profile inquiries that highlighted poor interagency cooperation and information-sharing as a concern (Laming, 2003, 2009; Munro, 2011b).

The need to consider multi-agency perspectives at every stage of child safeguarding is promoted in statutory guidance and legislation (HM Government, 2018a; Children Act 2004; Children and Social Work Act 2017). However, in practice, it is far more complex, and there is a gap in research pertaining to the intricacies and practical applications of multi-agency decision-making processes (Roesch-Marsh, 2016). Research into multi-agency safeguarding practices largely focuses on the challenges, including competing professional priorities and explanatory models, differences in power and

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<sup>7</sup> The term ‘safeguarding partners’ relates to professionals working for organisations that have direct contact with children and young people and, consequently, have safeguarding responsibilities as set out in statutory guidance (HM Government, 2018a). This includes police, education, health, youth services, housing, and third-sector organisations.

professional statuses, and an incongruent interpretation and understanding of risk amongst agencies (Frost *et al.*, 2005; Jahans-Baynton and Grealish, 2022). A report published by the CSPRP on safeguarding children at risk of CCE highlighted that collaborative multi-agency work is the only way to tackle CCE (CSPRP, 2020). According to the report, to ensure effective multi-agency responses, it is essential to have a deeper understanding of the agencies that need to be represented. Senior leadership from all agencies must also be supportive, and there should be appropriate shared resources. Likewise, a clear framework stating accountability, roles, and responsibilities is also necessary (CSPRP, 2020).

As highlighted above, the social work profession and the safeguarding response to children and young people more broadly have undergone significant developments over the past four decades. This has included an emphasis on multi-agency working and an increased focus on addressing harm in the extrafamilial context (HM Government, 2018). Also, during this time, the social work profession has been positioned as the face of child protection in England. This dates to the early 1970s and one of the first high-profile public inquiries into the murder of seven-year-old Maria Colwell, and the 'system' response (Butler and Drakeford, 2011). Following the inquiry into Maria Colwell's death, and the many more that have since punctuated the world of child protection, both social work and the wider child protection system have become increasingly indistinguishable in the minds of the mass media and the public. This has resulted in the social work profession, and, by proxy, individual social workers, being considered fair game and a convenient scapegoat anytime a child is seriously harmed or killed (Butler and Drakeford, 2011; Cooper, 2014; Parton, 2014). In her review of the child protection system in England, Munro criticised the culture of blame surrounding social workers (Munro, 2011b). Nonetheless, in 2015, in his response to the CSE scandals, David Cameron, who was Prime Minister at the time, arguably undermined Munro (2011b) and her review of child protection, which his government commissioned, by publicly warning professionals that if they 'fail' to protect children, they will be held 'properly accountable' and face up to five years in prison (Wintour, 2015).

For social workers, the sustained atmosphere of blame and overt lack of trust and confidence in their profession has created an environment where workers frequently feel the need to adopt defensive practices (Munro, 2011b; MacAlister, 2022). Harris (1987) defines defensive practice as a preservation strategy in social work, which can include overdocumentation and unnecessary interventions (i.e., escalating concerns) to protect themselves or their organisation (or both). Other defensive practices have been highlighted by Lipsky (1980), who introduced the concept of 'rubber-stamping'. This is a process whereby social workers and other 'street-level bureaucrats'<sup>8</sup> unquestionably accept the decision-making of others, including managers and other agencies. This is sometimes done to fill specialist gaps in knowledge, but it may also be employed as a protective strategy to reduce culpability in decision-making, thus redirecting any potential for blame (Marinetto, 2011). Munro (2011b) identified that the need to employ defensive practices can sometimes compete with and override concerns about protecting children.

For forty years, social work practice has become caught in a morbid cycle, where child protection mistakes are made, followed by media and public outcry, leading to system-wide transformation (Butler and Drakeford, 2011; Cooper, 2014; Parton, 2014). This cycle, termed the 'cycle of crisis and reform' by Warner (2015, p. 3), often results in reforms that aim to eliminate risk by increasing regulation (Munro, 2011b). A prime example of this includes Laming's two reviews of child safeguarding in England following the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly ('Baby P') (Laming, 2003, 2009). Munro (2011b) argues that in a perpetual drive to eliminate risk and 'increase accountability', previous child protection system reviewers, including Laming, have reduced the social work role into measurable and quantitative activities.

The two most recent reviews of the English child protection system paid attention to freeing social workers from the inflexible and overly bureaucratized systems instilled over the past four decades (Munro, 2010, 2011b; MacAlister,

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<sup>8</sup> According to Lipsky (1980; 2010), a 'street-level bureaucrat' (SLB) is someone who works in public service, interacts directly with the public, and implements government policies and programmes at the local level. SLBs work in various fields, including social work and law enforcement.

2021; 2022). Although Munro recognises that recording social work activity is 'central to the protection of children', she suggests that the relationships between social workers, children, and families are being replaced with data inputting (Munro, 2011b). Electronic recording systems, such as the Integrated Children's System (ICS), now used across all children's statutory services, have become a vital tool for managers and social workers in managing, overseeing, and capturing social work activities. However, Sarwar and Harris (2019) argue that such a reliance on ICS has transformed the profession into technical activities 'dominated by unimaginative and routinised work practices'.

In academic text, the influence of ICS on social work practice is often conflated with other bureaucratic practices, such as managerialism and new public management (NPM) (Burton and van den Broek, 2009; Evans, 2010; Munro, 2011b; Lees *et al.*, 2013; Parton, 2014). 'Managerialism' describes the prescriptive procedures and practices used to standardise and monitor social work performance and reduce risk. This often includes increased management oversight and the use of audits and risk assessments (Burton and van den Broek, 2009). Managerialism is said to stem from NPM (Lees *et al.*, 2013). NPM emerged under the Conservative government elected in 1979 (Munro, 2005). NPM is 'a set of practices from the private sector, designed to make services more efficient, better controlled and more transparent and accountable to the government, the taxpayer and the user' (Lees *et al.*, 2013, p. 549). Such approaches to social work practice have become intertwined, and most recently, reinforced by the inquiries into the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly (Hood, 1991; Laming, 2003, 2009; Lees *et al.*, 2013).

The two most recent independent reviews of child protection and social care in England, conducted by Munro (2011b) and MacAlister (2021; 2022), identified procedural and bureaucratic responses, like managerialism, as obstacles to effective practice. Both reviews suggest that such approaches hinder social workers from exercising professional judgment and acting in the best interests of children, young people, and families. Concerning child exploitation and EFH, various approaches have been promoted as part of an effective response; these include strengths-based and relationship-based practices (Scott *et al.*, 2017; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a; HM Government, 2023a). Both approaches require practitioner flexibility, the development of trusting and quality relationships, and

a focus on the young person's future aspirations and goals (Pattoni, 2012; Ingram and Smith, 2018), which, perversely, appears to be the antithesis of the characteristics usually associated with managerialist and highly procedural responses (as discussed below).

## **2.3 Tackling child exploitation: a summary review of key approaches**

Much has been written about 'child exploitation' and 'EFH' (Hallett, 2013; Eaton, 2017; Maxwell *et al.*, 2019; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a; JTAI, 2022), and it is beyond the scope and remit of this study to provide a comprehensive review of all CSE- and CCE-related literature. Indeed, as this thesis focuses on influences on social work decision-making and interventions, this section will concentrate on literature relating to the key safeguarding approaches to tackling child exploitation. Limiting the literature to safeguarding and social work approaches will ensure that sufficient depth of analysis is provided to be meaningful in answering the research questions. For other types of literature reviews which adopt a panoptic perspective to examining child exploitation and EFH, see Eaton (2017), Maxwell *et al.* (2019), Huegler (2021), and Firmin *et al.* (2022a).

This section discusses four central approaches: strengths-based practice (SBP), relationship-based practice (RBP), contextual safeguarding, and participatory approaches. Although a variety of models, theories, and approaches are discussed in child exploitation literature, including trauma-informed responses (Hickle, 2020), this section concentrates on the four principal approaches identified above. These approaches appear to be the most developed in terms of child exploitation practice and the most frequently cited in child exploitation literature (Eaton, 2017; Maxwell *et al.*, 2019; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a; JTAI, 2022; HM Government, 2023).

## Strengths-based practice

SBP is a rights-based approach that adopts an ecological approach to building on strengths to enable and empower individuals, families, and communities (Saleebey, 2000). SBP requires working collaboratively with clients to identify and build on their strengths to develop plans to address areas of concern. By recognising and building on strengths, individuals can gain confidence and resilience, leading to positive outcomes (Pattoni, 2012). SBP was first introduced into social work practice in a meaningful way in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the seminal work of Weick *et al.* (1989) and Saleebey (1992). Others had previously questioned the problem-focused approach that social work had adopted (Shulman, 1978; Hepworth and Larsen, 1986) and, whilst not using the term SBP, Germain and Gitterman were earlier proponents in linking strengths-based approaches to an ecological perspective (Germain and Gitterman, 1980). However, it was not until the 1990s that SBP started to significantly challenge the dogma of deficit-based social work (Lietz, 2011). Since this time, SBP has experienced fleeting levels of interest and implementation in social work in England (Godar, 2018). Recently, there has been a renewed and sustained interest in SBP as part of developing an effective response to child exploitation and EFH (Scott *et al.*, 2017; Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2021; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a; HM Government, 2023).

Strengths-based approaches can be applied at different levels, from individuals to communities and organisations (Godar, 2018). There are also various recognised strengths-based methods, such as solution-focused therapy, which focuses on future aspirations and determines pathways and solutions to reach goals; strengths-based case management, which helps individuals achieve desired outcomes; and narrative-based approaches, which seeks to identify hidden strengths and resilience in individuals and communities by reframing problems in constructive ways (Pattoni, 2012). Whilst there are a variety of approaches and methods to implementing SBP, it is possibly more accurate to describe SBP as a philosophical approach to social work practice. This is perhaps one of the main challenges of SBP, possibly contributing to its inconsistent application in practice (Wilkins and Whittaker, 2018).

Organisations and senior leaders wanting to successfully implement SBP must embed and continually commit to promoting and supporting SBP in policies, procedures, performance indicators, and values (DHSC, 2019). Indeed, where SBP has been tried and tested in the context of child exploitation, it was supported by council leaders and was embedded in the structures of the service provision (Scott *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, SBP has been used in combination with other rights-based approaches, such as RBP and participatory approaches (Scott *et al.*, 2017). When considering SBP work and social work practice with young people, research has found that applying SBP can be a complex process due to the power of external influences associated with this stage of child development (Arnold *et al.*, 2007). However, the same research found that with practitioner and organisational commitment to SBP, young people working with social workers, who ‘may doubt their own abilities’, can be supported to successfully achieve their goals, and not view them as unattainable (Arnold *et al.*, 2007).

Because SBP promotes individual, group, and community strengths over traditional power structures, it has been recognised as reducing the impact of oppressive, discriminatory, and racist practices (Saleebey, 2002; Hines *et al.*, 2021). However, others have criticised SBP for focusing too heavily on individuals and their personal networks. For example, Gray (2011) cautions practitioners about placing too much responsibility on individuals and reinforcing ‘neo-liberal’ attitudes, emphasising that SBP does not sufficiently account for structural forces, including poverty and oppression.

## **Relationship-based practice**

Within the context of child exploitation and EFH, ‘relationship-based practice’ (RBP) has been gaining increasing attention (Lefevre *et al.*, 2017; Scott *et al.*, 2017; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a; Hickle and Lefevre, 2022). However, despite its growing familiarity and application in social work, RBP remains inconsistent in how it is both understood and applied (Hingely-Jones and Ruch, 2016). This is partly due to RBP not being a model or method with standardised practices that can be routinely implemented. Instead, RBP underpins every interaction, intervention, and approach social workers utilise (Ingram and Smith, 2018). Therefore, arriving at a succinct and accepted definition of RBP is difficult



because RBP refers to a wide variety of ways of working and may be informed by either psychodynamic practice or person-centred practice (Murphy *et al.*, 2013). In RBP literature, social work is commonly associated with psychodynamics (Ruch, 2010; Murphy *et al.*, 2013; Hingely-Jones and Ruch, 2016), which promotes the relationship between the social worker and the 'service user' as the vehicle for the implementation of effective decision-making and interventions. In contrast, person-centred RBP focuses on the relationship between the 'client' and the 'therapist' as the driving force for the change process (Murphy *et al.*, 2013). Murphy *et al.* (2013) state that the fundamental aspect of person-centred practice is the relationship itself. Therefore, social workers constrained by the power dynamic and obligations to attain predetermined agency-driven results cannot be considered to use a person-centred approach, as this goes against the non-directive principle of person-centred practice.

While it has been argued that it is important to understand the philosophical differences between psychodynamic and person-centred RBP (Murphy *et al.*, 2013), RBP does not require a 'sophisticated understanding of psychology' (Ingram and Smith, 2018). However, RBP does require social workers to adjust to the 'emotional world' of the client they are working with and be able to relate and communicate this understanding in the broader social context of the relationship. This includes recognising previous experiences of relationships beyond individual interactions, as well as acknowledging social factors such as personal and professional power, racism, and poverty (Ingram and Smith, 2018). Therefore, when adopting RBP in social work, a combination of psychodynamic and systemic thinking is required (Ruch, 2010; Hingely-Jones and Ruch, 2016). Indeed, in relation to tackling EFH and risk, Firmin *et al.* (2022a) have developed and extended the notion of relationships, identifying three levels of relationship-based working. These are *trusted relationships* between safeguarding professionals and the young people they work with, *collaborative relationships* between professionals and either young people or their parents/carers, and wider *community relationships* – including with local businesses, schools, and charitable organisations (Firmin *et al.*, 2022a, p. 40).

When considering the connection between RBP and social factors, Hingely-Jones and Ruch (2016) highlight the systemic influences and how external

factors can shape how relationships are established and experienced. For example, social workers who work in highly unpredictable and anxiety-provoking situations may find it challenging to maintain focus on the relationship. It may feel safer and easier to rely on recognised, tangible, and task-orientated activities, such as completing paperwork or remaining office-based, rather than undertaking direct or face-to-face work (Ruch, 2010). This can lead to doing the minimum required or relying on processes and procedures, as opposed to upholding the relationship as a vehicle for interventions and decision-making.

Similar to SBP, a criticism levelled at 'earlier models' of RBP is its potential to problematise service users. This includes a lack of acknowledgement of social and societal influences such as poverty, racism, sexism, and homophobia (Ruch, 2010). However, as RBP has developed it has adopted a more systemic understanding and benefitted from being a more inclusive way to practice. One of the challenges for social workers when using RBP to inform their work is to ensure that the relationship is not the only focus of the intervention. This would indeed 'pathologise' service users, individualise problems and position the professional as the 'expert' (Ruch, 2010). More reflective practices are needed. These can include managers and professional forums and networks that provide space to explore psychodynamic concepts such as containment, mirroring, transference, and countertransference (Ruch, 2010).

## **Contextual safeguarding**

Contextual safeguarding is a relatively new framework; it seeks to develop an ecological response to addressing risk and harm faced by young people in the extrafamilial context (Firmin, 2020). These include CSE, CCE, peer-on-peer abuse, and association with gangs (Lefevre *et al.*, 2020). Like SBP and RBP, contextual safeguarding does not provide set processes that require strict adherence; rather, it is a methodology that requires careful consideration and tailoring to meet local needs (Firmin, 2020). However, for a safeguarding service to be considered 'contextual safeguarding', it must align with the four domains of the contextual safeguarding framework (Lefevre *et al.*, 2020):

- Target the contexts (social conditions) in which harm was occurring.

- Locate contextual work in the field of child protection, child welfare, and safeguarding, rather than crime reduction and community safety.
- Be built on partnerships that had a reach into the contexts where harm was occurring.
- Measure success and outcomes contextually.

(Firmin, 2020, p. 94)

Whilst a relatively recent development in safeguarding, over sixty-five children's services across England, Wales, and Scotland are reportedly using the contextual safeguarding framework to address the issue of EFH (Firmin, 2020; Lloyd *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, contextual safeguarding was added to statutory safeguarding guidance in England in 2018 (HM Government, 2018a).

Services and organisations implementing contextual safeguarding can assess their progress using a specifically designed self-assessment tool (Firmin *et al.*, no date); however, there are limited independent and comprehensive evaluations of contextual safeguarding available publicly. One of the most recent and widely available evaluations of contextual safeguarding relates to Hackney Council, which received about £2.2m from the Department for Education. This grant was provided to support the design, development, and embedding of the contextual safeguarding system in Hackney. Two evaluations have been conducted relating to Hackney's progress, the first in 2020 and the second in 2023 (Lefevre *et al.*, 2020, 2023). The 2023 evaluation indicated that the contextual safeguarding system was cost-effective and led to a decrease in the use of out-of-borough and residential placements. However, despite the project running from 2017 to 2023, the evaluation concluded that contextual safeguarding was yet to be fully embedded into Hackney's mainstream organisational context and daily operations. The evaluation highlights the COVID-19 pandemic and a cyberattack as two significant events that have affected the implementation and evaluation of the project (Lefevre *et al.*, 2023).

Hackney Council's experience in implementing contextual safeguarding illustrates the complexity of service transformation and its susceptibility to external forces. Environmental pressures were also cited as a detrimental factor in Wilson *et al.*'s (2022) study of implementing a contextual safeguarding

approach in one local authority. This study shared senior leaders' experiences relating to the challenges of embedding a contextual safeguarding approach against a backdrop of austerity and significant cuts to public sector budgets (Wilson *et al.*, 2022). Although the study largely focuses on the barriers to implementing a contextual safeguarding approach, it also highlights several positive factors. One example was senior managers reporting closer relationships with community partners and across teams, thus improving the effectiveness of service responses (Wilson *et al.*, 2022).

Whilst evaluations of contextual safeguarding continue to uncover some of the framework's immediate and early potential benefits, other researchers and academics are expanding the reach of contextual safeguarding and establishing connections between contextual approaches and other theories and concepts. An example of this includes a model of intervention that uses contextual safeguarding's ecological approach as the foundation to develop a new framework called 'Systemic Investigation, Protection and Prosecution Strategy' (SIPPS) (Barlow *et al.*, 2021). The SIPPS framework positions itself between criminal theory, public health, and modern slavery approaches, providing a systems analysis that not only assesses information about the young person and the locations in which the young person resides and operates, but also asks questions about the perpetrator and their potential motivations (Barlow *et al.*, 2021). Whilst the SIPPS framework has been 'road-tested', the authors of the paper also acknowledge that the model is in its infancy (Barlow *et al.*, 2021). Another example of theoretical connections being made includes a recent study that identified a mutually beneficial relationship between contextual safeguarding and RBP (Lloyd *et al.*, 2023). Using a combination of interviews with practitioners and managers, case file reviews, observations of meetings and a focus group, and a 'documentary review', the study found that *'Relationships with young people makes contextual safeguarding more effective and vice versa'* (Lloyd *et al.*, 2023, p. 14). However, the study recognises that this approach is novel and has been underdeveloped in the application of contextual safeguarding.

As highlighted above, contextual safeguarding is simultaneously being implemented at a rapid rate and dynamically evolving, both as a recognised framework and in a fractured and influencing capacity. Perhaps one of the

challenges in the future will be the consistency of its continued application, which may add further complexity to attempts to evaluate its future and system-wide impact.

## **Participatory approaches**

Young people's rights to participate and have their wishes and feelings listened to when determining the services they are provided with are set out in statutory guidance and legislation, and ratified in international conventions (CA, 1989; UNCRC, 1989; HM Government, 2018a). This includes the UNCRC, which was ratified by the UK in 1991; consequently, the UK is legally bound by all the articles in the convention, including Article 12, which specifically states that:

(1) States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with age and maturity of the child.

(UNCRC, 1989)

Recognising young people's evolving rights to express their views and participate in decision-making, as stipulated in UNCRC Article 12, is particularly significant when considering child exploitation and the older age group that is reported to be most at risk (Firmin and Knowles, 2022).

In relation to safeguarding, the term 'participation' is associated with the right of children and young people to have their views sought and considered in matters affecting them, and, where appropriate, acted upon (Diaz, 2020). Legislation and guidance clearly state that professionals working with children should 'speak to the child; listen to what they say', and 'take their views seriously' (HM Government, 2018a, p. 10). As highlighted above, legislation and guidance are also clear that children's views should be assessed in the context of their age, maturity, and level of understanding. This suggests that social workers and other safeguarding professionals need to be trained and skilled in communicating with children and young people and have knowledge of child development (Diaz, 2020).

Although children's rights to participate has been enshrined in legislation for over three decades, and the concept of participation is often revered in children's services, there is little evidence that participation has been embedded into practice in a systemic or meaningful manner (Diaz, 2020; Hill and Warrington, 2022). The participatory research relevant to social work and safeguarding tends to focus on children's participation at a localised level (Hallett, 2013; Lefevre *et al.*, 2017; Diaz, 2020; Mitchell, 2022). Participatory research is also inclined to concentrate on formal processes such as children's hearings, social work meetings, and case conferences (Morrison *et al.*, 2019; Diaz, 2020).

Hill and Warrington (2022) suggest that using the language of 'empowerment' may be more radical and fitting when discussing the safeguarding needs of adolescents. Empowerment suggests taking control of one's own circumstances to achieve individual and shared goals, whereas 'participatory approaches are often associated with the involvement of individuals in processes that are designed, instigated and controlled by those with institutional power...' (Hill and Warrington, 2022, p. 179). The language of empowerment is more closely associated with social work involving adults than social work involving children and families; indeed, it is one of the six adult safeguarding principles (DHSC, 2023). However, there are growing calls for a more nuanced approach to safeguarding young people (Huegler and Ruch, 2021; Cocker *et al.*, 2022; Hill and Warrington, 2022).

Meaningful participation for young people who have experienced adversity appears particularly important as it can act as a protective factor (Cossar *et al.*, 2013; Collin-Vézina *et al.*, 2015). Collin-Vézina *et al.* (2015) argue that children whose feelings and rights to participate have been ignored are less likely to be able to identify harmful or exploitative relationships, as they may not have experienced interactions that are underpinned by choice, respect, and collaboration. Participatory literature suggests that social workers not only require appropriate training and support to enable them to effectively facilitate participation, but also need to be employed in services and organisations where appropriate institutional policies, structures, and drivers for performance support them to do so. Practice that is procedural and system-led, as opposed to being

child-led and participatory, runs the risk of reflecting the exploitative and oppressive power dynamics of abuse and exploitation (Cossar *et al.*, 2013).

The literature relating to participation is harmonious in terms of increasing young people's confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and protection (Cossar *et al.*, 2013; Collin-Vézina *et al.*, 2015; Diaz, 2020; Hill and Warrington, 2022). However, research indicates that professionals, including social workers, are not always able to prioritise young people's participation over the need to provide protection (Tisdall, 2015; Lefevre *et al.*, 2017; Mitchell, 2022). Lefevre *et al.*'s (2017) analysis of data from a two-year evaluation of a child-centred framework for addressing CSE in England found that when working with young people at the highest risk, professionals frequently acted unilaterally. This included transgressing young people's expressed wishes and freedoms. Lefevre *et al.* (2017) concluded that safeguarding professionals primarily interpreted children's rights as their rights to safety and protection, and that participation was viewed chiefly in relation to supporting children to talk about their worries, risks, and abuse.

## **2.4 Adolescent development and service responses**

Children of all ages can be vulnerable to exploitation, and there is emerging evidence that younger children are increasingly at risk (JTAI, 2018; The Children's Society, 2018; 2019; Children's Commissioner, 2019; Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2021). For example, The Children's Society (2018) report that older siblings' debts are being passed onto other family members to fulfil, including younger siblings. The Children's Commissioner (2019) suggests that younger children are being targeted more frequently due to organised crime groups constantly changing their methods to avoid detection.

Nonetheless, as our understanding of child exploitation and EFH more widely has developed over the past two decades (DoH, 2000a; Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Beckett, 2019; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b), it has become increasingly evident that the risks of CSE and CCE are primarily associated with adolescents rather than younger children (Firmin and Knowles, 2022). The risks faced by adolescents may be due to a combination of factors, including reduced

adult/parental supervision, spending increased time with peers, and the young person's developing sense of autonomy and agency (Coleman, 2019). However, despite the recognised risks, developments in adolescent theories and safeguarding and well-being responses and interventions have not always kept pace (Steinberg, 2015). Indeed, progressing parallel to, but largely separate from, literature relating to child exploitation has been research relating to adolescent development. The lack of integration between these two bodies of work possibly hinders our understanding of risks and vulnerabilities associated with young people in the extrafamilial context. There is a need to bridge the gap between these two fields to develop more comprehensive and effective interventions for safeguarding adolescents.

Though not a completely uncontested field (Epstein, 2007; Males, 2009), the growing body of adolescent development literature is scientific and multidisciplinary and provides 'incontrovertible evidence' that adolescence is a time of significant change in the psychosocial, biological, and neurological development of young people (Steinberg, 2012). However, while these developments appear important, they should be considered with caution. As Brown and Charles (2021) note, in relation to criminal justice, applying concepts of evolving capacity and developing responsibility may bring some benefits for young people; however, it may also erode other rights regarding agency and autonomy. Coleman and Hagell (2022) also warn that the drive to understand the motivating factors of a young person's behaviours could potentially undermine their self-efficacy.

As a human development process, adolescence is often associated with risky behaviour and a drive for sensation-seeking (Hanson and Holmes, 2014). Indeed, research confirms that individuals take more risks during adolescence (Silva *et al.*, 2016). Higher risk-taking at this stage is partly due to adolescents having less experience to draw from when compared to adults; additionally young people's information processing is less efficient, which may influence 'optimal decision-making' (Scott and Steinberg, 2008). Research also indicates that adolescents are more likely to take risks when in the company of their peers, as opposed to being alone (Blakemore and Robins, 2012). This form of influence is known as the 'peer effect' which indicates that social rewards make young people more responsive to their peers (Silva *et al.*, 2016). By mid-



adolescence (approximately fourteen years and older), young people tend to have risk perceptions similar to adults when away from their peers (Blakemore, 2018). However, even though adolescents seem to have a mature understanding of risk and probability by mid-adolescence, there remains a developmental gap in making optimal decisions in highly emotional situations where the peer effect remains a factor (Blakemore and Robbins, 2012).

The need to seriously consider adolescent development theories in safeguarding responses is possibly most evident in the services provided to young people, which are often less extensive than those aimed at younger children (Thornberry *et al.*, 2010; Hanson and Holmes, 2014) and are usually extensions of interventions designed for children or adults (Weisz and Hawley, 2002; Thornberry *et al.*, 2010; Hanson and Holmes, 2014). The adapting of children and adult services to meet the needs of young people runs the risk of professionals using ill-fitting tools and processes that may be 'adultist' or 'adultifying' in their approach. Psychologist, Jack Flasher, defines adultism as the 'special legal, social economic responsibilities, rights and privileges' adults have over children (Flasher, 1978, p. 517). Shier (2012) elaborates on the concept of adultism by exploring social structures and universally accepted norms and practices that uphold adults' unquestioning authority over children. These include the contradictory nature of children being unable to exercise their full citizenship until they have reached set chronological milestones or have demonstrated accepted levels of maturity, as judged by the adults in the child's networks. In contrast, Adultification involves the ascribing of adult-like attributes to children and young people. This can include emotions, experiences, responsibilities, and exposure to adult-like environments and themes (Davis and Marsh, 2022). Although any child can experience adultification based on a variety of personal and social factors, research indicates that Black children are more likely to be adultified than their White peers (Goff *et al.*, 2014; Epstein *et al.*, 2017).

As discussed above, literature relating to child exploitation and EFH has highlighted that child safeguarding legislation, policy, and practices have chiefly been designed to meet the needs of younger children and to tackle harm caused in the home (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Firmin and Knowles, 2022). Therefore, it could be assumed that approaches to tackling child exploitation

are more likely to be underpinned by adultist, as opposed to adultifying, perspectives. Whilst adultism might be the most obvious theoretical concept for practitioners to be alert to, it is adultification that has been associated with young people's interactions with professionals in the context of child exploitation (Davis and Marsh, 2020).

There are multiple ways in which adolescent development theories could contribute to better-informed safeguarding responses in the context of EFH. For example, professionals could acknowledge young people in the context of their networks and peer groups, as discussed as part of SBP and contextual safeguarding. Both these approaches accord with peers' increasing importance and influence during adolescence. Other areas where there is possible convergence include capacity-building, where the young person is considered the expert in their life and is given appropriate levels of responsibility. Research conducted in Newham Council, London, found that young people at risk of CCE appreciated being given additional responsibilities and 'being treated as grown up' (Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2021). These beliefs and practices are associated with SBP, RBP, and participatory approaches.

## **2.5 Rationale for the study**

This section summarises the literature to support the ecological theoretical framework and justify the research questions. The study explores the central factors that most influence social work decision-making in determining interventions when working with young people considered at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context. One of the principal reasons for this study is the dearth of research relating to child exploitation that specifically focuses on the role of the social worker. Although most literature in the field of child exploitation includes the role of the social worker, this is often alongside a focus on other professional responses or in the context of multi-agency practice and policy (Eaton, 2017; Hickle *et al.*, 2017; Maxwell *et al.*, 2019; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a; Holmes, 2022; HM Government, 2023). As highlighted above, the role of social work in tackling child exploitation is unique in the legal responsibilities of the profession to lead multi-agency assessments

and plans and to conduct child protection enquiries (HM Government, 2018a). Yet, despite the pivotal role social workers have in addressing child exploitation in the EFH context, there has been relatively little focus on the social work profession, and what focus there is tends to be on CSE (Firmin *et al.*, 2016; Lloyd, 2022).

My research explores factors that influence social work decisions and interventions in cases of child exploitation. Previous studies on social work decision-making have mainly centred on traditional children's social work (O'Sullivan, 2010; Whittaker, 2014; Gillingham, 2017; Munro, 2018; Murphy, 2019, 2021; Killick and Taylor, 2020; McCormack *et al.*, 2020). However, unlike traditional social work, risks and harm in child exploitation typically affect older children and occur mostly in the extrafamilial context (Firmin and Knowles, 2022). These unique circumstances can make safeguarding in child exploitation more complex (Hanson and Homes, 2014; Huegler, 2021). Consequently, it cannot be assumed that the findings relating to decision-making in the context of traditional social work (i.e., intrafamilial risk and harm) are entirely applicable to the field of child exploitation and harm, which mainly occurs outside of the home. Therefore, this study will provide novel insights into social work decision-making in the context of child exploitation. To my knowledge, to date, this is the only primary research in England that has focused on social work decision-making when working with young people at risk of sexual or criminal exploitation.

When considering the most appropriate theoretical framework to underpin my study, I needed a framework that was sympathetic to the exploratory nature of my research and would facilitate an open and inductive approach to data collection and analysis. This led me to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. As a model, it was purposefully developed to examine individuals in the context of their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This aspect was important to my study because, as highlighted above, I intended to explore issues relating to structural inequalities, societal attitudes, and aspects of human development.

Several decision-making theories and models have risen to prominence in social work. These include Munro's system-focused approach, which offered an alternative perspective to understanding decision-making and learning from

social work mistakes (Munro, 2005). Munro argued that child protection requires viewing from a systems perspective rather than solely the responsibility of individual social workers. She asserted that errors and failures in child protection should be analysed as part of a larger system, including organisational, professional, and societal factors which all contribute to decisions made by social workers (Munro, 2005). By taking this approach, Munro aimed to address the underlying causes of failures in child protection rather than condemning individual social workers. Munro's approach underscored the importance of continuous learning, reflection, and improvement and has influenced contemporary social work practice (McCormack *et al.*, 2020).

Other approaches to understanding decision-making include heuristics. Heuristic decision-making focuses on the internal strategies of an individual and how they arrive at decisions efficiently and economically (Kahneman, 2011). Although others have applied heuristic decision-making to social work research and literature (Whittaker, 2014; Taylor, 2017), heuristics was not considered an appropriate fit for this study. Some limitations of heuristic decision-making include the tendency to oversimplify complex issues and the potential lack of attention to the social and cultural factors that can influence decision-making. For example, as De Bortoli and Dolan (2015) highlight, while practitioners may adopt heuristics in decision-making processes, these cognitive shortcuts can lead to biases and errors. The risk of biases and mistakes in heuristics is due to practitioners relying on prior experiences and personal knowledge, which may not be applicable to the situation with which they are faced (Munro, 2008).

This study employs the ecological system model developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as the theoretical framework. The ecological approach accommodates the complex overlapping and intersecting dimensions of human interactions (Tudge *et al.*, 2016). The ecological model is also an established cornerstone of social work practice in England, underpinning social work assessments as part of the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DoH, 2000b). The assessment framework is familiar to social work and has been a fundamental aspect of social work practice in children's services for over two decades. Therefore, adopting the principles of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as the study's theoretical framework is aligned to social worker's

understanding in how they assess and reach decisions in English child protection cases. In addition, the ecological model has been tested and proven to be accessible as a framework when applied to social work practice and child exploitation. For example, Dolan and McGregor (2019) have promoted the use of an ecological approach to working with young people who have been sexually abused or exploited.

## **2.6 Summary**

This chapter was structured and aligned with the ecological theoretical framework in mind. The chapter opened with the examination of legislation and policy relevant to child exploitation and EFH. The chapter argued that an uneven approach to safeguarding legislative and policy developments has often resulted in older children and boys experiencing a compromised safeguarding response. The chapter then considered the social worker's role in contemporary child safeguarding practice, stating the need for more child exploitation research and literature using the prism of social work practice and the profession's legal duties. This chapter also considered four prominent practice approaches to tackling child exploitation: SBP, RBP, contextual safeguarding, and participatory approaches. A common theme that cuts across all four approaches is their amorphous nature. All four approaches refrain from providing a roadmap to implementation. Indeed, all four approaches are underpinned by philosophical frameworks, allowing for more localised and tailored support. Before focusing on the study's rationale, the penultimate section of the chapter explored young people's needs through the prism of adolescent development. This section explored the argument for organisations and professionals to familiarise themselves with emerging adolescent development theories and the possible benefits of applying such knowledge to strengthen child exploitation practice.

The final section shared the rationale for the study and the underpinning theoretical framework. The study argues the case for using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) as the most suitable framework to help answer the research questions. This is because the ecological approach facilitates understanding the multi-layered and bidirectional influences occurring in the social work environments. Specifically, this includes cultural norms, laws, and

national policies; the role of policymakers and regulatory bodies; and safeguarding partners such as the police and professionals working in health and education. Additionally, it allows the exploration of individual interactions between the young person and the social worker (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The next chapter goes on to explain my research design. It examines the research decisions made in relation to each stage of the research process, justifying the selections made. This includes providing a detailed account of the methods used for data collection and analysis.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

This chapter aims to share the research design and justify why the methodological frameworks and perspectives used are the most suitable and practical approaches to answering the research questions. There are a 'bewilderingly large set' of approaches for researchers to consider when conducting social research (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Therefore, it is important that a transparent and step-by-step account of the decisions made is provided. This chapter achieves this by outlining the methods and procedures adopted to undertake the empirical study, leading to the key findings presented in later chapters.

The chapter commences by discussing the research questions, design, and underpinning perspectives. This includes examining the role of the researcher and addressing research ethics. This is followed by an exploration of the approach and methods used for data collection and analysis.

### **3.1 Research questions and ontological and epistemological perspectives**

#### **The research aims and questions**

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence social work decision-making and interventions, specifically regarding young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, criminal or sexual exploitation in the extrafamilial context. This research is both timely and urgent as there is a pressing need to address the increasing concerns of exploitation confronting England's adolescent population (Commission on Young Lives, 2022). This research is also important as there is limited knowledge on effective interventions, especially regarding CCE (CSPRP, 2020). In addition, by investigating the impact young people's intersecting characteristics can have on safeguarding responses, this study aims to contribute to the limited literature relating to the safeguarding experiences of young people from marginalised and minoritised backgrounds (Firmin *at al.*, 2021). It is the aim of this research to contribute to the growing body of evidence relating to child exploitation in England to inform social work policy, research, and practice developments.

## **The research questions**

1. What are the central factors that most influence social work decision-making in determining interventions when working with young people considered at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context?

While the aim of this research and the overarching research question outline the study's main purpose, it is also important to provide context and depth to the topic area. This includes locating this research in the literature reviewed in the previous chapter. Therefore, four sub-questions have been designed to break down the overarching question and guide the study:

- What practice concepts and theories help develop an understanding of influences on social work decision-making and interventions when working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context?
- Do social workers use adolescent development theories to help shape and/or inform their response when working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context? If so, to what extent?
- Do established children's social work practices influence social work decision-making and interventions when working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context? If so, to what extent?
- To what extent do social work decisions and interventions reduce the original concerns (i.e., reasons the young person was referred to the specialist team)?

## **Research ontological and epistemological perspectives**

There are various perspectives and methods that could be used to answer the above questions. Consequently, it is important that time is taken to specify the research paradigm. Guba (1990) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe the



research paradigm as characterised by the belief system that informs the researcher and the methods used to collect and analyse data; the research paradigm also details the underpinning ontological and epistemological perspectives. Anchoring the research design to the research questions stops the research from becoming difficult to understand and adds to the credibility of the findings (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

When considering the questions and aim of this research, it is apparent that a detailed understanding of individual perspectives and experiences needs to be developed. This includes collecting and analysing narrative-based data, such as conversations between social workers, their managers, and young people. Therefore, a qualitative approach is the most suitable. Qualitative research focuses on the richness of human life and allows for deep exploration into individualised circumstances (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Qualitative research frequently involves a small sample population to accommodate this level of depth and understanding (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009). In contrast, quantitative research uses statistical and numerical information more suited to managing larger sample populations. Due to the size of the sample populations associated with quantitative research, there is less scope to explore individual experiences (VanderStoep and Johnston, 2009; Bryman and Bell, 2015).

Additionally, when using a qualitative methodology, there is the acknowledgement that, to some degree, the data will be 'shaped by the social and personal characteristics of the researcher' (Hammersley, 2013, p. 14). Acknowledging my potential influence on the data collected and analysed is vital to upholding the integrity of this research (Charmaz, 2014). As a social worker-cum-researcher, it is important to me that my role is recognised and made transparent. Indeed, as highlighted in Chapter 1, it was my professional experience that led me to undertake this research.

## **Relativist ontology**

Ontology asks fundamental questions about the nature of reality and the relationship between human beings and the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). In contemporary research debates, there are two contrasting ontologies: critical realism and relativism (Levers, 2013). Critical realists argue that reality exists

independently of the mind, whereas relativists believe that reality differs from person to person, dependent on their individual experiences and perspectives (Lincoln *et al.*, 2018). As this research aims to understand influences on individual social work decision-making and interventions, a relativist ontology fits better with the research aims and questions. For example, agreeing that a child is being criminally exploited and requires social work intervention may vary from social worker to social worker. Individual social workers may be influenced by professional knowledge and experience, local context, and the availability of resources. A relativist ontological approach acknowledges that the reality for social workers, and indeed young people, is subjectively constructed through their individual experiences and reflections (Levers, 2013).

## **Constructivist epistemology**

Epistemology in research can broadly be understood as to whether research in social sciences can and should be approached with the same principles as those applied to natural sciences (Bryman, 2016). The approach that reinforces the close replication of the natural sciences is generally known as positivism. As with any doctrine, arriving at an agreed definition can be challenging; however, in principle, a widely accepted notion of positivism is that research is conducted value-free, and therefore, the researcher acts as an objective observer (Bryman, 2016). The contrasting epistemological position to positivism is interpretivism. Though it is an umbrella term used to describe a range of approaches, such as constructivism and critical realism, it is also an epistemological position (Schwandt, 1998; Bogna *et al.*, 2020). Interpretivist approaches broadly accept that, to gain an understanding of the social world, the researcher must interpret what is before them (Schwandt, 1998). This is in direct contrast to positivism and the stated objectivity of the researcher.

The epistemological position underpinning this research is constructivism. Its central tenet differs from that of critical realism. Constructivism proposes that knowledge is not passively received from the environment but co-constructed by the subjects involved (Appleton and King, 1997). In this research, a constructivist approach acknowledges that, as the researcher, I will co-construct the findings (knowledge) of this research by interacting with the data and the

research participants. Therefore, knowledge and reality are subjective and pluralistic (Bruner, 1991).

Adopting a constructivist approach to this research is fitting as it recognises the multiple contexts and realities in which young people reside and social workers practise. For example, although young people and safeguarding professionals function in shared spaces, their experiences and realities may differ significantly. This is due to a multitude of factors, including previous experiences, issues such as personal and structural power, individual characteristics, and social capital (Firmin, 2015). In addition, as the researcher, I have also added my own layer of interpretation and understanding to the data collected and analysed. Using a constructivist epistemology is in keeping with a qualitative methodology and relativist ontological position, whereby all research subjects, including the researcher, construct their realities based on their individual experiences and judgments (Charmaz, 2017).

## **3.2 Reflexivity and positionality**

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is the continual critical internal dialogue that assesses and recognises the researcher's position and any influence they may have on their research (Berger, 2015; Bryman, 2016). The role of the researcher's 'situatedness' requires careful and honest self-appraisal (Berger, 2015), constantly evaluating the self and any influence on knowledge generation. This includes when the researcher is a recognised actor in the co-construction of the findings, as with my research paradigm stated above.

Researcher reflexivity is a process and not an event. It is an important feature at each stage of the research, including when designing and formulating the research questions, during data collection and analysis, and when writing up the findings (Bradbury-Jones, 2007). Reflexivity in relation to this research has been achieved via ongoing supervision with experienced PhD supervisors. It has also included continued explicit written and personal–professional reflections, which were explored during supervision sessions. I have also regularly met with several other doctoral students outside my formal PhD supervision. These meetings were facilitated online using video-calling

platforms and usually took place monthly. The doctoral students were from a mixture of professional and research backgrounds. These sessions provided a relaxed space for reflection and challenge.

In addition to the above, I presented my emerging research findings at conferences and professional training sessions and shared them through various industry outlets, such as professional blogs, podcasts, and articles in industry-related magazines and journals. The responses I received provided valuable insights by serving as an additional feedback loop. For example, an article I co-authored on the adultification of Black boys who were criminally exploited was one of the most read articles of 2020 in *Critical and Radical Social Work* (Davis and Marsh, 2020). Social workers and professionals commended the research for its applicability to practice. Because of this, I wanted to ensure that the findings from my thesis also resonated with practitioners; this feedback encouraged me to frame the research synthesis in relation to the potential impact on young people and social work practice.

Part of being a reflexive qualitative researcher is acknowledging how important personal and professional experiences and biases have been in shaping the research (Fook, 2002). As highlighted in Chapter 1, this research was borne out of my social work practice experience, as a service development lead. It was this role that provided me with the opportunity to design a regional response to CSE. During this time, I observed the limitations of statutory social work in addressing abuse and risk that occurs outside a young person's home. This experience ignited my professional curiosity to further understand how social work responses to young people could be better understood and developed. Consequently, my prior experiential and theoretical knowledge, known as practice wisdom (Samson, 2014), has had an indelible impact on the lens through which I view social work practice in this area.

Although the scope and remit of my thesis have broadly remained the same, it is important to highlight that, early on, I expanded the focus and remit of the research. Initially, I proposed that my research would be limited to CSE and young people from marginalised communities only, with a specific focus on the social work response to Black British females. This was borne out of an acute awareness of the lack of representation of Black British girls in both research

and practice settings regarding sexual abuse and exploitation (Ward and Patel, 2006; Bernard, 2019). However, once I started to engage with the limited literature available on the Black British experience of social work and CSE (Ward and Patel, 2006; Bernard and Thomas, 2016; Wilson; 2016), I started to critically reflect on the authenticity and sensitivity this area of research required. Moreover, as a fully funded PhD researcher, I did not feel that it was ethical for a White British male to occupy this space with funding from a studentship. It was specifically after reading Wilson's PhD thesis *'Spaces to Speak' of Sour Milk: Exploring African–Caribbean–British women's activism and agency on childhood sexual abuse from the 1980s to the present day* (Wilson, 2016) that I concluded that, even though this area is under-researched, I lack the necessary insight and authority to tread where, so few have had the opportunity to explore.

The experiences of lesser-heard groups are important to me; therefore, the social work responses to minoritised and marginalised groups remain a feature of my research. Additional amendments to the scope of the study include the inclusion of CCE. This change aligned with practice developments in the social work sector.

## **Positionality**

The following section explores my professional experience as a social worker and how this positions me, as a researcher, as both an insider and an outsider. I have been working in and around safeguarding and social work for over twenty years; from this perspective, I engage with this research from the position of an insider, that is, someone who is privy to insider knowledge, insider conversations, systems, and processes (Bartunek and Louis, 1996; Burns *et al.*, 2012). As a qualified social worker, I have worked in various roles, both as a frontline practitioner and in leadership roles. However, since 2017, and more recently with the commencement of this programme of study, I have stepped back from frontline delivery and now act as an observer of practice. Therefore, it could be argued that I have forgone my role as an insider and adopted an 'outsider' persona. An outsider is said to have less emotional connectedness to the research area, allowing for distance and a degree of objectivity (Bartunek and Louis, 1996; Burns *et al.*, 2012). This potentially indicates that an 'outsider' is less likely to hold assumptions or biases. However,

due to my experience and my previous professional connections to both research sites (see Section 3.5), I would say that I have a foot in both camps. I am both an insider and an outsider and may be recognised as one or the other by different people and in different contexts.

How a researcher perceives themselves may be different to how others perceive them. For example, though I consider myself a social worker, frequently, when providing consultation to social work leaders and organisations, I am asked questions by social workers that indicate that they no longer recognise me as one of them (an insider). This includes questions such as 'When you were a social worker...?' or 'When you used to practice social work, did you...?' This indicates that, although I consider myself a social worker, others hold contrasting views. Additionally, in a postmodern society, adopting a critical lens, such as critical race theory or queer theory, adds further considerations as to whether someone is viewed as an insider or an outsider. I may relate to the profession of social work as an insider, but as someone who identifies as a gay, White, British male, I may be considered an outsider by the participants of my focus group, for example, if they identify as heterosexual females, or if they do not identify as White British (Merriam *et al.*, 2001). This is particularly important given the topics this research explores: patriarchal, racial, and heteronormative assumptions. Reaching a consensus on whether a researcher is an insider, outsider, or both may feel context-specific and subjective. However, it is important that researchers make explicit the lens with which they interact and interpret data. It is the researcher's role to make clear how their positionality may have influenced the research process. This has been achieved by being clear about the research paradigm used (see Section 3.1).

### **3.3 Research design and methods**

When undertaking qualitative research, there are many approaches to choose from (Bryman, 2016). For example, I could have undertaken an ethnographic study to explore what factors influence social work decision-making and interventions. Both ethnography and participatory observation involve the researcher immersing themselves in a group or organisational setting over an extended period: observing behaviours and listening to what is being said, both

between fieldworkers and the researcher (Bryman, 2016). This approach would have exposed me directly to social workers and their decisions and interventions.

In contrast, accessing documentation or using surveys and/or interviews as the research method adds another level of data for the researcher to comb through, interpret, and make sense of (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Adopting an ethnographic design and being close to social work practice, observing the interactions between social workers, young people, and families, was initially appealing. However, after careful consideration, I concluded that conducting an ethnographic study was not the most practical or ethical place to start understanding influences on social work decision-making. This is because social work routine practice data exists via alternative and less intrusive routes. Whilst considering possible alternatives to an ethnographic approach, I deduced that accessing social work case files and facilitating subsequent social work focus groups to sense-check my findings was a fitting alternative. This approach also allowed me to review decision-making across several young people's case files, covering a variety of scenarios. It also allowed me to review social work decision-making and interventions over a much longer time frame than would have been achievable in a purely ethnographic study.

The best research methods for any research are ultimately the methods that can answer the questions posed and provide a transparent, scientific, and robust framework. The main methods of data collection used in this research were the in-depth case file analysis of relevant social work case files and two subsequent focus groups with social workers. I discuss each in the following sections.

## **Social work case file analysis and focus groups**

Prior to examining the appropriateness of using case file analysis as the primary method for data collection, it is perhaps useful to provide an overview of social work case files in statutory children's services. In England, all social work case recordings are managed via electronic social care records management systems (also known as ICS); this was recommended and reinforced by the national report by Lord Laming, following the high-profile death of Peter Connelly ('Baby P') in 2007 (Laming, 2009). ICS has been criticised for altering

social work practice 'from a narrative to a database way of thinking' (Parton, 2008) and transforming the profession into technical activities 'dominated by unimaginative and routinised work practices' (Sarwar and Harris, 2019). Nonetheless, social work record-keeping remains a key social work task (Munro, 2011b).

The need for social workers to 'maintain clear, accurate, legible and up to date records' is stipulated by the professional regulatory body, Social Work England (Social Work England, 2023). The High Court in England and Wales has also set out the expectation that social work case records should be 'clear, accurate, full and balanced' (L, Re (Care: Assessment: Fair Trial), 2002). Consequently, social work case files provide a rich well of data, which must meet set professional standards and provide sufficient detail to allow for retrospective scrutiny of decision-making and interventions (Social Work England, 2023). Therefore, social work case files are not simply an electronic database where sensitive information is stored – they also provide a view into contemporary social work practice (Hayes and Devaney, 2004).

Whilst social work case files can be a valuable resource for research purposes (Hayes and Devaney, 2004), there are limitations to using official documents as a data source. The subjective nature of data collection, input, and analysis by the author can influence the quality and reliability of the data (Darke *et al.*, 1998). Furthermore, the contents of case file recordings can be influenced by social workers' justifications for their actions and defence against possible criticism (Denscombe, 2010). In addition, data collected from documents such as social work case files require an additional layer of interpretation via the researcher and their chosen research paradigm (Fuller and Petch, 1995). Therefore, two key issues arise when considering the use of social work case files as part of research: first, the transparency of the researcher's methodology and how data will be collected, analysed, and interpreted, and second, acknowledging and addressing the limitations and potential biases in the documents.

To ensure transparency, this chapter has provided a detailed description of the research design, including the research paradigm and the lenses through which data has been analysed. A step-by-step and chronological overview of data



collection and analysis is also provided to enhance openness and trust in the decisions and actions taken during the research process. Being transparent also provides opportunities for others to scrutinise and evaluate the rigour of my research. By explicitly demonstrating the link between me (the researcher and author), the data, participants, and data analysis, I aim to build credibility and confidence in my research findings. As the findings of this thesis aim to support developments in social work policy and practice in addressing child exploitation, it is vital that others can understand, deliberate, and advance my findings (Moravcsik, 2019).

To address the limitations presented by the case file analysis, such as the inability to ask questions, interact, and respond to other stimuli (e.g., social workers' comments, tone of voice, and expressed concerns (Bryman, 2016)), two focus groups were also included as part of the data collection. Focus groups were selected rather than one-to-one interviews because they are more conducive to idea generation, discussion, and the deconstruction of social phenomena (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Focus groups also align with the theoretical framework, introduced in Chapter 1, as they enable the living context of the focus group participants to be presented and examined in relation to the individual and their environment (Wilkinson, 1998).

A recognised limitation of focus groups is the restricted number of topics that can be covered in the set time (Robson and McCartan, 2016). However, because the focus groups were considered a secondary source of data collection, I was able to concentrate on exploring specific areas (codes and categories). Furthermore, cross-referencing the data gathered from the case file analysis with social workers during the focus groups tested the initial findings in the context of real-life social work practice (Bryman, 2016). In addition, the interactions between focus group participants encouraged views to be challenged, cultivated, and critically examined (Bryman, 2016). This dimension is usually absent from other data collection methods, such as one-to-one interviews or questionnaires (Robson and McCartan, 2016; Bryman, 2016).

### 3.4 Ethics

It was important to gain ethics approval for this research due to the confidential and sensitive nature of the data collected from the case file analysis. An ethics application was sent to the University of East London Research Ethics Committee (UREC); following consideration, ethics approval was granted in August 2019 for a period of two years (see Appendix 1).

One of the more ethically complex elements of the research was gaining consent to access the data contained in social work case files. The question was whether to seek both the local authorities' consent and the service users'<sup>9</sup> consent, which then raised questions about whose information I was attempting to access and who the service user was (parents and carers or the young person). Working with my PhD supervisors to reflect on my thoughts and explore the technical aspects of consent, I eventually decided that I would seek consent from the two local authorities and not from parents and carers or young people. The deciding factors included a combination of the methodological challenges and the perspective I was adopting for this research. The methodological challenges related to identifying, seeking out, approaching, and waiting for consent from young people and family members, which may have caused them additional stress and anxiety, especially if they were still in need of high levels of support. I also had to balance this prospect with the potential resource requirements and the limitations of my research (Hayes and Devaney, 2004). Additionally, the aim of this research was to understand influences on social work decision-making. Therefore, it is not strictly focused on individual young people or their views and individual experiences.

Whilst this decision was not taken lightly, I submitted my ethics application on the basis that my research proposal was ethically sound. This was strengthened by my research being focused on an under-researched area of social work practice. Therefore, my research aimed to make recommendations about policy and practice improvements in an emerging area of child safeguarding. Consequently, my access to social work case files was permissible under the European Union General Data Protection Regulation, which provided a legal

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<sup>9</sup> A service user is a term used to describe any person who has the right to access welfare services. Service users should be treated with dignity and respect and should be able to contribute to decision-making (SCIE, 2004).

basis for accessing the files as a researcher and in the public interest (Article 6(1)(e)). Ethics approval was granted on the provisos that young people's details remained anonymous and their right to privacy was upheld. As a result, all young people were provided pseudonyms, and any personally identifiable information was removed. To ensure anonymity, where specific or potentially revealing case examples have been used, amendments have been made to the details, including in which research site young people lived.

As the research developed, two further ethics applications and amendments were made. Both applications related to changes in the name of the thesis. The initial thesis title was submitted when I commenced my PhD. However, as the research developed and I matured as a researcher, I wanted a more accurate title. The second title was *Safeguarding Young People from Extrafamilial Harm: An Exploratory Study Investigating How Social Workers Make Decisions in English Child Exploitation Cases*. Approval for this change in title was given on 13 January 2023. I requested a final amendment to the title on 22 September 2023. I felt that this final title change was necessary to reflect the focus of the study (see Appendix 1). Approval for the change in title was granted on 23 October 2023.

### **3.5 Research sites and accessibility**

#### **Trent and Hampstead Councils**

The two research sites were selected to provide a contrast in settings, geography, and demographics. As detailed below, each research site presented unique contexts where social workers supported young people affected by child exploitation. This deliberate selection of diverse settings enhances the potential transferability of the research findings, as argued by Charmaz (2014).

Prior to discussing the research sites, it is important to state that both local authorities received an inadequate Ofsted rating. At the time of writing, only 11% of local authority children's services were judged inadequate by Ofsted (Ofsted, 2022). Consequently, this restricts the level of detail that can be discussed whilst upholding anonymity. Therefore, the sharing of precise details relating to population, size, and demographics must be balanced with the need to protect the confidentiality of both local authorities, the young people whose

case files have informed this research, the social workers, and the social work managers.

Despite these limitations, this section provides a broad outline of each local authority and an overview of their individual approaches to tackling child exploitation. Due to the absence of a national strategy or published reliable evidence of what works, it is incumbent on individual local authorities and regional areas to develop a local response to child exploitation (Huegler, 2021). Both councils had published strategies and practice frameworks that stipulated how they tackled child exploitation and wider issues of EFH. Although Trent and Hampstead developed their responses separately and the councils are located far from one another, similarities were observed in their underpinning approaches. For example, both councils' official strategies and frameworks stated that several theories and models underpinned their approaches: both included SBP and RBP.

## **Trent Council**

Trent Council is a relatively small local authority in the north of England (population approximately 300,000). It borders a large city and is well connected to other city regions. Trent Council is made up of a mixture of suburban and urban areas and has a more diverse population than England's general population (ONS, 2021). According to the English Indices of Deprivation (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019), Trent Council contains some of the country's most and least deprived areas (wards). The areas where Trent Council borders the neighbouring city region represent some of the borough's most deprived and ethnically diverse areas. Less than 40% of people in these wards identify as White British (local authority data). These figures are representative of similar patterns observed across England, where White British, White Irish, and White Other ethnic groups are the least likely to live in the most income-deprived neighbourhoods (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019). Trent Council has a specialist child exploitation service. As highlighted in Table 1, the service handbook stated that SBP and RBP underpinned Trent Council's approach. Young people allocated a social worker from the child exploitation service were subject to an alternative framework than those allocated a social worker from a traditional social work

team. This included the use of strengths-based and relationship-based tools, and child exploitation social workers being allocated time and resources to allow them to focus on building rapport with young people prior to commencing any formal interventions. The social workers on the child exploitation team worked with a maximum of six young people at any one time. According to the service handbook, this was designed to provide social workers with the capacity to build a trusting relationship with the young person and remain responsive to the young person's needs.

Trent's child exploitation team included two full-time social workers, two part-time senior practitioners (social workers) and one full-time parenting worker. The full-time social workers were the only practitioners to work directly with young people. The senior social workers provided supervision and management support to the frontline workers. The parenting worker provided all planned interventions with parents/carers. The child exploitation service worked with young people considered to be at medium or high risk of exploitation, as determined via the completion of a child exploitation risk assessment. All cases were co-worked with a social worker from a traditional child protection team. This was designed to provide the child exploitation social worker the space to focus solely on the young person at risk of, or subject to, child exploitation. The social worker from the traditional service worked with the whole family and was responsible for any other children in the household and wider safeguarding concerns such as parenting concerns, issues of neglect, or other intrafamilial issues.

## **Hampstead Council**

Hampstead Council is approximately three times larger than Trent Council in size and population. Hampstead Council is an English local authority in the south of England. Hampstead spans rural, coastal, and suburban areas. Hampstead Council is less ethnically diverse than England's general population, with many areas being upwards of 94% White British and White non-British. Hampstead Council is made up of towns, villages, and hamlets. Approximately ten miles from Hampstead Council's border is a major city region with a hyper-diverse and more youthful population (ONS, 2021).

According to the Indices of Deprivation (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019), Hampstead Council is in the top 20% of the least deprived areas in England. In contrast, at the neighbourhood level, several of Hampstead Council's wards are in the 10% of the most deprived areas in England. Like Trent Council, the more deprived wards in Hampstead also represent the most ethnically diverse (local authority data). The deprivation recorded in the more deprived wards included poorer health and education outcomes and higher rates of unemployment and crime, although the risk of crime was reportedly lower in Hampstead Council than in Trent Council (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019).

Hampstead Council did not have a distinct model or set of specialist tools (outside the risk management tool) that social workers used with young people at risk of, or subject to, exploitation. Instead, Hampstead Council used a variety of approaches. For example, young people who were at risk of, or subject to, exploitation were allocated to social workers from various teams. This included traditional child protection teams, looked-after children's teams and a high-risk, high-vulnerability adolescent team. A single social worker was allocated to the young person and their family. The average caseload for social workers working in Hampstead Council was between twelve and sixteen young people. The social worker's role included working with other children within the family as well as addressing any traditional safeguarding concerns. Hampstead Council's practice framework stated that they promoted this model as part of a whole-family approach. A whole-family approach has been found to be an effective method of intervention when working with young people at risk of exploitation (Ravenscroft, *et al.*, 2021).

Hampstead Council's practice framework stated that social workers used a variety of approaches to tackle child exploitation and EFH. As highlighted in Table 1, like Trent Council, this included strengths-based and relationship-based approaches (see Section 4.1 for further discussion of Trent and Hampstead's approaches to practice).

**Table 1. Trent and Hampstead Councils’ underpinning theories**

Trent Council’s approaches	Hampstead Council’s approaches
(Trent Council’s Strategy and Action Plan, 2019–2021; Service Model Handbook, 2017)	(Hampstead Council’s Practice Framework, 2020; Multiagency Missing and Exploitation Guidance, 2019)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SBP</li> <li>• RBP</li> <li>• Adolescent developmentally informed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SBP</li> <li>• RBP</li> <li>• Behavioural model</li> <li>• Trauma-informed approach</li> <li>• Contextual safeguarding</li> <li>• A systemic approach</li> </ul>

## Access

Accessing confidential data in social work case files can be challenging (Hayes and Devaney, 2004). However, through established professional connections within each local authority area, I navigated local processes with the assistance of senior leaders and information governance officers in each area. Using professional connections to gain access is a legitimate research approach if the organisation is germane to the subject area and access is ethically gained and transparent to the reader (Bryman and Bell, 2015). To ensure that I was clear and upfront with research sites, I broadly followed Bryman’s (2016) recommendations for promoting transparency:

- I was open and honest with the Directors of Children’s Services and participants regarding the research’s expectations, time frames, and remit (see Appendix 2).
- I was transparent regarding how the findings would be used and who would see the findings (see Appendix 3).
- I was flexible in relation to access, timings, and how the study was approached within the organisation.

Negotiating access to social work case files proceeded promptly and was well supported in each area. Both local authorities echoed the UREC’s recommendations, requesting written assurances relating to ethical data

collection, handling, storage, use, and deletion. To ensure safe data management, I provided a data management plan outlining the pseudonyms and approaches to anonymising data. The plans also detailed how I would use an encrypted and password-protected external hard drive to store coded information. My data management plan also specified how my coding system would avoid using personal information (such as names and addresses) in my notes or on the hard drive. For example, non-identifiable pseudonyms, approximate dates of birth, and geographical area codes were used to protect the young people's identities. In addition, each local authority was assigned a pseudonym: the one in the north of England was named Trent Council, and the one in the south of England was named Hampstead Council.

### **3.6 Data collection and analysis**

#### **Data collection and analysis: the impact of COVID-19**

Before delving into the process of data collection and analysis, it is important to note the pandemic's effect on my data collection. Between March 2020 and January 2021, the UK government enforced several national lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This included full lockdowns where individuals were not allowed to interact with others outside their household unless they were an 'essential worker'. Later, the restrictions were loosened, with limitations focused on the number of people gathered (Institute for Government, 2022).

In March 2020, I had completed the case file analysis for Trent Council and was preparing to move on to Hampstead Council when the first lockdown was announced. All data collection activity was paused until the UK government published further guidance or a remote solution could be agreed upon. Due to high levels of uncertainty and an increase in demand for support services during this time, Hampstead Council's priorities were understandably focused on the safety and well-being of its residents and staff members. This delayed progress in accessing social work case files until June 2020, when, through discussions with my PhD supervisors and a senior leader in Hampstead Council, it was agreed that I could undertake the case file analysis remotely using a Hampstead Council laptop. All other safeguards agreed in my ethics



approval and data management plan remained in place. In July, I received a Hampstead Council laptop. I completed the online learning modules relating to information security, confidentiality, and the social work case recording system. After an almost six-month delay, I commenced Hampstead's case file analysis in August 2020.

Before starting Hampstead Council's case file analysis, I made the research decision to only include data from Hampstead Council that predated 23 March 2020. This decision was made to ensure that the data collected was comparable in both research sites because changes had been made in social work practices in response to the national lockdowns, which included adjustments to social work interventions, with digital forms of direct work taking precedence over face-to-face interventions (Racher and Brodie, 2020; Ravenscroft *et al.*, 2021).

Considering the unpredictable nature of COVID-19 lockdowns, I also changed the format of the two focus groups. I decided that they would be conducted online using Microsoft Teams. This decision was based on the evolving working conditions in the UK, where restrictions on working practices remained dynamic (Institute for Government, 2022). Furthermore, with technological advancements, online platforms have been found to be an appropriate alternative to in-person interviews and focus groups (Kite and Phongsavan, 2017).

Criticisms of carrying out online research include the challenges of reading facial expressions and body language via a small camera and potentially stifling the natural cadence of group interactions (Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996; Edmunds, 1999). Other concerns relate to the technical difficulties the online environment can bring, including internet speed, software malfunctions, and camera and microphone anomalies (Edmunds, 1999). However, these limitations are not exclusive to virtual facilitation, and similar concerns could occur in a physical setting, where issues such as being unable to see and read facial expressions or body language or the Dictaphone not working properly may cause similar anxieties. Kite and Phongsavan (2017) have praised the convenience and flexibility that online facilitation brings and found that, with

planning and good facilitation, it is a ‘comparable’ alternative to face-to-face focus groups.

## Fieldwork activity

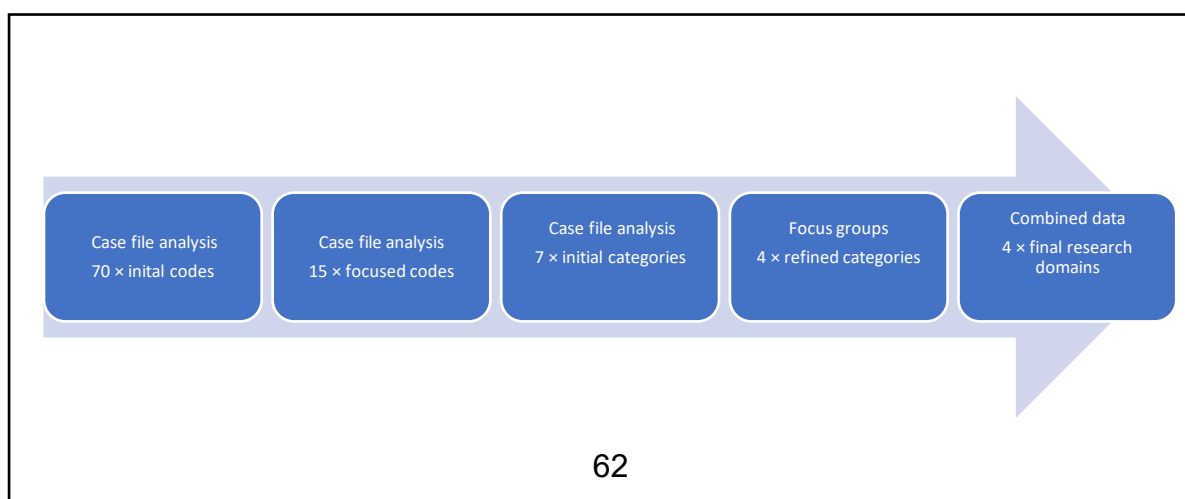
As highlighted in Table 2, fieldwork activity took place over a twelve-month period, commencing in December 2019 and concluding one year later.

**Table 2. Summary of fieldwork activity**

Research method	Research site	Details	Time frame
Case file analysis	Trent Council	9 × social work case files	December 2019– March 2020
Case file analysis	Hampstead Council	6 × social work case files	August 2020– October 2020
Focus group	Trent Council	6 × social workers	18 November 2020
Focus group	Hampstead Council	6 × social workers	11 December 2020

As illustrated in Figure 2, data collection and analysis followed several distinct processes. This included developing seventy initial codes from the case file analysis into the final four domains. This process included the analysis of fifteen social work case files (which equated to data spanning a combined period of fourteen years and nine months) and two focus groups, which included twelve qualified social workers. The individual elements of data collection and analysis are discussed below.

**Figure 2. The development of codes, categories, and domains**



## **Constructivist grounded theory**

As this study focuses on an exploration of social work decision-making and interventions, and given my professional proximity to the research topic, I wanted to choose an approach to data collection and analysis that simultaneously acknowledged me as a researcher and was inductive (data-driven), rather than deductive (hypothesis-driven). Therefore, in line with my epistemological and ontological perspectives, I used techniques from constructivist grounded theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014). Although I have used a version of grounded theory (GT) techniques, I did not intend to create a theory from data. My aim was to use inductive methods of data collection to generate original insights.

GT is a systematic approach to inquiry for the purpose of theory construction. Though GT is chiefly an analytical method, it informs data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). The main feature that distinguishes CGT from other forms of GT relates to the role and influence of the researcher. Charmaz, who developed CGT, states that the researcher and their prior knowledge and experience are important features in social research, and to deny this is to insinuate a pseudo-objectivity (Charmaz, 2014). However, one of the founding theorists of GT, Glaser, makes clear his rejection of CGT. In his article 'Constructivist grounded theory?', Glaser disputes the significance of the role of the researcher, stating that '... human biasing whatever is minimized to the point of irrelevancy...', going on to state that Charmaz's CGT uses constructivism to make '...the researcher's interactive impact on the data more important than the participants' (Glaser, 2000). For this study, it is CGT that most resonates with me as a researcher, possibly because of the origins of this research. As stated in Chapter 1, this research was borne out of my professional social work experience, and for that to be 'minimized to the point of irrelevancy' not only appears impracticable but is not necessarily a desired objective of this research. On the contrary, my professional insights will hopefully enhance the research findings, being able to identify nuances and themes that may be less apparent to someone from a different discipline. The sections below will discuss the application of CGT techniques to data collection and analysis for both the case file analysis and the focus groups.

## Case file analysis: sampling

Both Trent and Hampstead Councils had established specialist services and panels to support young people at risk of, or experiencing, child exploitation (Hampstead Council's was a specialist adolescent team). This provided a convenient sample population for this research. Other inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Only social work case files that related to young people assessed to be at medium or high risk of child exploitation were considered. This criterion was designed to ensure consistency across the case files and between the two research sites. This approach also ensured that child exploitation was a significant feature in social work decision-making.
2. Only social work case files related to young people who had been allocated a social worker from the specialist team for three months or more were considered. This criterion was designed to ensure that there was sufficient service involvement to explore social work decision-making in a variety of contexts.
3. Only social work case files that were open and active cases were considered. This was to ensure that the most recent local developments relating to social work decision-making were recorded and available for analysis. This approach reduced the risk of research participants in the focus groups distancing themselves from practices they considered outdated. Furthermore, accessing case files where a social worker was allocated to the young person would have allowed for immediate action to be taken should any safeguard concerns have arisen.

In Trent Council, ten young people met the above inclusion criteria. I analysed nine out of the ten social work case files. The tenth file was restricted, with only approved workers permitted access. This was due to the highly confidential nature of the young person's experiences of exploitation and potential links to organised crime.

In Hampstead Council, I restricted the potential case file sample population to young people allocated to a social worker from the specialist adolescent service and known to the exploitation panel. This provided the closest equivalence to

the case files analysed in Trent Council. In addition, the sampling technique was also amended to ensure that the research sample population was as diverse as possible. A stratified purposive sampling approach was adopted. This approach is used to ensure that individuals of interest or 'subgroups' are included in the research (Robson and McCartan, 2016; Bryman, 2016). In relation to this study, this comprised prioritising young people from ethnic minoritised backgrounds, females, and young people across diverse ages and living arrangements. In research site 2, six cases were analysed before saturation was reached. Saturation occurs when the gathering of data stops revealing new insights or properties related to the developed categories (Charmaz, 2014).

As highlighted in Table 3, a total of fifteen social work case files were analysed, five relating to females and ten relating to males. At the start of social care's involvement, the young people's ages ranged from thirteen to sixteen years. Nine young people were from White British backgrounds, two were from Black Caribbean / White mixed backgrounds, two were from White European backgrounds (Portuguese and Polish), one was from a Black African background, and one was from a Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) background. From the case file data, six young people were recorded as having an identified or suspected learning difficulty or special educational needs. Nine young people were recorded either as receiving psychological or emotional support or as having 'mental health difficulties'.

**Table 3. An overview of the young people\***

#	Young person	Age (years)	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability / learning need / neurodiversity	Emotional and mental health needs	Previous SW involvement	Concern
1	Keira	16	F	White British	Query ASD	Query borderline personality disorder	No	CSE
2	Jack	14	M	White British	FASD	Query psychosis	Yes	CCE
3	Hope	13	F	Mixed heritage: Caribbean/European	Query ASD	Query depression	Yes	CSE?
4	Ryan	14	M	White British	None recorded	Auditory hallucinations	Yes	CSE
5	Jamie	15	M	White British	Communication difficulties	'Mental health issues	No	CCE
6	Dylan	13	M	Mixed heritage: Caribbean/European	None recorded	Emotional difficulties	Yes	CCE
7	Sara	15	F	White British	None recorded	None recorded	Yes	CSE/CCE
8	Noah	14	M	White British	ASD	None recorded	No	CCE
9	Ella	13	F	White British	None recorded	Extreme lack of confidence	Yes	CSE
10	Tanya	14	F	White British	None recorded	None recorded	Yes	CSE
11	Zac	14	M	GRT	None recorded	None recorded	No	CCE
12	Damian	13	M	Black African	None recorded	None recorded	Yes	CCE
13	Toni	15	M	White British	None recorded	None recorded	Yes	CCE
14	Kris	14	M	White European	None recorded	Emotional difficulties	No	CCE
15	Lucas	14	M	White European	ADHD	None recorded	No	CCE

ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; ASD, autism spectrum disorder; F, female; FASD, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder; M, male.

\*Young people from Hampstead Council are depicted in grey.

## **Initial coding**

Using CGT techniques, I developed my initial research codes and emerging categories in the first research site and then tested the codes and categories, reaching saturation in the second research site (Charmaz, 2014). Conducting my research in this way, across two sites, ensured that I was not recording localised phenomena and that what I observed was transferable to other contexts (Charmaz, 2014).

When using CGT principles, data analysis and coding commence at the start of data collection (Charmaz, 2008, 2014). This is important as it facilitates coding early on and ensures that the researcher remains close to the data. Charmaz (2014) recommends that researchers achieve this by coding data line by line, incident by incident, or situation by situation. Due to the volume and nature of social work case recordings, I coded incident by incident. Nonetheless, even when adopting this more efficient data collection and analysis approach, I still generated seventy initial codes (see Appendix 4).

The codes generated were formulated using gerunds. Gerunds are the preferred method of coding when using CGT as this approach 'moves beyond concrete statements by focusing on actions rather than themes' (Charmaz, 2014, p. 111). When coding, I ascribed codes to all data, even if, on first interactions, the data appeared to be unrelated to the aim of my study and the research questions. Charmaz (2014) emphasises that coding in this manner allows previously unseen leads and patterns to emerge, which opens the possibility to new insights and does not confine findings to prior researcher's knowledge and understanding of the topic area.

## **Constant comparison and focused coding**

The case file analysis of the first three case files (Keira's, Jack's, and Hope's case files) produced seventy initial codes. Towards the latter stages of analysing each case file, I became so familiar with the content of that case file and the codes that I was able to go back and forth with dexterity, comparing data with data and codes with data in the various contexts recorded in the young person's case file. This is known as constant comparison and is a feature of all iterations of GT (Glaser and Holton, 2007). Constant comparison is

designed to support analytical distinctions by continually comparing, developing, and refining the data with increasing clarity (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Through the process of constant comparison, by the time I analysed five social work case files in Trent Council, I had developed the initial seventy codes into fifteen focused codes. Focused codes are developed from the initial coding process and arrived at due to the significance or frequency in which they appear in the data. Focused codes can be conceptual and incorporate several initial codes into a more refined state (Charmaz, 2003, 2008). Though not a linear process, GT coding involves a minimum of two main phases (Charmaz, 2014):

1. **An initial coding phase** involves naming and describing each data segment.
2. **A focused/selective phase** involves developing codes or 'using the most significant initial codes' to sift, 'synthesise, and organise large amounts of data.'

Both the above phases formed part of the data collection and analysis. As illustrated in Figure 2, as the data relating to focused codes became increasingly clear and the parameters became more defined, multiple initial codes fed into shaping the development of focused codes (see Appendix 4 for full details).

In conjunction with constant comparison, memo-writing is a GT technique to support the development of coding. Memo-writing is used from the first to the last interaction with data. As highlighted by my research memo extract below, memo-writing occurs at frequent intervals and is the initial step towards transforming data into categories. As such, memo writing becomes increasingly analytical as the codes gradually develop into defined categories. Birks *et al.* (2008) capture the process of memo-writing with their mnemonic **MEMO**: **M**apping research activities, **E**xtracting meaning from data, **M**aintaining momentum, and **O**pening communication.

Researcher's memo:

*I have now analysed eight files in total, and there are obvious patterns emerging in the data. Several codes are starting to appear less distinguishable from one*



*another the more I reflect on them. They specifically relate to young people, making their views clear to the outside world through verbal and non-verbal communication. This includes making specific requests to social workers and safeguarding professionals. The data shows that when young people's voices are not listened to, they appear to act out their frustration in a physical manner. This is exemplified by Dylan, who has told his dad and social worker that he doesn't feel ready to return to school after being assaulted with a bladed instrument. However, his views were not listened to, and he continued to be pressured to return to school. This appeared to result in Dylan often going missing from home mid-week, and his interactions with his dad and the social worker became increasingly volatile. Experiences such as Dylan's question whether I am fully considering the links between 'unaccepted expressions of agency' and 'acknowledging young people's age and identity (or not)'. Perhaps this isn't related to communication as much as it is about the evolving rights of young people to participate and a growing frustration about the lack of influence young people have on decision-making. Read more on participation.*

(Memo writing, 24 February 2020)

The above extract demonstrates my reflections and analysis following the examination of eight social work case files. Research memos are informal reflective notes and should provide a creative space for the researcher to make theoretical leaps to test during further data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). The above memo illustrates part of the process of developing research categories from focused codes. This process started with treating all focused codes as potential categories. Adopting this approach encourages the researcher to fully develop and examine the potential of all codes (Charmaz, 2014).

Categories are described as follows:

Categories explicate ideas, events, or processes in your data – and do so in telling words. A category may subsume common themes and patterns in several codes. ... Make categories as conceptual as possible – with abstract power, general reach, analytic direction, and precise wording.

(Charmaz, 2014, p. 189)

Following the above processes, combining data collection with constant comparison and memo-writing, I had developed the fifteen focused codes into seven initial categories by the time I had completed the analysis of all nine case files in Trent Council. Below is the list of the seven categories developed in Trent Council, ready to be transferred and tested in research site 2, Hampstead Council.

## **The seven research categories**

1. The boundaries of participation \*Young people having their voices heard.
2. The modality of social work (social workers not being able to meet the needs of young people and families).
3. Social worker self-preservation.
4. Social workers' discretion and autonomy.
5. The narrative of the helpful and the unhelpful parent.
6. Relying on familiar systems, processes, and actions to create feelings of progress.
7. Acknowledging the young person's identity and development (or not).

## **Testing the categories in Hampstead Council**

As part of testing the developed categories, my approach to data collection and analysis in research site 2 was amended to be more focused. I was only interested in data that would dispel, contrast, test, refine, or develop the seven categories. To ensure I remained focused when approaching data collection in Hampstead Council, I asked the following five reflective questions to test the transferability of the categories<sup>10</sup>:

1. How does this data contribute to the definition of the category?
2. What are the conditions in which this category arises or changes?
3. Does this data oppose or contradict the properties of the category? If so, to what extent?
4. How do the final categories relate to one another?

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'transferability' is used in place of the terms 'generic' and 'generalise' used by Charmaz (2014). This is in recognition of the scale and scope of this research. As an explanatory piece of research, the findings of this research are likely to be indicative and transferrable to other social work locations. However, the findings from this research are not designed to be generalised.

5. In what ways do the categories relate to the overarching research question?

(Adapted from Charmaz, 2014)

Charmaz discusses the importance of refining categories by gathering additional data from diverse settings and arenas (Charmaz, 2014). By exporting my developed categories to an alternative social work setting, I was able to further test the categories' transferability. Memo-writing in research site 2 also became increasingly analytical compared to the memo-writing in research site 1. Combining the reflective questions and a more analytical approach to memo-writing shifted the focus from openly exploring what the data was indicating to concentrating on how the data informed the parameters of each category.

Exploring data for each category and asking targeted questions about the relationships between the categories and their contribution to answering the research questions revealed limitations of categories 2, 3, 4, and 5. Category 2 notably lacked relevance to the overarching research question of what influences social work decision-making and interventions. However, further investigation showed that category 2 often arose within the constraints of social work processes and systems, which caused a disconnect between what young people and families wanted and what social workers could offer. Thus, when considered as part of category 6 (relying on systems, processes, and actions to create feelings of progress), category 2 added depth to category 6 and made sense in answering the research question.

Likewise, when reflecting on the above five questions concerning categories 3 and 4, the data from Hampstead Council's case files suggested that social worker self-preservation and discretion were more interconnected than previously thought. As a result, these two categories were amalgamated. Additionally, the findings relating to parents (the narrative of the helpful and the unhelpful parent) appeared less relevant in Hampstead Council. This was likely due to the different operating model in Hampstead Council, where the allocated social worker was responsible for everyone in the family, including the parents. This contrasted with Trent Council's approach, where the specialist exploitation social worker focused solely on the young person at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation and a parenting worker focused on working with the parents.

Therefore, while this category appeared important, it lost some significance because it was not transferrable. Consequently, this category was relegated back to a focused code. Apart from the changes mentioned above, the remaining four categories (1. Young people having their voices heard; 3. Social workers' discretion and autonomy; 6. Relying on familiar systems, processes, and actions to create feelings of progress; and 7. Acknowledging the young person's identity and development (or not)) remained largely the same (see Appendix 4).

## **Focus groups and category development**

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the opportunity to promote and recruit social work research participants to the focus groups in person was significantly limited. Consequently, recruitment for the two focus groups was conducted virtually via email. To ensure a wide variety of social work experiences and perspectives were included in the focus groups, emails were sent to all social work teams in both Trent and Hampstead Councils. The email specified the purpose of the focus groups and the inclusion criteria (see Appendix 5). The recruitment email made it clear that only social workers with experience working in child exploitation were eligible. Furthermore, to ensure that the focus groups provided an equitable and safe environment, only social workers or senior practitioners (experienced social workers who may provide supervision and support to social workers) were invited to participate.

Six social workers in each research site responded to the invitation and met the criteria. Eleven research participants were social workers, and one was a senior practitioner (see Table 4). All social workers attending the focus groups were female and identified as White British/ European (see Section 9.2 for discussion on research limitations). Due to the approach to recruiting the research participants, there was an unplanned overlap between social workers whose case files had formed part of the case file analysis and those attending the focus groups (see Table 4). Due to the design of Trent Council's approach to tackling child exploitation (i.e., child exploitation cases assessed to be medium risk are allocated to the exploitation team) and the significantly smaller size of the council, all of Trent Council's child exploitation team social workers attended the focus group. Only two of the research participants in Hampstead Council

were identified as being connected to the young people whose case files formed part of Hampstead's case file analysis. This is possibly due to the council's dispersed approach to tackling child exploitation, the smaller number of case files being accessed, and the fact that Hampstead is a much larger local authority than Trent Council.

As the researcher, I knew where the overlap lay between social workers attending the focus groups and the case files analysed. However, due to the thematic and open-ended design of the focus group questions (see Appendix 6), the research participants may not have recognised if or where their case files may have formed part of my findings. This design was intentional, aiming to provide a safe and secure environment for the social workers. In addition, due to the design of the focus group questions, if social workers did recognise the young people they worked with, they could choose whether to identify themselves as the allocated worker or not. In both focus groups, all social workers shared their experiences of working with young people in ways that did not explicitly identify individual young people. Only during Hampstead Council's focus group did a social worker ask whether a young male she had worked with had formed part of the case file analysis. The social worker asked the question in response to a discussion on sexual abuse and boys. I confirmed that one of her case files did form part of the case file analysis. However, I reiterated that the themes explored during the focus group developed from fifteen individual social work case files from two different local authorities. Consequently, we are exploring themes as opposed to individual experiences. No further comments were made about individual cases.

**Table 4. Overview of the social worker research participants**

<b>Name (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Team</b>	<b>Gender (self-identified)</b>	<b>Ethnicity (self-identified)</b>	<b>Social work case files accessed</b>
Pamela	CE team and CE panel chair	Female	White British	N/A
Dora	CE team	Female	White British	Yes
Emma	CE team	Female	White British	Yes
Louise	Duty team	Female	White British	Yes
Samantha	Family support team	Female	White British	Yes
Jenny (senior practitioner)	CE team	Female	White British	N/A
Hannah	Court team	Female	White British	No
Anne	Duty team	Female	European	No
Charlie	Adolescent team (previously edge-of-care team)	Female	White British	Yes
Zoe	Duty team	Female	White British	No
Maria	Looked-after children's team	Female	White British	No
Jazz	Adolescent CE (previously edge-of-care team)	Female	White British	Yes
CE, child exploitation.				

Both focus groups were held online using the video conferencing platform Microsoft Teams. Each session lasted ninety minutes. A PowerPoint presentation was used to help communicate the focus group questions. To preempt any foreseeable practical issues, participants were sent an email before each session. The email provided instructions on joining the focus group and the procedure should they become emotionally distressed during the session.

Additionally, I shared my contact details beforehand to ensure participants had an opportunity to share any concerns or raise any questions. I also informed research participants that I would be available for fifteen minutes before and after the session. This was to ensure that I could answer any questions and address any technical issues.

All focus group questions were open-ended and related to specific categories identified via the case file analysis. The questions were designed to encourage reflection and conversation. As highlighted in the focus group schedule (Appendix 6), the questions and information provided refrained from providing details of the findings, which may have unduly influenced focus group participants. Having a pre-set schedule also helped me achieve a sensible balance between providing space for the wider exploration of topic areas while keeping the discussion focused enough to be useful to my research (Krueger and Casey, 2014).

Although discussed in detail in Chapters 4–7, the focus group data largely supported the findings from the case file analysis. Interestingly, during both focus groups, social workers discussed the role of parents. However, due to the restricted nature of these conversations, the data from the focus groups did not add much clarity beyond the framing of parents as either helpful or unhelpful. Nonetheless, the fact that social workers in both focus groups raised the role of parents in an unprompted fashion possibly indicates that further research is needed in this area.

The data from the focus groups was analysed through the process of constant comparison and advanced memo-writing, as described above. The data collected from focus groups supported the development of four research domains, which broadly reflect the research ecological theoretical framework (see Appendix 4).

### **3.7 Summary**

This chapter discussed and justified the research paradigm, including the underpinning ontological and epistemological positions. The chapter described the ethical considerations and processes undertaken to gain ethical approval from the UREC. The steps taken to access the two research sites and social work data were also shared. The second part of the chapter laid out the research methods used for data collection and analysis, exploring how each step was coherent with the research paradigm and how each step contributed to answering the research questions.

The next chapter is the first of four findings' chapters. The research ecological theoretical framework informs the ordering of the findings' chapters. The following chapter focuses on influences from a macro-level perspective, specifically the effects of professional and organisational influences.



## **Chapter 4 Professional and organisational influences: Familiar responses to unfamiliar risks**

This is the first of four findings' chapters. This chapter explores the findings from the case file analysis of fifteen social work cases and two focus groups. The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with an understanding of how established social work practices and procedures influence social work decision-making in the context of child exploitation.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the two research sites' espoused underpinning approaches to tackling child exploitation and the influence these approaches have on social work decision-making. The second section is divided into three subsections examining the influence bureaucratic and risk management processes can have on social work decision-making and interventions. The third section analyses how traditional social work practices relating to working in a multi-agency environment can affect decision-making.

### **4.1 Local approaches to tackling child exploitation**

This section reintroduces Trent and Hampstead Councils' approaches and underpinning theories to tackling child exploitation and how they may influence social work decision-making and interventions. As discussed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.5), both councils have published strategies and practice frameworks stipulating local approaches to tackling child exploitation and wider issues of EFH. Due to the absence of a national strategy or published reliable evidence of what works, it is incumbent on individual local areas to develop individual responses to child exploitation (CSPRP, 2020). To allow a comparison between the two research sites, this section specifically explores SBP and RBP. This is because both local authorities identified these approaches as underpinning their child exploitation social work response (see Table 1 for full details).

## Trent Council's approach to tackling child exploitation

Trent Council's child exploitation strategy and service handbook states that SBP and RBP underpin its approach to tackling child exploitation. From the case file analysis, it was evident that the child exploitation social workers in Trent Council used a strength-based assessment tool. The service handbook stated that the tool was co-designed with young survivors of CSE to encourage young people's participation. Young people allocated to a social worker from the exploitation service were also subject to a different pathway and interventions than those allocated to a social worker from traditional social work teams. As the extract from the social work case file below highlights, this included child exploitation social workers being allocated time and resources to allow them to focus on building rapport with young people:

*I visited Jamie today to introduce myself and the service. I briefly explained who I was, my role and that I would love to get to know him and 'walk alongside him' for a little while, if this was OK. Jamie said he wasn't being rude, but he doesn't need anyone. I explained, I am hearing him and wanted to respect this. I mentioned possibly going to the local football museum to get to know one another. We then had a good chat about football, which he enjoyed. I explained I know he has half term coming up and if he wants, we could visit the museum. Jamie's eyes lit up and he smiled. I said that I can check with him nearer the time. I also explained it would be a nice thing to do which I think he'd enjoy. There would be no expectations on him after this to work with me. Jamie said, 'OK yeah'.*

(Case file 5: social worker case note)

The social worker's case note extract shows the social worker sharing power, gaining the young person's consent, and trying to be aligned with the young person's interests. These are all important features of building trust and can be seen as indicators of SBP and RBP (Ruch, 2010; Pattoni, 2012). When working with young people at risk of exploitation, social workers on traditional social work teams were not afforded the same time to build rapport with the young people they worked with. This was picked up during the case file analysis and in Trent Council's focus group. As highlighted by the conversation below, the social workers who worked on traditional teams felt that this approach led to a two-tiered safeguarding system:

**Louise** (social worker, duty team): *I get why the exploitation team have smaller caseloads and why they get the chance to take young people out and spend proper time with them. But I don't think it's fair to other teenagers who are also at risk of CSE but don't get to work with a specialist worker. They are stuck with us, and we have like, 20 cases.*

**Samantha** (social worker, family support team): *I agree with Louise. I think it creates a first-class and second-class system across child protection.*

This dialogue highlights some of the challenges experienced by local authorities when bringing about change to social work, even when it is in response to an emerging area of practice. It is acknowledged that traditional social work practice needs to adapt to tackle child exploitation (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Firmin and Knowles, 2022); however, as indicated above, once you isolate one area for improvement, it can leave others feeling neglected.

Trent Council's exploitation team also limited social work caseloads to a maximum of six young people at any one time. This approach was designed to allow social workers to build relationships with young people and be responsive to their needs. Indeed, in her review of the child protection system, Munro (2011b) stated that the 'quality' of the relationship between the social worker and 'child and family' directly influences the effectiveness of the support provided. As illustrated by Dora's comments, these sentiments were echoed by the research participants during the focus groups:

*On the exploitation team, we work with a maximum of six cases. I found that having time to be flexible and build relationships is key. So now, when my young people are in trouble, they call me. This shows that the relationship has been built and I'm a trusted adult. We are slowly taking influence away from the perpetrators.*

(Dora, social worker, exploitation team)

As the research participant's comments indicate, having the time and space to build a trusting relationship is an important part of the social worker's intervention. The quotation implies that the relationship itself is part of the social worker's intervention. It is a vehicle for change, slowly shifting power away from

perpetrators towards professionals. However, one of the challenges for social workers when using this approach is to ensure that the relationship is not the only focus of the intervention. Focusing on the relationship as the primary intervention can pathologise service users and position professionals as the 'expert' (Ruch, 2010).

SBP and RBP appeared to be embedded in Trent Council's child exploitation model; nonetheless, the findings from the case file analysis indicated a possible tension between espoused approaches and local safeguarding procedures. For example, social workers on the specialist team were required to complete two assessments: one was a strengths-based tool, the other was a risk-based tool. The strengths-based assessment placed emphasis on a young person's future, interests, and strengths. It also had sections to capture and promote the young person's priorities. As an example, Hope's assessment and plan involved an action for the social worker to provide support to improve communication between Hope and her parents. The plan addressed Hope's top priority, which was to discuss and establish a new weekend curfew. Based on the case note extract below, the social worker worked directly with Hope to explore strategies for approaching the subject with her parents:

*Today's session focused on Hope's wish to stay out later with her friends during weekends. This action is Hope's top priority. This is an important area of work as Hope has informed me that one of the reasons that she goes missing on weekends is because she must be home earlier than her friends (8pm) ...*

(Case file 3: social worker case note)

The social worker's case note indicates that Hope was considered the expert in her life. This is demonstrated by the social worker taking Hope's suggested solution to her going missing seriously. Features such as following the young person's pace and lead are closely aligned with strengths-based approaches (DHSC, 2019). The use of the strengths-based assessment was evident across all child exploitation social workers' case files. The child exploitation risk assessment was used in a different manner. It was completed at three-monthly intervals or following a 'significant event'. The risk assessment focused entirely on the risks and deficits in the young person's life, such as alcohol and substance use, mental health issues, social media use, and sexual activity. The

case file records also appeared to indicate that young people and their families were not frequently informed about the completion of the risk assessments, and seldom received copies of the completed document. Trent Council's risk assessment process focused more on internal procedures than involving young people or their parents directly. This was indicated by the fact that young people or their parents did not receive copies, nor did they directly contribute to the assessment in any meaningful manner. Social work literature suggests that risk assessments and process-driven approaches can indicate organisational defensive practice, as they help standardise and monitor social work activity to manage risk (Littlechild, 2008; Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016).

Trent Council's two assessments appear to fulfil two specific purposes. The above extract from Hope's case file suggests that the strengths-based assessment facilitated engagement with young people, which helped shape the social worker's priorities and included the young person's perspective. The data from the case file analysis suggests that the risk assessment also contributed to social work practice, albeit in different ways. The social workers' case notes indicated that social workers would frequently share the level of risk (high, medium, or low) the young person was perceived to be at during discussions in multi-agency meetings and case discussions with managers. The findings from the social work case files suggest that the young person's risk score appeared particularly important when deciding on case closure. Only young people considered low risk (or medium risk with a plan of support) were stepped down to universal services or had their cases closed.

The coexistence of both tools in Trent Council highlights a potential tension between practice ideologies and the reality of social work practice in a risk- and process-focused profession (Cooper, 2014; Featherstone *et al.*, 2018). The coexistence of opposing assessments in strengths-based and relationship-based services possibly reflects wider social work debates relating to participation versus protection (Lefevre *et al.*, 2017; Mitchell, 2022). For example, the strengths-based assessment appeared to provide young people with varying degrees of participation. However, the risk assessment, which appears to be completed behind closed doors and away from the young person, suggests that there is also a second professional decision-making process that runs parallel to the strengths-based assessment, one in which the young

person's and their family's involvement is not permitted. This suggests that SBP and RBP are possibly limited to the social workers' interactions with the young person.

## **Hampstead Council's approach to tackling child exploitation**

In contrast to Trent Council, Hampstead did not have a distinct model or set of tools that social workers used with young people at risk of, or subject to, exploitation. Instead, Hampstead Council used a variety of approaches. For example, Hampstead Council did not have a single specialist child exploitation team; young people who were at risk of exploitation were allocated to social workers from various teams. This included traditional child protection teams, looked-after children's teams, and a specialist adolescent team. Therefore, it was more challenging to determine how Hampstead Council's social work decision-making was underpinned by SBP and RBP. Like Trent Council, Hampstead also used a risk-based assessment tool that helped shape social work decision-making and was presented in various exploitation-related professional meetings and panels.

Although child exploitation was tackled in a more dispersed manner in comparison to Trent Council, as the extract from Lucas' case file below illustrates, social workers appeared to recognise the importance of building relationships with young people:

*... Lucas was talkative today; we are establishing a positive relationship. He is starting to open-up about his relationship with his dad. I did not ask him too many questions as he can be shy, and I want him to feel safe in our relationship and to show that he's in control.*

(Case File 15: social worker case note)

This case note illustrates that social workers in Hampstead Council did prioritise relationships with young people. However, possibly due to the absence of specific tools or a clearly defined approach stating how SBP and RBP were implemented, it was difficult to gauge how these theories were consistently implemented in practice. The ambiguity of how these approaches influenced social workers beyond individual interactions with young people was also

present during the focus group. As illustrated by the following quotation, research participants in the focus group also appeared to concentrate on the relationship between the social worker and the young person as the singular method in which RBP was implemented. The social worker's comment below was in answer to the question, 'What theories and approaches most inform your practice?' As demonstrated by Hannah's comments, the research participants appeared unable to identify ways in which they were evident in practice:

*We are relational in our approach. We are also trauma-informed and strength-based.*

(Hannah, social worker, court team)

In response to Hannah's comments, I asked if she could be more specific and share how social workers implemented these approaches. As seen below, Hannah's response focused on practice intentions and did not provide detail in relation to implementation:

*Well, we put the relationship at the heart of everything we do. We build on young people's strengths, and we recognise the impact of trauma.*

(Hannah, social worker, court team)

Other research participants in the focus group contributed to Hannah's response by adding practical applications of RBP. The following quotation provides some detail of how social workers build trusting relationships with young people:

*I would say, we spend time building a trusting relationship with young people. We offer them a relationship that is different to how they are treated by their abusers.*

(Charlie, social worker, Adolescent team)

Charlie's comments provide insight into the delivery of RBP in Hampstead Council; however, it remains focused on the social worker's role. This reinforced what was observed during the case file analysis: RBP was largely evident in the interactions between the social worker and the young person. However, it was difficult to ascertain from the case file analysis or the focus groups how RBP extended beyond these interactions. A systemic approach is required for RBP to be effective, whereby social workers receive a 'distinctive kind of support and

development, in terms of training, supervision and leadership' (Ward *et al.*, 2010, p. 5). Relying on the relationship as the intervention does not consider wider social factors and upholds the notion of the social worker being the expert (Ruch, 2010).

When analysing Hampstead's case file data, it was challenging to consistently identify how RBP and SBP influenced social work decision-making. There appeared to be hints of these approaches in individual case recordings (see Lucas's case note above). However, it was difficult to understand how these theories extended into practice across all cases of exploitation. Indeed, there were multiple occasions when social work practice appeared to contrast with Hampstead Council's espoused approaches. For example, the case note below, taken from Tanya's case file, shows a social worker prioritising administrative tasks over a prearranged meeting with a vulnerable young person. The case note relates to Tanya's social worker rescheduling a planned visit. This visit was a follow-up visit after Tanya had disclosed to her social worker that, whilst drunk, she had been sexually assaulted by two males:

*Telephone call to Jane (Tanya's mum) to reschedule my visit this afternoon. I asked Jane to apologise to Tanya for me and share that I was still in the process of writing up her assessment. Which I wanted to share with Tanya during today's visit. Jane said she would pass on my apologies, and we agreed that I would visit following the strategy meeting when I would have a full update.*

(Case File 10: social worker case note)

The case note from Tanya's case file could be interpreted in several ways. It could be taken on face value and possibly reflect a busy social worker trying to balance work priorities. However, it may also be an illustration of a social worker feeling pressurised or anxious and finding it challenging to engage in relationship-building with Tanya against a backdrop of sexual assault. As Ruch, (2010) highlights, it may feel easier and safer for practitioners to focus on office-based activities than investing emotional toil and energy into developing a trusting relationship. Whatever the reason for the rescheduling of Tanya's appointment, the way it was rescheduled, through Tanya's mother, did not appear to be child-focused.



Owing to a combination of factors, it has been challenging to arrive at a definitive conclusion about the influence of SBP and RBP on social work decision-making in Hampstead Council via case file data. These factors include the lack of SBP- and RBP-orientated documents and the distributed and inconsistent approaches to tackling child exploitation cases. A compounding factor is the retrospective reviewing of case file data, asking questions the data was not designed to answer. Social work case files are designed to capture what is happening for the young person and to justify social workers' actions and decision-making (Stanley, 2019; Social Work England, 2023). Therefore, only limited information on Hampstead Council's underpinning theories could be gleaned from the case file analysis. Hampstead Council's focus group did provide a further opportunity to develop the findings; however, the research participants appeared to reinforce the findings from the case file analysis. Although there was some mention of positive and supportive relationships with managers and team members (see Section 5.1), social workers in the focus group suggested that SBP and RBP in Hampstead Council were largely confined to individual relationships and interactions between the social worker and the young person.

## **4.2 The transfer of processes and practices from traditional social work to child exploitation**

Social work files in England are maintained digitally, and although Trent and Hampstead Council used different computer-based systems, the case files were organised using similar electronic tabs. The electronic tabs related to the young person's personal data, referrals, case notes, completed social work assessments, meeting minutes, interagency communication, and legal documents. In the main, the tab containing the social workers' case notes provided the most relevant data. Social work case notes in Trent and Hampstead Council captured social workers' day-to-day activities working with young people and their families. This included telephone calls, home visits, informal supervision and case discussions between the social worker and their manager. This tab also included correspondence with safeguarding partners (see Appendix 7 for a case note example).

The need for social workers to 'maintain clear, accurate, legible, and up to date records' is stipulated by the professional regulatory body, Social Work England (Social Work England, 2023). As such, social work files in both areas provided comprehensive sources of rich narrative-based data. When first interacting with the case file data, the volume of desk-based activity and the almost daily upkeep of the case files became apparent. The social workers' case notes indicated that most of the social workers' time was spent on administrative tasks such as meetings with managers and safeguarding partners, telephone calls, and other desk-based activities. Upon analysing all fifteen case files across both research sites, it became apparent that approximately one in every seven case recordings related to social workers spending time with young people or families. The remaining case recordings were related to administrative tasks, procedural activities, or professional interactions.

I undertook a deep and focused analysis of four social work case files to better understand social work activity levels. Table 5 provides the numerical snapshot of the social work activity. The data suggests that most social work activity is procedural and desk-based. These findings echo research elsewhere in relation to traditional social work practice (Parton, 2008; Munro, 2011b; Cottam, 2018; Murphy, 2021). The data captured in Table 5 reflects findings from four social work case files, two from each research site. The case files were selected to ensure a balanced representation of both Trent and Hampstead Councils in terms of gender and exploitation type. After identifying the four case files, I systematically analysed three months of data from each file. The data examined in each case file related to various points of social work involvement, including the beginning, midpoint, and three months prior to case closure. Adopting this approach provided insight and contrast across social work involvement. The opening and halfway analyses relate to Trent Council's case files due to the case file analysis starting there. Conversely, data relating to the halfway point and the three months leading up to case closure relates to Hampstead Council.

**Table 5. A snapshot of social work activity**

Research site	Young person's case file	3-month period of involvement	No. of case note entries	No. of social work visits	No. of strategy meetings	No. of decision-making processes attended	No. of assessments, including risk assessments
Trent	Ella	Start	65	13	2	4	3
Trent	Dylan	Mid	106	17	6	7	5
Hampstead	Damian	Mid	85	8	4	7	3
Hampstead	Tanya	End	59	9	2	5	2

Each case note entry in Table 5 indicates an activity, interaction, case discussion, or meeting involving the social worker. The number of social work visits includes visits to the young person and/or their family. Table 5 also highlights the number of decision-making processes social workers attended. These include exploitation panels and supervision.

As Table 5 illustrates, Dylan's case file shows that, within a three-month period, social workers undertook 106 different recorded activities, of which only seventeen were visits to Dylan and/or his family. This includes the period when Dylan was assaulted by the adults who were exploiting him. This number of visits is at the upper end of visits to young people and their families by social workers during the three months of data collection. In contrast, Tanya's case file records fifty-nine activities over the course of three months. This includes nine social work visits, eight fewer than Dylan, although it is important to acknowledge that this period included the stepping down of Tanya's case to early help. The stepping down of a case indicates that social work concerns are reducing. The data in Table 5 also suggests that young people in Trent Council were visited more frequently than those living in Hampstead. Owing to the small sample size, the data contained in the table is not definitive, but this data set possibly reflects Trent Council's protected caseload policy. Social workers on Trent Council's child exploitation team have a maximum caseload of six young

people per worker. In contrast, Hampstead Council social workers worked with between twelve and sixteen young people. Trent Council's exploitation service was designed to increase contact between the social worker and young people.

The data above provides only a snapshot of four social work case files from two different local authorities; nonetheless, it perhaps indicates that social workers working in child exploitation spend significantly more time in the office, completing administrative tasks than with young people and families. Research consistently estimates that social workers in traditional settings spend between 20% and 30% of their time with children and families, with the remainder spent on administrative tasks (White *et al.*, 2010; Munro, 2011b; Murphy, 2021). The findings from the case file analysis suggest that this pattern is also observable in child exploitation social work. The two most recent reviews of child safeguarding in England concluded that excessive time spent on administrative tasks misuses social work time and resources and takes the focus away from children and families (Munro, 2011b; MacAlister, 2021).

As highlighted by the comments below, the participants from the two focus groups discussed the disproportionate time spent on administrative tasks. The statements included a focus on the lack of time available to spend with the children and families:

*It's all the paperwork and management type of stuff that takes up most of your time. You are constantly having to record and evidence your work. I don't think there's much value in these types of things. I think spending time with children and families is more important.*

(Dora, social worker, exploitation team)

*I suppose when you are working with a young person, that's what you want to do. You want to be seeing them, and not sat at your computer or going to all these meetings. It's frustrating. And the mad thing is, the more risks there are, the more meetings, managers, and paperwork it involves and the less you see the child.*

(Maria, social worker, looked-after children's team)

Both comments highlight how social workers can feel frustrated by the impact of bureaucratic processes on their ability to spend time with young people. The first quotation indicates the volume of administrative tasks social workers are caught up in to justify their decision-making. The second quotation reinforces this point, and also highlights the relationship between the level of risk a young person is exposed to and the amount of bureaucracy social workers must navigate. The relationship between levels of risk and increased bureaucracy has been identified in traditional social work practice, where increases in processes and standardisation are sought to help manage risk and levels of uncertainty (Lees *et al.*, 2013; Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016). In her review of the English child protection system, Munro identified such increases in bureaucracy as defensive practice, stating that:

... where a concern with protecting oneself or one's agency has competed, and sometimes overridden, a concern with protecting children. In this respect, the focus on process and recording needed by the audit system has offered a tempting solution.

(Munro, 2011b, p. 20)

Munro's (2011b) insights possibly provide a plausible explanation for the sentiments the two research participants expressed above. Table 5 highlights the relationship between risk and procedural responses by social workers. For example, Dylan's case file shows higher recorded social work activity than Tanya's case file, including four additional strategy meetings and two more risk assessments. The data collected for Dylan spans a three-month period marked by significant uncertainty after his exploiters seriously assaulted him. Conversely, Tanya's case was winding down and closing, with fewer perceived risks. These findings suggest that traditional social work practices, including high levels of bureaucracy, have been carried over to child exploitation social work. Moreover, there also appears to be a relationship between increased bureaucratic and procedural responses and escalating risk, which may be associated with defensive practices (Munro, 2011b).

## 4.3 Responding to risk with increased oversight and additional procedures

The findings discussed below indicate that social workers working in child exploitation may be subject to additional processes and increased scrutiny compared with colleagues in traditional social work settings. This includes completing additional child exploitation risk assessment tools and safety plans. The findings suggest that these additional processes provide managers, safeguarding partners, and senior leaders with additional touchpoints to oversee, scrutinise, and standardise social work activity.

To gain a better understanding of the procedures, assessments, and processes that social workers dealing with child exploitation must navigate, compared to non-child-exploitation cases, I analysed data from all the case files in both research sites. I collected and analysed data from individual young people's case files who had experienced traditional social work interventions and social work practice related to child exploitation. Nine of the fifteen young people's case files indicated that the young person had previous experiences with social workers (see Table 3 for an overview of the young people's key data). The data from the case file analysis suggested that social workers working in child exploitation were required to complete four additional oversight and decision-making processes when compared with traditional social work practice.

**Table 6. A comparative overview of the procedures and processes**

Oversight and decision-making forums and processes	Traditional social work	Exploitation social work
Management supervision	✓	✓
The completion of a holistic assessment	✓	✓
Multi-agency and family meetings (including child in need, family meetings, and core groups)	✓	✓
The procedural and regular use of risk assessments	X	✓

The procedural and regular use of oversight and scrutiny panels	X	✓
Use of trigger and safety plans (risk management plans)	X	✓
The regular and systematic use of case formulation /consultation with psychologist	X	✓
Strategy meetings and other child protection meetings	✓	✓
Total number of decision-making processes social workers are required to follow	4	8

Table 6 compares the number of assessments, meetings, and processes social workers are subject to in both traditional and child exploitation settings. The data presents the decision-making processes observed in both local authorities' case files. For example, child exploitation social workers in Trent Council were required to complete a strengths-based tool. However, as an equivalent was not used in Hampstead Council, this was not included in the data. Table 6 illustrates that, when social workers in both research sites are working with young people at risk of child exploitation, they were required to attend two additional decision-making forums and complete two additional assessments/plans.

While it is beyond the scope of this research to assess the value of the additional processes, the findings from this research indicate that each process adds extra layers of scrutiny to the social worker's role and activity. For instance, Trent and Hampstead required their social workers to complete child exploitation risk assessments, which were reviewed regularly. In both areas, social workers were expected to update the assessment after a significant event and send it to their manager for authorisation. Trent social workers also updated their risk assessment every three months, while Hampstead social workers updated their risk assessment monthly as part of their supervision with managers. Below is an extract from Hope's case file. This extract was recorded following a case discussion with Senior Practitioner Jenny Wright. The social worker's case recording demonstrates the significance of risk assessments in

practice and how they provide a mechanism to identify and monitor social work activity:

*I shared with Jenny that all actions from Hope's plan and risk assessment have been completed. This includes signposting Hope to the Youth Zone. I have also completed sessions relating to healthy relationships and consent. Due to Hope's reduction in missing episodes and no recent evidence of alcohol or cannabis use, her risk assessment has also gone from medium to low risk. Jenny agreed that now Hope is low risk the case can be closed. Youth Zone to monitor.*

(Case file 3: social worker case note)

Hope's case file extract illustrates how risk assessments may encourage social workers and managers to focus on the completion of individual tasks as a measure of progress. Furthermore, the scoring of risk (high, medium, or low) appears to be a shorthand mechanism for social workers to communicate levels of need and risk from their perspective to managers and safeguarding partners. This research suggests that risk assessments are an integral part of social work decision-making processes. This is despite such assessments being criticised for their lack of inclusivity, limitations in identifying exploitation risks, and the absence of a strong evidence base (Franklin *et al.*, 2018; Hallett *et al.*, 2019).

The completion of risk assessments in Trent and Hampstead did not directly include the input of either young people or safeguarding partners, and young people and families did not receive completed copies. This suggests that these assessments are largely internal and procedural in nature, serving managerial needs as opposed to being meaningful to the young person or their families. It has been argued that process-driven practices, such as the use of risk assessments, can hinder a social worker's ability to exercise professional judgment and can get in the way of acting in the best interests of children and families (Munro, 2010; 2011b; MacAlister, 2022). Research participants in both Trent and Hampstead identified high levels of administrative and procedural tasks as a barrier to carrying out their roles. As highlighted by the conversation extract from Trent's focus group below, the social workers discussed their experiences of increased processes and procedures and what they thought the driving factors might be:



**Emma** (social worker, child exploitation team): *Even working on a new exploitation team that's been designed to reduce paperwork, I still feel that because you're working with teenagers and exploitation concerns are doubly heightened. So, you do get hit with even more paperwork, risk assessments and meetings to evidence what we do. It can get in the way of you doing your job.*

**Maria** (social worker, looked-after children's team): *Yeah, whenever there's risk, we seem to have a strat [strategy meeting]. I have never been to so many meetings. I feel like my time could be better spent. I get it, managers need to see what you're doing, and partners need reassuring and updating. However, very little time is spent seeing the child.*

Emma's and Maria's comments allude to the additional processes possibly being in place to allay professional anxieties. This includes providing further opportunities for management oversight and scrutiny. Emma highlights the concerns associated with working with 'teenagers' and 'exploitation', suggesting that, independently, these are two high-risk areas of social work practice that can raise concerns. Both comments align with Hingley-Jones and Ruch, who state that, in an atmosphere that is perceived as risky, 'bureaucratic systems predominate, managerialism becomes the norm and social work practice becomes depersonalised and defensive in nature' (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016, p. 5). Emma's and Maria's comments appeared to support one another; however, Jenny, a senior practitioner on the same team, provided a different perspective, suggesting that the overreliance on processes was a much broader problem within the social work profession:

*I completely agree with what's been said, we are very process driven. That's because in exploitation we are often responding to crisis. I don't think social work knows how to respond to crisis without relying on processes and paperwork to put plans in place.*

(Jenny, senior practitioner, child exploitation team)

Jenny's comments recognise the adverse influence that conventional social work methods have had on child exploitation. While the findings from this research cannot definitively state the reasons for increased bureaucracy and management oversight in child exploitation, it is apparent that reliance on

bureaucratic systems and managerialism has long been associated with defensive practices to manage risk and uncertainty (Parton, 1998; Littlechild, 2008; Munro, 2011b; Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016; MacAlister, 2022). One reason often cited for defensive social work responses is the culture of blame that has been embedded in the social work profession, which the media and government can exacerbate following a crisis (Munro, 2011b; Warner, 2013, 2014, 2015). Another possible reason for defensive practices is practitioners developing mechanisms to manage the emotional impact and anxiety associated with their role (Menzies Lyth, 1988; Lees *et al.*, 2013), a topic discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

## **4.4 Focusing on the completion of tasks as a measure of progress**

The findings below examine the relationship between increasing risk and an intensification in managerialist practices. Managerialism describes the prescriptive procedures and practices used to improve performance, increase standardisation and accountability, and reduce risk (Thiele, 2006; Harris and Unwin, 2009). This often includes increasing management oversight and promoting the use of measures and audits that prioritise ‘pre-ordained’ outputs as opposed to outcomes (Burton and van den Broek, 2009).

When examining data from the case files, the relationship between increased risk and increased managerialist practices was apparent in both councils and across all case files. The data from the case files illustrated the reactive nature of child exploitation in social work. For example, data from Keira’s case file shows that, following an incident where Keira was hospitalised for ingesting a sharp object, the amount of paperwork and actions her social worker was required to complete significantly increased. This was because professionals were anxious that Keira had self-harmed. However, Keira refuted these claims and had no prior history of such behaviour.

The two lists below detail the number of meetings and administrative activities recorded in Keira’s case file that the social worker was required to attend/complete in response to the hospital admission. The case file data

highlights that all activities were completed within eleven working days, from the first multi-agency meeting until the reconvened strategy meeting.

### **Decision-making forums and meetings attended by the social worker**

1. Multi-agency meeting at the hospital.
2. Strategy meeting.
3. Case planning meeting with social work manager, legal services, and Head of Service.
4. Four recorded management case discussions.
5. Discharge meeting following Keira's operation.
6. Reconvened strategy meeting.

### **Referrals, assessments, and plans completed by the social worker**

1. Update child exploitation risk assessment.
2. Update safety plan with parents.
3. Create a safety and support plan with Keira.
4. Referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
5. Referral to the young people's substance use team.

This data suggests that, in response to Keira's admission to the hospital, her social worker was required to complete three additional assessments and plans (a child exploitation risk assessment, a safety plan with Keira's parents, and a safety and support plan with Keira). The social worker also discussed the case with her managers and/or senior leaders on seven occasions. Combined, the social worker activity and meetings provided the social worker's manager with ten different touchpoints to oversee and monitor the social worker's work and progress. The findings from the case file analysis suggest that decisions made in professional meetings or via risk assessments, which are kept from young people and their families, limited their participation. Moreover, the bureaucratic and disparate approach of social work activity fragmented the young people's needs into distinct actions.

Analysis of the case files indicated that breaking young people's needs into separate tasks appeared to result in social workers, managers, and partner agencies focusing solely on completing those individual tasks. This

concentrated efforts on outputs and isolated activities at the expense of the young person's holistic and long-term needs. For example, the extract below from Keira's reconvened strategy meeting seems to suggest that, during the meeting, the social work manager measured progress by monitoring the completion of tasks as opposed to the effectiveness. The extract has been taken from the reconvened strategy meeting minutes, which was held following Keira's discharge from the hospital. The extract captures a conversation between Keira's social worker, Emma, and her senior practitioner, Jenny:

*Jenny opened the meeting by asking Emma to provide an update about progress made since the last strategy meeting two weeks ago...*

*... Emma shared that Keira had been discharged and is doing well at home.*

*Emma informed the meeting that she had completed all tasks from the last meeting.*

*Emma is still waiting to hear from CAMHS and Fresh Start [young people's substance use service] to see whether Kiera has been allocated a worker.*

*The safety plans have been completed with Keira and her parents. All sharp household items are now in a lockable cabinet. Only Keira's parents have access to the keys.*

*Keira's risk assessment has been completed. She remains at high risk.*

*Emma stated that Keira continues to engage well with her and her worker at the Youth Zone.*

(Keira's case file: reconvened strategy meeting minutes)

This extract seems to suggest a focus on completing individual tasks as indicators of progress. This is indicated by Emma listing the activities and stating whether they were completed. Strategy meeting minutes may not provide a verbatim record of what was discussed; nonetheless, the extract above does not indicate that there was any discussion relating to the effectiveness of the individual actions. O'Brien *et al.* (2009) question the usefulness of approaches that focus on outputs, suggesting they lack a focus on outcomes as experienced by workers or young people.

The adoption of task-orientated work was observed most frequently in the case files when young people faced increasing risks. As highlighted below, the research participants in both focus groups also appeared to recognise the relationship between increased risk and task-orientated practice. The quotation below, from Trent's focus group, highlights what O'Sullivan (2010) calls an 'unthinking' and 'reactive' approach to decision-making, one which he argues stems from professional anxiety:

*Something happens to one of your young people and you have to attend all of these meetings. Managers are like 'Tick this off your list, report back at the next meeting'. In the meetings they are like, 'Have you seen the child today?' Tick! 'Have you completed safer relationships work?' Tick! 'Is the risk assessment up to date?' Tick! I sometimes feel my work is a never-ending to-do list.*

(Samantha, social worker, family support team)

Samantha's comments highlight both the task-orientated approach to intervention and the relationship between escalating risk and increased levels of administration. In the quotation below, taken from the Hampstead Council focus group, Anne focuses on a possible explanation for the relationship between growing risk and additional paperwork. Anne suggests that managers may find it easier to 'monitor paperwork' as opposed to managing the risks young people are experiencing:

*I think managers feel safer with high levels of risk when they can give you a task to complete. For example, if they [the young person] keep going missing, their response is put a safety plan in place. It's easier to monitor paperwork than a young person.*

(Anne, social worker, the duty team)

Both Samantha and Anne touch on two important research findings: first, as risk increases, social work roles become progressively tick-box, managerialist and task-orientated, and second, managers start to focus on the completion of tangible tasks as indicators of progress. A potential consequence of this approach is that social work practice and interactions with young people start to reflect the bureaucratic and process-driven approach demonstrated by managers. The data from the case files also suggested that as risk escalates, exchanges between social workers and young people increasingly focused on

completing professional processes and recommendations instead of centring on the young person's needs and interests. Managerialist responses, as described above, have been criticised for failing to recognise the individual, emotional, and human aspects of social work (Trevithick, 2014).

As highlighted by the conversation extract below, the tension between bureaucratic processes and young people's participation was also recognised by the participants in Hampstead Council's focus group:

**Charlie** (social worker, adolescent team): *I just feel like there's so many meetings and so much paperwork on this team. That's where all my time goes, writing up the minutes, and completing the actions.*

**Maria** (social worker, looked-after children's team): *Yeah, I agree. I think we have a lot of professional meetings. It would be better if families attended. I think there is a lot of focus on meetings and perhaps a bit less on seeing and interacting with children and families sometimes.*

**Hannah** (social worker, the court team): *For the young people I work with, I find all these meetings and actions can create a bit of a barrier. There's a bit of mistrust and anger on their part. They feel that they're being told what to do rather than being involved in the planning and decision-making. They are being told what to do by us and by the people exploiting them.*

The above conversation reinforces the finding that the additional layers of decision-making and oversight can get in the way of social work practice. These processes often result in decisions being made in professional forums and not with young people. As Hannah said, this can have a negative effect on young people and may contribute to feelings of mistrust.

## **4.5 Social work decision-making in the context of multi-agency competing demands**

The findings discussed below suggest that the transfer of established systems and processes from traditional social work settings to the emerging field of child exploitation social work also includes familiar patterns of interagency

relationships. These patterns include hierarchical professional statuses, varying capacities for risk across the different agencies, and competing organisational and professional demands (Frost *et al.*, 2005; Devaney, 2008; Jahans-Baynton and Grealish, 2022).

Before discussing the data that supports this section, it is important to establish the context in which the findings developed. The initial findings to emerge from the case file analysis regarding interagency interactions related to safeguarding partners supporting social work decision-making and interventions. This finding was based on data that demonstrated agreement and cooperation between safeguarding partners. Findings from the case file analysis consistently demonstrated that social workers worked with multiple professionals, including safeguarding partners from education, health, substance use services, youth offending, police, and third-sector organisations. The frequency and level of interaction between social workers and safeguarding partners appeared to suggest a high degree of collaboration and alignment between the different agencies. However, although the data relating to interagency cooperation was common, it was largely implicit, non-descriptive, and limited. Consequently, this finding did not develop beyond the initial data collection and analysis phase.

In contrast, the findings relating to competing agency priorities and disagreements amongst safeguarding partners was explicit, descriptive, and significant. There are many possible factors contributing to the disparity in data; these may include the expected and routine occurrence of interagency cooperation as specified in legislation and statutory guidance (CA, 2004; HM Government, 2018a). Additionally, the purpose of social work case files is to detail what's happening for a child at any given time and to justify social workers' actions and decision-making, allowing for retrospective scrutiny (Stanley, 2019; Social Work England, 2023). Therefore, it may not be relevant to young people's case files to explicitly record professionals carrying out their routine duties. Consequently, the findings discussed below focus on multi-agency tensions and disagreements, which perhaps provides only a partial picture regarding multi-agency influences on social work decision-making in child exploitation cases.

Notwithstanding the limitations identified above, the findings from the case file analysis did indicate tensions between safeguarding partners' competing priorities. As the case file extract below illustrates, this included the social worker's professional judgment being compromised due to the need to cooperate with a partner agency's time frames and processes. The extract below is from Sara's case file. Sara's social worker wrote the case note following a telephone call with the police:

*Telephone call from Sergeant Diane Hurst. Diane called to inform me about allegations Sara made to the police last night about being raped. I requested that she email me the information so I can review it with my manager. Diane agreed to email the information but stated that the purpose of the call was to arrange a joint visit to see Sara, get her first account and arrange a SARC [Sexual Assault Referral Centre] appointment. I explained that I want to discuss the information with my manager and check in with Sara. Diane insisted that she needs to visit Sara this morning to secure evidence. I shared that it's important for me to talk to Sara and find out what she wants before agreeing. Diane stated that due to Sara reporting that she had been raped to the police, it was their duty to follow this up. Diane stated that the police visit will go ahead this morning whether social care is involved or not. Diane stated that Sara's welfare is also her priority. I agreed that I would attend the visit but would appreciate time to talk to my manager. I also stated that I wanted to arrange the visit with Sara and her foster carer. Diane agreed and suggested we meet at the foster carer's house within the hour.*

(Case file 7: social worker case note)

This case note is the social worker's record of her conversation with the police sergeant; nevertheless, it does suggest that the social worker was pressured into agreeing to the priorities of the police. The case note also illustrates how the 'mobilization' of different agency models can clash with one another (Frost *et al.*, 2005); for example, the police's role, with a focus on preserving evidence, appeared to contrast with the social worker's wish to be led by the young person. Research into multi-agency working and child protection policing states that safeguarding colleagues should support the role of the police by ensuring the welfare of victims is promoted alongside the requirements of the investigation (Beckett *et al.*, 2015). However, the sergeant's commitment to the inclusion of the social worker appears to have been conditional on the social worker adhering to the time frame of the police.



The above case file extract also appears to show the dynamic nature of the social work role when working in child exploitation. Sara's social worker was required not only to respond to Sara's disclosure, but also to consider another agency's requests. The necessity for social workers to respond simultaneously to young people's changing needs and partner agency requests was evident across all case files. As highlighted by the quotation below, the research participants in both focus groups alluded to the unpredictable nature of their work and the influence of other professionals. The following comment was in response to the question, 'What are the main influences on social workers when working with young people in the context of child exploitation?':

*Well, you can't ever plan your day. You will come to work thinking you've got A, B, and C to do, and you'll get a call from a young person's school, or the police and your whole day goes out of the window.*

(Louise, social worker, duty team)

Louise's comments reinforce the finding from the case file analysis that a social worker's day-to-day activities are susceptible to the needs of the young person and the requests of partner agencies. Instances of this were observed throughout the case files in both local authorities. For example, Ella's case notes highlighted a telephone call between Ella's CAMHS worker and her social worker. During the call, the CAMHS worker notified Ella's social worker that they wanted to close Ella's case due to non-attendance, as she had attended only three out of five sessions. Therefore, failure to attend her next appointment would result in the withdrawal of CAMHS support. Consequently, the CAMHS worker contacted the social worker to request that the social worker provide transport to and from Ella's appointment to ensure that the case remained open. The data in Ella's case file indicates that the social worker was concerned about the effect this may have on her and Ella's relationship. As highlighted by the case note extract below, the social worker shared with her manager that she was hesitant to agree to CAMHS' request, as she felt it was important to prioritise the social worker-child relationship, which had provided consistency in Ella's life:

*... Jenny and I spoke about my concerns about CAMHS' request and that I am the only worker Ella has consistently engaged with. I shared my worries about the impact of taking Ella to her CAMHS appointments may have on our relationship. Due to her recent move Ella is feeling unsettled and has said she*

*doesn't like attending CAMHS as she finds it boring. Both Jenny and I agreed that Ella has experienced a lot of stress and change with the move to her sister's flat. Jenny requested that I support Ella to her appointments and review the situation in two weeks.*

(Case file 9: social worker case note)

Though the findings from the case file analysis provide only a partial perspective of how decisions were reached, the case recordings suggest that social workers and their managers can feel pressured to agree with safeguarding partners' decisions. As highlighted by Ella's example above, this includes placing the sanctity of the relationship between the social worker and the young person secondary to the needs of other services. The flexibility required by social workers to meet other agency's requests, even at the potential detriment to their relationships with young people, is possibly an indicator of the hierarchy of power that comes with different professional statuses (Frost *et al.*, 2005; Devaney, 2008). Examples include the perceived subordination of social work to health (Jahans-Baynton and Grealish, 2022), as highlighted by Ella's example.

As highlighted by the research participants' quotations below, although the social workers attending the focus groups focused primarily on tensions between safeguarding partners, as opposed to the more collaborative elements, there was some discussion of agencies effectively managing conflicting priorities:

*We have a great relationship with the police. We have to, we're based in a bloody police station. No, but seriously, we do. Although, I don't know whether it's a cultural thing, it can be impossible to convince them that some young people are victims of CCE. It can depend on the young person's history or story for want of a better expression. If they [the police] detect more of a criminal background, especially if they come from certain families or areas, they are seen as criminals. We then have to agree to disagree.*

(Jenny, senior practitioner, exploitation team)

The research participant's comments appear to hint at areas of practice where safeguarding partners, particularly the police, hold fast to their individual

professional identity and that interagency cooperation sometimes means acknowledging and accepting these differences.

Overall, the findings from the case file analysis and the focus groups focused on the challenging aspects of interagency working. For example, although not frequently observed across the case file data, the extract below indicates the extent to which interagency disagreement and tensions can reach. The text below has been taken from the minutes of a multi-agency strategy meeting relating to Toni. At the time of the meeting, Toni was living with his grandfather on a special guardianship order (SGO)<sup>11</sup>. The strategy meeting was called because Toni went missing from home for five consecutive days. Prior to the strategy meeting, the data in Toni's case file indicated that he had thirty-four missing episodes recorded in the previous three months. During the latest episode, which led to the strategy meeting, Toni was found by the police at his mum's address. Toni was not allowed at his mum's property due to recently being charged with intent to supply crack cocaine and heroin, which he was thought to be selling on behalf of his mum's boyfriend:

*DC Tracy Cunningham (Police) stated that she does not feel that Toni's placement with his grandfather can continue as the grandfather cannot stop Toni's mum from visiting the property or Toni visiting his mum's house. Tracy stated that the frequent contact between Toni and his mother is a safeguarding concern. Michelle [Toni's social worker] informed the meeting that although this is not ideal, she is also worried that if Toni moves to a different placement, he will continue to go missing and the placement will quickly break down. Michelle feels that securing consistency in Toni's living arrangements is in his best interests. Tracy stated that she does not agree with this decision and wanted it recorded that the police do not agree with social care's decision to continue with this placement. Tracy stated that by social care continuing to support Toni's living arrangements they are placing him at risk.*

(Case file 13: strategy meeting minutes)

The strategy meeting minutes also noted that two other professionals attending the meeting (Toni's youth offending worker and substance worker) also wanted their concerns recorded and did not consider Toni's placement safe. The

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<sup>11</sup> An SGO is a private law order made under the Children's Act 1989. Local authorities can provide carers with support in applying for an SGO, in cases where the child was previously looked after by the local authority. An SGO shares parental responsibility between the guardian and the birth parent(s).

agreed actions from the strategy meeting minutes tasked the social worker with ascertaining legal advice and exploring possible alternative placements for Toni. Less than one month later, Toni was placed with his uncle. Statutory guidance is clear that 'safeguarding is everyone's responsibility' (HM Government, 2018a, p. 11) and that social workers 'should receive insight and challenge to their emerging hypothesis' (HM Government, 2018a, p. 31). However, the extract from Toni's strategy meeting suggests that, in practice, interagency 'challenge' can become strained. The minutes of the strategy meeting appear to indicate that three of the six professionals in attendance provided the social worker and their manager with a practice dilemma. Their request suggested that either Toni is moved out of his grandfather's home, or social care would be held responsible for any harm Toni may experience while living there.

Challenges to social work decision-making were not limited to professional meetings, as illustrated by an excerpt from Keira's case file below. The example highlights a youth club manager's strong disagreement with a social work manager. The disagreement was documented formally in an email, which the youth club manager requested be uploaded to Keira's file:

*... This email should be officially recorded on Keira's file, making it clear that the Youth Zone disagrees with the decision to withhold child exploitation support for Keira... In the past month, the Youth Zone have referred Keira to children's services on four separate occasions, yet the duty team has repeatedly refused to allocate a social worker. This is concerning, as we believe Keira is at high risk of CSE, and the continued absence of specialist social work support is contributing to the risks she faces.*

(Case file 1: email correspondence)

Shortly after the email was sent, Keira was allocated a social worker. However, the information from Keira's case file is unclear whether the allocation of a social worker was in response to the above correspondence or the fact that social care continued to receive referrals relating to Keira from the police, the regional ambulance service, the city's accident and emergency (A&E) department, and CAMHS.

The examples described above all relate to increasing levels of risk. This potentially indicates that different agencies and/or individual professionals tolerate different levels of risk (Jahans-Baynton and Grealish, 2022). In addition, in relation to the context of child exploitation, inter-agency interactions and cooperation may also feel less familiar or safe, as unlike traditional child protection processes, safeguarding in the context of child exploitation lacks a national strategy (CSPRP, 2020). Furthermore, due to the recent emergence of child exploitation as a safeguarding concern, particularly CCE, there is a lack of a reliable evidence base or knowledge of what works (Huegler, 2001). Consequently, social workers and safeguarding partners possibly feel more exposed and vulnerable to criticism, especially as the risks posed to the young person increase.

The data from the case files did not facilitate the development of a nuanced understanding of interagency working. Moreover, this data consistently leaned towards the margins of interagency interactions, as described above. In contrast, in addition to focusing on the negative elements of multi-agency interactions, the discussions in the focus groups provided rich descriptive narratives from the social workers' perspective. The following quotations highlight that, during times of interagency tensions, social workers can feel that they are ultimately responsible for safeguarding young people:

*We are the dumping ground for everyone else's decisions. They [safeguarding partners] can simply say 'No, I'm not doing that, I don't agree.' and we are left to pick up the pieces.*

(Pamela, social worker, exploitation panel)

*Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, except when it's not, it's ours [social workers]. The buck well and truly stops with us.*

(Jazz, social worker, adolescent team)

The comments above touch on the complexity of interagency cooperation. Both Pamela and Jazz note that, although they work in multi-agency contexts, it can sometimes feel that safeguarding is solely the social worker's responsibility. These comments possibly reflect a subtle tension in statutory guidance, stressing that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, whilst simultaneously emphasising that local authorities and their social workers are the lead agents

in matters relating to child safeguarding. Consequently, it remains the social workers' principal responsibility to promote the safety and welfare of children and young people (HM Government, 2018a).

## **4.6 Summary**

The findings discussed in this chapter demonstrate the multi-layered external factors that influence social work decision-making. This includes espoused local theories and approaches, restrictive and sometimes prescriptive policies and procedures, and pressures from safeguarding partners. The findings suggest that the high levels of bureaucracy transferred from traditional social work practice to the emerging area of child exploitation seem to be the most pervasive in influencing social work decision-making and interventions. This appears to be particularly true when risk escalates. The findings suggest that the relationship between risk and an intensification of managerialist practices often results in young people's needs being responded to in a transactional manner. This approach appears to distance young people from decision-making processes and dissect their needs into individual social work tasks.

This chapter emphasises that social workers hold a unique position as the lead statutory safeguarding professional, making them responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of young people. This responsibility often requires them to work within partner agencies' time frames, resource limitations, and working practices to ensure that the young person's welfare remains paramount. In addition, because safeguarding is recognised as everyone's responsibility, social workers (and their managers)' decisions are frequently scrutinised by safeguarding partners. Consequently, social workers are in the unusual position of having to secure consensus from safeguarding partners to enable effective working.

## **Chapter 5 Social workers' influences: Social work autonomy and discretion**

This is the second of four findings' chapters. This chapter examines the findings from the case file analysis and the two focus groups, developing an understanding of how social workers working in child exploitation use discretion and autonomy to navigate the bureaucratic and emotional dimensions of their role and manage work-related resources.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section assesses how social workers cope with the emotional dimension of their role and how they use discretion and autonomy to navigate high levels of risk. The second section examines social worker discretion, including how social workers employ discretion to conserve finite personal and professional resources.

### **5.1 Managing the emotional dimensions of child exploitation social work**

This section explores the emotional impact of child exploitation on social workers. Child exploitation is a complex issue, entailing a high level of risk and volatility, and frequent exposure to the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of young people. As the research participant's comments below highlight, social workers working in this area must strike a sensitive balance. On one hand, they need to be open and empathetic to connect with young people and their families enough to act as the 'catalyst' for change (Trevithick, 2014). On the other hand, they must protect themselves from the emotional strain of other people's traumatic experiences so they can perform their roles effectively:

*It does stress me out; it impacts me emotionally. It's difficult when young people are suffering this type of abuse, and they perhaps don't have their families to rely on for support. It's difficult to switch off in that sense. I try to make sure it doesn't impact me professionally.*

(Jenny, senior practitioner, the exploitation team)

Jenny's comments emphasise the need for openness and vulnerability in supporting young people, while also requiring a conscious effort to ensure that

the emotional dimensions of child exploitation work do not affect the support provided. As illustrated by the comments above, the focus groups provided rich and narrative-based insights into social workers' experiences. This contrasted with the case file analysis, which provided formal and technical data. Although the emotional dimensions of social workers were largely missing from the case file analysis, the data contained in the case files did illustrate the intensity of child exploitation social work. For example, as highlighted in Table 7, many young people experienced multiple and overlapping forms of instability, abuse, and exploitation.

Furthermore, the data in Table 7 also shows the complexity of the social work role in coordinating the large numbers of professionals involved in young people's lives. As Table 7 illustrates, young people worked with an average of twelve professionals. The data relating to the number of professionals working with the young person indicates the overall number of professionals working with the young person during the most recently recorded episode of social work involvement.



**Table 7. An overview of young people’s experiences**

#	Young person	Age (years)	Identified learning needs / SEN / neurodiversity	Evidence of exploitation	Evidence of sexual harm/assault	Evidence of physical harm/assault	Education instability	Home or placement instability	Alcohol and substance misuse	No of professionals
1	Keira	16		✓	✓				✓	22
2	Jack	14	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	16
3	Hope	13					✓		✓	13
4	Ryan	14		✓	✓				✓	16
5	Jamie	15	✓	✓				✓	✓	13
6	Dylan	13	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	13
7	Sara	15	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	20
8	Noah	14	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	11
9	Ella	13		✓	✓			✓	✓	10
10	Tanya	14		✓	✓			✓	✓	15
11	Zac	14		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9
12	Damian	13		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	10
13	Toni	15		✓			✓	✓	✓	8
14	Kris	14		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	9
15	Lucas	14	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	9

Table 7 demonstrates how child exploitation social workers must simultaneously manage dynamic risks across multiple cases. For example, in Trent Council, one social worker was allocated five young people, including Noah, Dylan, and Jack. Reviewing their individual case files indicated that all three boys were known victims of criminal exploitation. All three used substances (mostly cannabis), and Dylan and Jack were also subject to a violent assault perpetrated by their exploiters. Both boys required medical attention for their injuries.

As illustrated by the quotation below, social workers attending the focus groups were clear that working in child exploitation can feel emotionally challenging and stressful:

*I'd say this role is the hardest role I've ever done. I have been on area and duty teams. I've stayed in work until 7pm just to keep from drowning, but the emotional side of this is something much harder. I'd like to think I'm quite professional, but I recently cried at a strategy meeting. I literally broke down. It's something I've never done before. I'm welling up now just thinking about him. He'd been raped, he was being exploited by an OCG [organised crime group] and the response was to move him on to another placement. Imagine that you've been raped and now you're being moved. We don't know what we are doing yet [in child exploitation]. Normal social workers have all these systems and processes, and we are still figuring stuff out. And because of this, you're fighting all the time. You're fighting professionals for the rights of young people. It's exhausting and I can't shake the feeling that I'm failing. It's hard.*

(Dora, social worker, exploitation team)

Dora's comments illustrate the emotional intensity of the social work role in child exploitation. Dora highlights the factors that affected her, including the rape of a young person she was working with, the involvement of organised crime and the compounding and destabilising effect of professional involvement on the young person's life. Given the nature of the responsibilities of a caring professional, it is reasonable to anticipate that they will be exposed to emotionally stressful situations (Cooper and Lousada, 2005; Finch, 2020), however, Dora also describes a secondary cause of stress, one that is particular to social work practice in child exploitation at this stage in its development. Dora states that 'normal' social work practice has established

systems and processes to rely on and follow. Such frameworks and processes can contribute to feelings of familiarity, objectivity, and safety for social workers (Ruch, 2010; Munro, 2011b). Due to its recent emergence as a critical safeguarding issue, child exploitation social work lacks a national strategy and dependable evidence of effective practices (CSPRP, 2020; Huegler, 2021). Consequently, as practice and policy evolve, social workers may understandably feel more susceptible to stress and risk.

The experience Dora describes relates to the experiences of one young person on her caseload. As discussed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.5), social workers on Trent Council's child exploitation service worked with up to six young people at any one time, whereas caseloads in Hampstead Council ranged between twelve and sixteen young people per social worker.

Working in the field of child exploitation can have a negative impact on social workers' emotional well-being, which can, in turn, affect their personal lives. As demonstrated by the quotations below, research participants in both focus groups reiterated these sentiments. The following quotations highlight the difficulties social workers can have in being able to 'switch off' once they finish work:

*It's hard to switch off, particularly when a young person is missing. I find that genuinely difficult. In the evenings I keep calling them, just to see whether I can get a hold of them. In the morning when you switch your work phone on, you're thinking please say they've come back and they're safe. Your heart is pounding.*

(Charlie, social worker, the adolescent team)

*I worry enormously for young people, like boys and Black boys, who other agencies maybe aren't fully on board with their understanding, yet. Young people whose plans aren't being progressed, the appropriate safeguards aren't in place, and they won't get the same police response. I mainly worry about threats of physical violence and stabbings. It has become normalised to see a news article outside of work and think it might be one of mine that's been injured or killed?*

(Emma, social worker, the exploitation team)

Charlie's and Emma's comments touch on the reality of the dangers exploited young people face (Jay, 2014; CSPRP, 2020). Charlie discusses the physical reaction she has and the worry she experiences for young people who are missing. Charlie's comments indicate how her work seeps into her home life, which is evident in the telephone calls she makes in the evenings and the anxiety she feels when switching on her work phone in the morning. Emma's quotation recognises that not all young people are provided with equal safeguarding responses, especially when considering the compounding factors of gender, race, and ethnicity. Emma's comments reflect findings elsewhere, which highlight that Black children are at heightened risk of receiving a compromised safeguarding response (Bernard, 2019, 2021; Davis and Marsh 2020; Firmin *et al.*, 2021).

Another research participant shared concerns about the prevalent practice within the social work profession, wherein individuals are held culpable when things go wrong, shedding light on the consequences of a blame culture:

*For me, because of how social workers, more than teachers, doctors or nurses are treated by the media and society, I go home always asking, 'is there something more I could have done? Is there anything more I could have said, written, or negotiated?' It's that constant second-guessing myself. Did I do everything I could to protect that young person? It's exhausting.*

(Anne, social worker, duty team)

Anne's comments highlight the challenges of being a social worker instead of being in a more revered profession like teaching, medicine, or nursing. Anne's observations possibly reflect past experiences where social workers have been publicly blamed and subjected to criticism when professionals have not stopped adults from harming or killing children (Warner, 2015). The statements made by the research participants reveal the anxiety and stress experienced by social workers, which can impact their personal lives. The data from the focus groups indicates that while social workers may feel concerned about the safety of the young people they are working with, concerns about their circumstances and well-being can further compound these feelings.

The data from the case file analysis not only revealed the risks and complexities of child exploitation but also suggested that social workers use defensive practices to navigate these risks as well as the emotional impact of their role. Though the term 'defensive practice' is used throughout this chapter, it is important to state that this is not used to pathologise social workers. Indeed, acting defensively may be a reasonable response to coping with high levels of stress, work conditions, and/or the behaviours of others (Halton, 1994; Whittaker, 2011; Trevithick, 2014). Harris (1987, p. 62) defines defensive practices as 'practices which are deliberately chosen in order to protect the professional worker, at the possible expense of the well-being of the client'.

An early example of defensive practice from the case file analysis includes when Jack asked his social worker to provide him with transport to and from school. Jack made this request due to feeling unsafe travelling on the school bus after receiving threatening text messages from his exploiters. The social worker's initial case recordings concerning this request stated that the social worker refused Jack's request and detailed various alternative routes for Jack to travel to school safely. However, later recordings authored by the social worker show that the decision was also subsequently discussed during a multi-agency meeting. This decision was recorded on the social work cases file as '*During the meeting, it was unanimously agreed that Jack would not be provided with transport to or from school*'. Unfortunately, two weeks following the meeting, Jack was attacked by three males with a metal object whilst waiting for the school bus.

Jack's example illustrates a pattern observed across the case files, where social workers routinely sought confirmation of their decisions from safeguarding partners. Often, the involvement of safeguarding partners appeared unnecessary and disproportionate to the weight and context of the decisions. Menzies-Lyth (1988) highlighted the practice of excessively involving others in decision-making as a form of defensive practice, arguing that such approaches to decision-making are designed to reduce the weight of individual responsibility (Menzies-Lyth, 1988).

Other techniques used by social workers for sharing decision-making were also observable across the case file data. For example, the case file analysis

demonstrated that social workers repeatedly escalated decisions upward to senior practitioners and managers. Like excessively involving others in decision-making, Menzies Lyth suggests that elevating decision-making can also be a defensive mechanism designed to disclaim responsibility (Menzies Lyth, 1988). The excessive involvement of others in decision-making and the frequent elevation of decision-making were apparent in both sites and across all case files. As illustrated by the case note extract below, this was particularly apparent between the social worker and their team managers. The case note extract relates to a social worker wanting to reschedule a visit with a young person (Tanya). However, the visit was sensitive as it was a follow-up visit after Tanya disclosed to the social worker that two males had sexually assaulted her. As the case note extract highlights, the social worker escalated the decision to reschedule the visit to her manager:

*Case discussion with team manager. I explained that I am supposed to complete a home visit this afternoon to see Tanya and her mum. However, I am unable to provide a full update and I'm still trying to arrange a strategy meeting following Tanya's recent disclosure. Tanya's assessment is also still outstanding. We agreed that I should prioritise arranging the strategy meeting and writing up Tanya's assessment and that I should complete the home visit at the earliest opportunity following the completion of these actions.*

(Case file 10: social worker case note)

The case note above can be interpreted in multiple ways, as the broader context of this interaction remains unknown. One possible interpretation is that the social worker might require her manager's support to prioritise her actions. Alternatively, the case note may indicate the adverse effects of high levels of managerialism<sup>12</sup>, which have hindered social workers' ability and confidence to think and act independently (Trevithick, 2014). However, given the frequency and commonality of similar case recordings, the findings from this research suggest that the social worker's involvement of the manager in decision-making may be an attempt to reduce individual responsibility. It is plausible that the social worker felt anxious about cancelling the home visit to a vulnerable young person who had recently spoken about being sexually assaulted. However, by

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<sup>12</sup> Managerialism describes the prescriptive procedures and practices used to improve performance, increase standardisation and accountability, and reduce risk (Thiele, 2006; Harris and Unwin, 2009; Munro, 2010).

sharing the decision to reschedule the visit with her manager, the social worker reduced their accountability. Menzies Lyth (1998) describes this action as the individual forcing decision-making upwards to reduce the 'heavy burden' of responsibility. Due to the limitations of the data included in social work case files, it is impossible to determine the reason for the social worker's actions. However, it is of note that social workers are highly trained and qualified professionals<sup>13</sup>, and they manage complex caseloads that demand multiple decisions every day. Therefore, it is perhaps incongruous with the demands of the social work role that they would require support to prioritise routine activities such as rearranging a home visit.

The anxiety felt by social workers to be accountable for their decisions is possibly reinforced by local systems and processes that focus on these behaviours. Though discussed in detail in Chapter 4, the quotation below, taken from Trent Council's focus group, demonstrates both a potential explanation for such responses and possible unintended consequences:

*Decisions relating to my young people can go back and forth with managers and senior leaders. The higher the risk, the more people get involved. I think it's to protect the local authority. There's a knee-jerk reaction and doesn't necessarily take into account what's right for that young person.*

(Emma, social worker, exploitation team)

Emma's comments suggest defensive practices stretch beyond individual social workers and are also apparent in systems, processes, and management responses to risk. Practices such as these were observable during the case file analysis, evidenced by the number of decision-making processes social workers were required to navigate. In both research sites, child exploitation social workers faced at least eight individual decision-making processes and forums (see Table 6). Therefore, there may be a relationship between social workers excessively involving others in decision-making and an organisational culture that fears making mistakes and consequently instils checks and counterchecks on social work activity.

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<sup>13</sup> Social workers in England are required to be educated to degree level. This includes either an undergraduate or a postgraduate degree in social work, or a 'level-6-degree apprenticeship' such as Frontline or Step Up to Social Work (<https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/job-profiles/social-worker>).

Aside from indicating possible defensive practice techniques to help manage practice-based and/or organisational anxieties, the case files also revealed that social workers working in child exploitation, in both sites, had access to a psychologist. In Trent Council, this support was available on a one-to-one basis. In Hampstead Council, social workers accessed the psychologist by attending a multi-agency forum. In both sites, the psychologist's role was primarily to help develop an understanding of young people's lived experiences. However, as the quotation below highlights, in Trent Council, the social workers were also encouraged to access the psychologist for themselves:

*We're so lucky to have a team psychologist. I think every social worker should have access to one. The understanding she helps us develop about young people is amazing. Our psychologist pushes the agenda of looking after ourselves. It's part of the relationship-based model. It's a testament to that. So, I think for me personally, I feel very supported and looked after.*

(Emma, social worker, exploitation team)

Emma's comments suggest that she appreciates being supported and having access to additional resources such as a psychologist. The importance of working in an environment that supports social workers in expressing their feelings and talking openly about their emotions is recognised as promoting effective and resilient social work practice (DfE, 2017; Lefevre *et al.*, 2017; Cook, 2020). Indeed, the guidance on CSE states that 'Creating the right organisational environment and ensuring good quality professional leadership and practice supervision are essential for developing and sustaining effective practice' (DfE, 2017, p. 19).

During the case file analysis, apart from several copies of stray supervision notes, none of the documents in the social workers' case files referred to the support available to social workers. Outside the indicators of defensive practice described above, only the findings from the focus groups illustrated how social workers coped with the emotional dimensions of their role and how the social worker's emotions influenced decision-making. As the two quotations below suggest, social workers found that having accessible, informal, and ad hoc support from their manager and/or team was an effective form of support:



*The worry is just quite sickening sometimes. My young people can be quite honest and quite open. Sometimes it's hard to hear. It's tricky, but, for me, having a good manager is the best social work support. I've got a supportive manager. So, I know that she will be there when I need her. I can give her a call, and she checks in all the time.*

(Maria, social worker, looked-after children's team)

*Similar to others, I've got a good, supportive manager and team. They're amazing. So, I can have a good old rant if I need to. Discussing things with the team or my manager, having a laugh when things are just starting to become stressful.*

(Anne, social worker, duty team)

These quotations capture what Ruch (2012) highlights as relationship-based management in children's social care, whereby managers and organisational culture move from a technocratic role towards being more flexible and responding to the anxiety and uncertainty that comes with the social work role.

During the focus groups, the research participants also highlighted self-care techniques that supported their ability to switch off whilst at home. Lisa spoke of the need to physically exert herself to combat her feelings of frustration:

*I can be quite teary at times, if I'm making those difficult decisions, like making a secure application for example. It can be overwhelming and make your head hurt. So, I think doing something physical is how I deal with this kind of stuff. Doing body combat and stuff. Kicking and punching.*

(Lisa, social worker, court team)

Other research participants found alternative techniques to promote self-care. Jazz talked about avoiding social media whilst at home to protect herself from hearing about violent attacks on young people whilst not in work:

*My self-care is related to social media. So, one of my young people had previously stabbed another young person and there was a separate incident of another young person being stabbed, and it started popping up all over my Facebook. 'Teenager stabbed.' And it was a weekend. I was like, 'Oh God, I know it's one of mine.' I felt sick. I think social media does make it very difficult to switch*

*off at the weekend. When you see police notifications of teenagers missing or being stabbed and you're thinking, it's one of mine. I literally avoid social media. I have to; it's for my own well-being.*

(Jazz, social worker, adolescent team)

The above comments indicate that social workers recognise the importance of practising self-care to mitigate the potential risk of vicarious trauma, burnout, or compassion fatigue (Lewis and King, 2019; Finch, 2020). Lisa and Jazz highlight the different techniques they have developed to manage the impact of their work on their personal lives.

The findings shared throughout this section have highlighted the impact that such high-risk work and working closely with the abuse and exploitation of young people can have on social workers. Social workers were clear on the complexity and emotional stress working in child exploitation can bring. The findings from the case file analysis and the focus groups suggest that social workers used various techniques to cope with the pressures and anxieties associated with their role. The data from the case file analysis indicated that this could include using defensive practices in work, such as excessively involving others in decision-making and escalating decisions to managers to reduce the burden of individual responsibility (Menzies Lyth, 1988). Other practices include using work-based resources such as supervision, team-based psychologists, Outside the workplace, social workers appeared to rely on creative ways of dealing with the physical signs of stress or avoided adding stress to their lives in the first place. The examples provided were taking up high-impact physical activity and disconnecting from social media.

## 5.2 Social workers' discretion and professional judgment

This section explores how social workers can use their discretion and autonomy to influence the direction of cases and the allocation of resources. As discussed in Chapter 2, social workers require discretion and autonomy to carry out their roles and responsibilities effectively (Lipsky, 1980; Munro, 2011b).

The term 'discretion' takes on different values depending on the environment (Evans, 2010). In the context of this research, the term discretion is used in the 'structural sense', as defined by Molander (2016). Molander's definition states that 'discretion is the space for decision-making and action taking on the basis of discretionary judgements' (Molander, 2016, p. 10). This definition uses 'space' to denote the boundaries and context-sensitive nature in which individual discretionary judgments are permitted. As discussed below, for social workers, this includes undertaking assessments and presenting and prioritising information and risks to managers and partner agencies.

The data from the case file analysis and the two focus groups identified two distinct manifestations of social work discretion. The first related to how social workers assessed, prioritised, and presented information to their managers. Social workers are continually gathering and assessing information. As Killick and Taylor highlight:

Everything that a social worker does is some form of assessment: Every conversation, every home visit and every telephone call. Social workers may engage in specific assessment processes but the quest for understanding is continual.

(Killick and Taylor, 2020, p. xv).

The findings from this research suggest that how social workers assess, process and present information to their managers and safeguarding partners, whether written or verbal, influences the decisions made and the interventions provided.

The second expression of social work discretion observed in the research data relates to social workers adopting other professionals' decisions. The findings

indicate that social workers may accept other professionals' decisions for a variety of reasons. This can include embracing the decisions of others as a shortcut to decision-making, helping to conserve social work resources such as time. Lipsky (1980, 2010) called this practice 'rubber-stamping'. The notion of rubber-stamping was developed as part of Lipsky's (1980) theory on street-level bureaucracy. Lipsky's theory relates to public sector workers, known as 'street-level bureaucrats' (SLBs), whose role includes applying government policy to practice. A key argument of Lipsky's theory is that SLBs, such as social workers, police, and teachers, use their discretion to interpret and reshape policy on the frontline. This is due to resource constraints and ambiguity in government policy (Lipsky, 1980, 2010). Both expressions of social work discretion and judgment are discussed below.

## **Prioritising and presenting information**

Examples of social workers using discretion to prioritise information were observable to some degree across all case files. However, to help illustrate the findings clearly and concisely, data from one young person's case file is used. Focusing on just one young person's experiences provides straightforward and sequential examples of social workers exercising discretion and professional judgment throughout the course of social work involvement. The following examples have been taken from Tanya's case file.

### **Case background: Tanya**

Tanya was fourteen years of age at the start of the most recent episode of social work involvement. Tanya lived with her mum, dad, and older sister. Her family had a long history of social care involvement relating to issues of domestic abuse between her parents. Historically, Tanya's mother also suspected that Tanya had been sexually abused. These concerns were raised to social care when Tanya was between eight and eleven years old. The mother's concerns related to Tanya experiencing pains in her stomach and vagina and Tanya having frequent urinary tract infections, cramps, and constipation. According to the case file, Tanya was also displaying 'sexually inappropriate behaviour' such as sitting on men's laps and touching her 'flower' in the bath. Tanya's mother insisted on Tanya having a forensic medical examination. However, this request was refused, and the case was closed after

social workers spoke to Tanya, and she did not disclose that she was being hurt or touched inappropriately. It is worth noting that it is rare for children to disclose any type of abuse, including sexual abuse, to relative strangers (i.e., a newly allocated social worker) (Allnock and Miller, 2013).

### **Current episode of social care involvement**

Tanya was referred to Hampstead children's social care team on five separate occasions prior to being allocated a social worker. This included three referrals by the Safeguard Lead at Tanya's school, one from the local Barnardo's CSE service, and one by the police. All referrals related to concerns that Tanya was being sexually exploited by her contemporaries and that an explicit video was circulating around Tanya's school of her 'performing oral sex on two male peers'.

The data from Tanya's case file indicated that a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)<sup>14</sup> senior social worker was responsible for making decisions relating to the first referral. This referral was from Tanya's school and included information about Tanya potentially being at risk of CSE and the emergence of the explicit video. The data from Tanya's case file suggests that a MASH senior social worker assessed the information provided by the school and reviewed Tanya's case history to reach their decision. The senior social worker's decision was recorded on the file as *'School and Barnardo's [CSE service] are providing support. Advice given to school to continue to act as lead and to inform the police about the sharing of an explicit video. NFA [no further action].'*

Over the course of the following month, the safeguard lead from Tanya's school made two more referrals, indicating an escalation in their concerns for Tanya's welfare. The safeguard lead's third referral stated *'My concerns for Tanya continue to escalate as her attendance has become erratic. We don't know where she is when she is absent from school. When she is in school, Tanya does not engage well with teaching staff'*. The response by the MASH senior social worker was to provide advice and for the school's safeguard lead to continue to coordinate the support plan. However, two weeks following the third

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<sup>14</sup> A MASH is a multi-agency team whose members are co-located. Having social workers, the police, health workers, and other safeguarding partners working in the same office environment is thought to promote trust, effectiveness, and information-sharing (Munro, 2011b).

referral, Tanya went missing from home for two days; this resulted in two subsequent referrals, one from Barnardo's CSE service and one from the police. The MASH senior social worker's advice remained the same that '*All appropriate agencies are involved, NFA*'.

One week after Tanya went missing, the social worker's case file states that Tanya took an overdose of approximately thirty unspecified tablets. Tanya's parents took her to A&E. Following her admission to A&E, a sixth referral was made to MASH by staff at the hospital. This resulted in Tanya being allocated a social worker.

The example above suggests that individual senior social workers use their discretion to decide whether young people receive social work support. Prior to the referral from the hospital, MASH senior social workers appeared to base their decision-making on the information provided by the referring agencies and Tanya's extensive case history. There is no record of Tanya, or her family being contacted as part of the decision-making process. Due to the limitations of analysing data contained in social work case files, it is difficult to accurately state which information the MASH senior social workers prioritised when reaching their decisions. Nonetheless, the fact that a social worker was not allocated until the sixth referral suggests that senior social workers used their discretionary professional judgment to prioritise and focus on the current protective elements in Tanya's life, namely Tanya's attendance at school and the three services involved (education, the police, and Barnardo's CSE service). The historical information contained in Tanya's case file appears to have played less of a priority in decision-making, even though this included possible previous experiences of sexual abuse, which may increase vulnerability to further experiences of abuse and exploitation (Coy *et al.*, 2017).

Acknowledging the limitations of assessing historical secondary data, such as social work case files, is important. Retrospective analysis of data comes with the potential for 'hindsight bias'. This can oversimplify the situations experienced by practitioners, resulting in a reductionist understanding of the complexities affecting decisions and behaviours at that moment in time (Woods *et al.*, 2010). The role of social workers on duty and assessment teams, and MASHs is particularly challenging. As Broadhurst *et al.* (2010) highlight, social

workers working at the 'front-door' are required to balance high workloads and the need for rapid decision-making, which may not be the ideal context for reaching reliable, consistent, and informed responses. This environment, which requires high demand and hurriedness, is laden with the potential for mistakes, making it challenging to draw firm conclusions as to why certain decisions were made.

Once a social worker was allocated to Tanya and her family, the social worker completed a child and family assessment. Statutory guidance states that a 'good quality assessment' should be 'focused on action and outcomes for children' and be 'holistic in approach' (HM Government, 2018a). The social work assessment explored all aspects of Tanya's life, including her experiences at home and in school. When describing Tanya's home life, the assessment stated:

*Tanya described her life as being lonely and chaotic. She said that she doesn't have any friends and that she spends most of her time listening to her parents getting drunk and arguing. Tanya stated that ever since she was young, she has felt like a prisoner in her own home and that this has got worse since her overdose.*

(Case file 10: children and family assessment)

Tanya's wishes and feelings were recorded in the assessment as:

*Tanya said that she has aspirations for her future and wants to work with children or animals. Tanya said that she would like support finding out how she can get involved in volunteering so she can see which job she prefers. This will help her choose which college courses to apply for.*

(Case file 10: children and family assessment)

The plan that followed the assessment detailed the following actions:

- A. Social worker to see Tanya every ten working days (the data recorded in the social work case file did not provide further details about the purpose of the social work visits).
- B. Mum to continue her engagement with the CMHT (community mental health team).
- C. Social worker to complete 'What If' safety plan.
- D. CSE risk assessment to be completed.

*E. Healthy relationship work to be undertaken.*

(Case file 10: children and family assessment)

The above case file extracts from Tanya's assessment and plan further illustrate social worker discretion and professional judgment in action. For example, the social worker's assessment of Tanya emphasises several aspects of Tanya's life that are arguably worthy of professional attention and focus. This includes Tanya being quoted in the assessment as not having 'any friends and that she spends most of her time listening to her parents getting drunk and arguing'. Yet neither of these points was covered in Tanya's plan. The same is also seen in Tanya's 'aspirations' of volunteering. Tanya directly asked for support to find a place to volunteer. This is also absent from Tanya's plan, despite research indicating that encouraging young people to engage in participatory activities can help reduce the risk of CSE (Beckett, 2019; Hallett *et al.*, 2019).

This example of social work discretion appears to reinforce findings discussed in Chapter 4, that as risk and uncertainty increase, there appears to be a focus on the completion of individual tasks, as opposed to the young person's holistic needs. As highlighted by Tanya's plan, this includes overlooking the age of the young person and their needs in relation to adolescent development. During adolescence, peer relationships and acceptance become increasingly important (Blakemore and Robbins, 2012); however, for reasons unrecorded, Tanya's expressed wish to connect to her peers was not acted upon by the social worker. Tanya's case illustrates that, although social workers may have to navigate complex procedures and systems, there still appears to be space to use their discretion to determine what support needs will be addressed.

During the focus groups, the participants expressed mixed feelings about the levels of discretion and influence they had as social workers. As the conversation from Trent Council's focus group below highlights, some social workers recognise the power they have in prioritising certain pieces of information, whereas others felt that it was more complicated:

**Dora** (social worker, exploitation team) *The social worker before me did great pieces of work, they identified the issues for my young person. I was so impressed. But although they identified the issues, they didn't really talk about them when it came to plans or meetings. It didn't tally up with what the case file*



*said. I don't know what was happening for that social worker or with the culture of the duty team at the time, but there was enough information to send the case across [to the exploitation team] much earlier.*

Dora's comments resonate with the findings from the case file analysis. Dora shares an example, similar to Tanya's case file, where a social worker gathered comprehensive information in the assessment, but this did not translate to the child's plan. In Emma's comment below, she shares her experiences of social workers using their discretion to shape decision-making. Emma also alludes to the social workers' confidence and skill being a potential contributing factor to decision-making:

**Emma** (social worker, exploitation team) *...I agree with Dora, when you are allocated a new case and read the file, you're sometimes left thinking, 'why did the social worker make that decision or not follow that bit of information up?' Sometimes you can see how the decisions made have led to certain outcomes. You wonder if they were too scared to ask difficult or sensitive questions.*

The final two comments during this conversation, highlighted below, explored wider issues that may influence social work decision-making. Pamela's comments suggest that it is the social work manager who makes the decision, not the social worker. Jenny expanded the conversation by considering contextual factors such as the availability of resources, including the social workers' time:

**Pamela** (social worker, exploitation panel) *Come on; we can't always blame the social worker. All decisions and assessments are signed off by managers. Social workers might suggest something, but it is the manager's job to help them reflect and ask why the suggestions are being made.*

**Jenny** (senior practitioner, exploitation team) *It's easy to look at the cases you're allocated and think, 'why did they [the previous social worker] do that, I would have done something different.' All social workers do that. But like Dora said, you just don't know what else was happening at that time. We don't know how busy the team or the social worker was at the time and we all know there's no resources.*

The comments above do, by and large, support the conclusion from the case file analysis that social workers can organise and prioritise the information available when developing a young person's plan of intervention, albeit in the context of a lack of confidence or resources. The data from the focus groups provided further depth and understanding of the contextual factors affecting social workers' discretion and decision-making. These included additional work pressures social workers might be experiencing, such as increased workloads or direction given by managers and senior leaders. As highlighted in Jenny's comment, there may also be other factors influencing individual social workers that may not always be captured in the case files. These may include financial restraints and the scarcity of resources. This is particularly pertinent in the context of ten years of austerity in England, which has seen 'unprecedented funding cuts' since 2010, with a reduction of up to 54% in council budgets (Local Government Association, 2017). Such significant decreases in local authority funds have affected what support can be provided by local authorities and their social workers. For example, Murphy (2023) highlights that the cuts in early help and preventative services have resulted in an increased number of referrals to child protection services. Accordingly, social workers are working with more children, young people, and families and consequently have less time to spend with individuals. Murphy (2023) suggests that in the absence of 'more manageable workloads', social workers are less able to consistently exercise discretion in the best interests of the children and families they are working with.

## **Rubber-stamping**

This section explores social work discretion when used to conserve organisational and personal resources. The findings from this research suggest that social workers may exercise discretion by 'rubber-stamping' other professionals' decision-making. Lipsky (2010, p. 128) defined 'rubber-stamping' as the 'transferring of decision-making responsibility about clients to other public workers.' Lipsky (1980) proposes that the primary reason why public sector workers (SLBs), such as social workers, rubber-stamp other workers' decisions is to 'hoard' finite resources such as time. At first glance, rubber-stamping may appear similar to the two defensive mechanisms discussed in Section 5.1 (excessively involving others in decision-making and routinely elevating decision-making to management). However, rubber-stamping relates

specifically to adopting other professionals' decisions to protect resources, whereas the two practices discussed above relate to gaining agreement in decision-making to share or reduce the burden of responsibility.

The initial indicator that social workers may adopt other professionals' opinions to safeguard limited resources was first observed during the case file analysis in Trent Council. The data in Noah's case file stated that Noah had arrived at school with bruising and swelling to his face. During the strategy meeting, the attending police officer and health practitioner disagreed with the social worker's suggestion that Noah required a child protection medical examination<sup>15</sup>. The strategy meeting minutes stated that the police officer and health practitioner felt that it was plausible for a thirteen-year-old boy, with brothers and friends, to acquire similar bruising from 'playing rough' or 'playing sports'. The strategy meeting minutes also noted that there had not been a disclosure of abuse or assault made by Noah. From the meeting minutes, it seemed that, although the social worker and social work manager suggested the need for a child protection medical examination, they soon agreed with the police officer's and health practitioner's decision not to proceed. This is despite Noah's case file indicating that two previous social work child exploitation risk assessments scored Noah as being at high risk of criminal exploitation; this included scoring the highest risk in relation to 'peer/adult association', where it was recorded, that Noah was connected to adult males who were known to be violent and were possibly affiliated to an organised crime group. This score indicates that, by the social worker's own assessment, they considered Noah to be at high risk of violence. The case file indicated that the social work manager had authorised the risk assessments.

When considered in the context of the previous risk assessments, the decision of the social worker and social work manager to agree with police and health professionals possibly shows the hallmarks of rubber-stamping. Agreeing with the decision not to proceed with a child protection medical examination would almost certainly result in less demand on social work resources such as

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<sup>15</sup> A child protection medical examination is carried out by a trained doctor and is conducted to look for signs that child has been abused or neglected (GMC, 2020).

additional paperwork and the commencement of a Section 47 enquiry<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, the social worker would have most likely escorted Noah to a medical examination, which would take considerable time out of their diary. Trained doctors conduct child protection medical examinations. They review the child's or young person's account of how they sustained their injuries and compare it with an examination of the injuries. The resulting medical report contains the doctor's insights and conclusions, which can be useful to social workers and safeguarding partners in understanding the young person's experiences. The doctor's report can also be helpful if the child or young person, like Noah, ever discloses what happened and wants to pursue criminal charges.

In the reconvened strategy meeting minutes, held two weeks later, professionals reflected on the appropriateness of the above decision. It was noted in the minutes that, given Noah's history and experiences of exploitation, it would have been best practice for him to have attended a child protection medical and for a Section 47 enquiry to have been commenced. There may be many reasons why social workers and managers may agree to seemingly controversial decisions. One possible contributing factor is the pressure to conform to the views of other professionals with greater seniority or expertise. Agreeing with more skilled or senior professionals can indicate a tendency towards rubber-stamping, as it provides a shortcut to decision-making (Lipsky, 1980, 2010). While the adoption of other professionals' perspectives and decisions can be a legitimate platform in the decision-making process, especially if the other professionals possess superior knowledge or seniority, it can become problematic when the act of rubber-stamping is performed in the absence of complete information, as highlighted in the case of Noah (Lipsky, 1980, 2010; Marinetto, 2011).

Social workers rubber-stamping other professionals' decision-making was observed in a variety of safeguarding settings. This included during strategy meetings, as illustrated above, and when reaching decisions about case closures. The case note extract below illustrates the rubber-stamping of a police

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<sup>16</sup> A Section 47 enquiry is initiated to decide what type of action is required to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child who is suspected of, or likely to be, suffering significant harm. This can include completing additional assessments and interviewing parents and the young person (HM Government, 2018a).

decision to take no further action. This was in relation to the police investigation into allegations Tanya made about sexual assault (discussed in the previous section). The recording in Tanya's case file appeared to suggest that Tanya's social worker rubber-stamped the police decision to close their investigation, which also allowed for Tanya's case to be closed from social care's perspective. The case note excerpt below relates to Tanya's interview with the police and her subsequently retracting her allegation of sexual assault. The police interview relates to allegations Tanya made about two older males (approximately two years older) pressurising her into giving them oral sex. Tanya said that they pressurised her by being 'mean' to her. The males filmed the incident, and the video was shared on social media, including with pupils from Tanya's school.

Case note:

*Case discussion with the team manager to discuss the outcome of the police investigation. I shared that the police have concluded their investigation, and they are taking no further action. This decision was reached after Tanya retracted her statement.*

Details of police decision to take NFA:

*This morning the police interviewed Tanya. The police stated that during the interview Tanya's account did not make sense. The police said that during the interview they shared the start of the video of Tanya and the two males. The start of the video showed Tanya interacting and laughing with the males before the sexual act. The police questioned why Tanya was laughing if she was being pressurised by the males in the video. Tanya stated that she doesn't know why she was laughing and that they were being 'mean' to her. The interviewing officers asked Tanya how her laughing may appear to others. Tanya didn't answer and asked for the interview to stop. After a short discussion, which included the officers trying to reassure Tanya, the interview was terminated. Soon after Tanya left the room and withdrew her allegations. ... The police said they spoke with Tanya and her mum immediately after the interview and Tanya insisted that she wanted to stop the investigation. The police also contacted Tanya and her mum a few hours later. Tanya again confirmed that she wants to retract her statement...*

*... I shared with my manager that all the actions on Tanya's plan are up to date and complete and that we were just waiting for the outcome of the police investigation. My manager agreed that Tanya's case can be stepped down. Case closure agreed.*

(Case file 10: children and family assessment)

From the data in the social worker's case file, it appears that the social worker may have rubber-stamped the police's decision and, in the process, legitimised the closing of Tanya's case from a social care perspective. The social worker did not appear to question the police's decision or conduct during the interview with Tanya. For example, the police shared the video with Tanya showing her alleged abuse. From the data held in the case file, it appears that the social worker did not ask the police about Tanya's well-being and how the prospect of watching herself being sexually abused in the video may be traumatising or, at the very least, embarrassing. Therefore, the context in which Tanya retracted her statement could have been explored further. Rubber-stamping involves adopting other professionals' decisions often without questioning their decision-making process (Lipsky, 2010). A possible explanation for the potential rubber-stamping illustrated above is what Lipsky (2010, p. 125) calls 'practices oriented towards husbanding resources'. Lipsky (2010) points out that workers whose roles are unpredictable and who are often already overwhelmed may use what little discretion they have to 'conserve their own job resources'. In Tanya's case, the police closing the case provided a potential opportunity for the social worker to bring their involvement to an end. Closing a case is possibly a social worker's most direct action to conserve time and resources.

Other reasons for the potential rubber-stamping of the police's decision may have included the anxiety the social worker may have felt about being responsible for risk without support from colleagues such as the police. This form of rubber-stamping could be considered a form of defensive practice as defined by Harris (1987), who defines defensive practice as actions that arguably protect the worker or the organisation at the expense of the individual. During the focus groups, the participants suggested that social workers have the capacity to use their discretion to accept working with high levels of risk or

not. As illustrated by the quotation below, the level of risk social workers may be willing to accept can depend on the support they are provided with:

*You know, if supported well, social workers will feel quite comfortable holding high levels of risk. When social workers aren't supported, they will obviously be less inclined to accept that level of responsibility. Who can blame them? Their response might be to get the case moved up from child in need to child protection.*

(Jenny, senior practitioner, exploitation team)

The social workers attending the focus groups did not use the term 'rubber-stamping' or explicitly identify defensive practices. Nevertheless, the quotation above suggests that social work discretion can influence the direction and intensity of social work interventions. Although the example provided by Jenny suggests an intensification of social work involvement, it also highlights the potential for social workers to reduce concerns and de-escalate cases, as observed in Tanya's case file. Therefore, it is possible that Tanya's social worker did not feel comfortable holding Tanya's case once the police decided that their role was to end and consequently advocated for social care to close the case.

During the focus groups, social workers identified other potential manifestations of rubber-stamping. For example, the comments below highlight occasions when social workers may rubber-stamp other professionals' decisions due to feeling overwhelmed. This reason for rubber-stamping is not explicitly captured by Lipsky (1980, 2010), but it does bear similar hallmarks to those discussed by Lipsky: it involves accepting the decisions of others to conserve professional resources. The professional resources in this case are compassion, energy, and maintaining working relationships across a multi-agency partnership:

*When you're that lone voice with no support, advocating for a young person and worrying about the risk. It can be exhausting. You're fighting with professionals who don't share your concerns. You're isolated and tired, and you follow other professionals' demands just to reach agreement and move forward.*

(Emma, social worker, exploitation team)

Similar comments were also made in Hampstead's focus group. In the comment below, Maria shares a case example of her rubber-stamping a police decision to ease the stress of her job:

*Sometimes it's easier to just go along with, say, the police's decision. Our job is already stressful. I was once working with a fifteen-year-old who wanted to go to this teen nightclub. I was OK with it, it's normal for young people to do these things. However, the police disagreed. They said it's a bad idea and they have heard negative things about the club. They wouldn't budge. In the end I just went along with their decision, it probably saved me a ton of paperwork and the stress of having to continually argue the case.*

(Maria, social worker, looked-after children's team)

Maria's comments illustrate the complexity of the social work role, balancing professional relationships and expertise, work-related tensions, and young people's needs and wishes. In the example Maria provided, she did not think it was worth pushing for the young person to attend the 'teen nightclub' in terms of her own well-being, continuing the interagency disagreement, or the potential paperwork. This example highlights the multifaceted aspects that can contribute to a social worker rubber-stamping another professional's decisions.

## **5.3 Summary**

This chapter explored the ways in which social workers utilise professional judgment and discretion to navigate the bureaucratic and emotional aspects of their work. A key finding is that social workers generally manage emotional stressors on their own, using a combination of professional and personal practices. This can include accessing support from colleagues and managers, avoiding work-related information outside work hours, and making use of defensive practices such as sharing decision-making to alleviate individual responsibility. The findings also highlight how social workers can use their discretion to influence the direction of a case, including prioritising information presented to managers and safeguarding partners. Lastly, the research suggests that some social workers may 'rubber-stamp' decisions made by other professionals to protect themselves from additional stresses or manage finite emotional and/or professional resources.



## **Chapter 6 Young people's influence, pt.1: Processes and procedures versus participation**

This is the penultimate findings' chapter. This chapter examines the findings from the case file analysis and the two focus groups. The findings discussed aim to provide the reader with an understanding of how young people can influence social work decision-making in cases where child exploitation is a concern.

This chapter is the first of two findings chapters that focus primarily on the influence of young people. The findings discussed in this chapter have been conceptualised in terms of young people's participation and the extent to which they share power and responsibility in social work decision-making. Kennan *et al.* (2018, p. 1985) define participation as '... the right of the child to express their views in matters affecting them and for their views to be acted upon as appropriate.' This definition of participation is useful for its conciseness and because it emphasises both ascertaining children's and young people's views, and the importance of acting on them. The combination of these two actions, listening and acting, forms the central focus of this chapter.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section serves as a re-introduction to the young people whose case files have been instrumental in informing the study. The second section explores three different types of participation, which were developed from the research findings. These three categories of participation were determined using Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of the child's right to participate, as specified in Article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). The three types of participation, 'restricted participation', 'forced participation', and 'negotiated participation', are discussed in detail in discreet subsections.

## 6.1 Reintroducing the young people

Prior to examining the influence young people can have on social work decision-making, it is important to reintroduce the reader to the young people whose experiences and interactions with social workers inform the findings of this thesis. As stated in Chapter 3, fifteen social work case files were analysed as part of this research. Nine case files were analysed in the first research site (Trent Council), and six case files were analysed in the second research site (Hampstead Council). As Table 8 illustrates, the fifteen cases analysed involved five females and ten males. At the start of social care involvement, during the most recent episode, the young people's ages ranged from thirteen to sixteen years.

Regarding ethnicity, nine young people were from White British backgrounds, two young people were from Black Caribbean / White mixed backgrounds, two were from White European backgrounds (Portuguese and Polish), one young person was from a Black African background, and one young person was from a GRT background. The case file data recorded six young people as having an identified or suspected learning difficulty or special educational needs. Seven young people were recorded as either receiving psychological or emotional support or as having 'mental health difficulties.' The terminology recorded in Table 8 reflects the terms used in the social work case files.

Professionals must be mindful of young people's experiences and intersectional identities when facilitating participation. For instance, when working with young people from ethnic minoritised backgrounds, social workers should acknowledge the potential structural and societal racism that young people may have experienced, which could affect the establishment of trusting relationships with state agencies like the police and social care (Davis and Marsh, 2022). As noted by Bernard (2019), situational racism is a phenomenon that social workers need to recognise and address to work effectively with young people from ethnic minoritised backgrounds; young people's race and ethnicity are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Table 8 also provides an overview of other key personal data relating to the young people. The table illustrates that nine young people were allocated to social workers due to concerns relating to criminal exploitation; five young

people were allocated to social workers due to concerns of sexual exploitation, and one young person due to concerns of both criminal and sexual exploitation. Hope was the only young person who was assessed as being at risk of CSE, as opposed to being exploited. All other young people were recognised and recorded as victims of exploitation.

Ten of the fifteen young people attended some form of alternative provision (AP)<sup>17</sup> for education. This equates to 67% of the young people who formed part of this research being transferred from mainstream education into AP.

Government data is limited on the numbers of children and young people in AP, but the best estimate is that approximately 0.6% of the national state school population is in AP (Long and Danechi, 2019). The sample population for this research was not designed to be representative of the national picture, but the findings here suggest that a disproportionate percentage of young people affected by child exploitation are transferred to AP. This disparity aligns with a growing acknowledgement of the relationship between child exploitation and young people being excluded from mainstream education, including being sent to AP (Ofsted, 2020; Graham, 2021; HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021).

The data presented in Table 3 indicates that the young people included in this research shared many common experiences, such as attending AP, largely being in mid-adolescence (aged thirteen to sixteen years) and navigating difficulties in their home and school lives. However, as will be discussed throughout this chapter and Chapter 7, upon closer analysis, each young person's set of circumstances were disparate and personal. The recorded experiences of each young person highlight how a combination of intersecting characteristics, early childhood experiences of care and/or abuse, current living arrangements, and relationships with family members and professionals contributed to their unique set of circumstances and experiences.

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<sup>17</sup> AP is defined as '... education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour' (DfE, 2013, p. 3).

**Table 8. A detailed view of the young people\***

#	Young person	Age (years)	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability / learning need / neurodiversity	Emotional and mental health needs	Concern	Education	Accommodation
1	Keira	16	F	White British	Query ASD	Query borderline personality disorder	CSE	Home schooling	Living with mum and dad
2	Jack	14	M	White British	FASD	Query psychosis	CCE	Pupil Referral Unit	Living with mum
3	Hope	13	F	Mixed heritage: Caribbean/European	Query ASD	Query depression	CSE?	Mainstream / home schooling	Living with mum and dad
4	Ryan	14	M	White British	None recorded	None recorded	CSE	Mainstream	Living with mum
5	Jamie	15	M	White British	Communication difficulties	Mental health issues	CCE	Mainstream	Living with mum and dad
6	Dylan	13	M	Mixed heritage: Caribbean/European	None recorded	Emotional difficulties	CCE	Pupil Referral Unit	Lived with dad and then looked after
7	Sara	15	F	White British	None recorded	None recorded	CSE/CCE	Private education	Looked after by the LA
8	Noah	14	M	White British	ASD	None recorded	CCE	Behavioural school	Lived with mum and dad
9	Ella	13	F	White British	None recorded	Extreme lack of confidence	CSE	Mainstream	Lived with mum then sister
10	Tanya	14	F	White British	None recorded	None recorded	CSE	Mainstream	Lived with mum and dad
11	Zac	14	M	GRT	None recorded	None recorded	CCE	Pupil Referral Unit	Lived with mum and dad
12	Damian	13	M	Black African	None recorded	None recorded	CCE	AP education	Lived with mum
13	Toni	15	M	White British	None recorded	None recorded	CCE	Not in school	Lived with grandfather, then uncle
14	Kris	14	M	White European	None recorded	Emotional difficulties	CCE	AP education	Lived with mum and dad, then looked after
15	Lucas	14	M	White European	ADHD	None recorded	CCE	AP education	Lived with dad

ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; ASD, autism spectrum disorder; F, female; FASD, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder; LA, local authority; M, male.

\* Young people from Hampstead Council are depicted in grey.

## 6.2 Young people's participation in social work decision-making

This section examines the parameters of participation as observed during the social work case file analysis and the two focus groups. Meaningful participation is important for young people who have experienced abuse and harm as it can act as a protective factor by increasing young people's confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Cossar *et al.*, 2013).

Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of the child's right to participate, as specified in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989), has been used to analyse the levels of participation afforded to young people, as observed in the findings from the case file analysis and the two focus groups. Lundy's model (2007) outlines four phased factors to be followed if a child's right to participate is to be upheld:

1. 'Space', children must be given the opportunity to express their views.
2. 'Voice', children must be facilitated to express their views by skilled and listening practitioners.
3. 'Audience', the child's views must be listened to by those making the decisions.
4. 'Influence', the child's views must be acted upon as appropriate.

Although children do not have the absolute right to a final say in the decision-making process, their views should be given due consideration relevant to the child's age and capacity (Lundy, 2007). The fourth aspect of Lundy's model (2007), 'influence', resonates with the definition of participation that opened this chapter, which emphasised the notion of young people's views and wishes not only being listened to but also, where appropriate, being acted upon (Kennan *et al.*, 2018).

Using Lundy's model (2007) to inform the parameters of participation, three types of participation were developed during the data collection and analysis from the case file analysis and the two focus groups:

1. **Restricted participation:** this type of participation relates to the limited and formulaic opportunities provided by social workers (and the wider

safeguarding system) for young people to participate in decision-making. For example, the data from the case file analysis appeared to suggest that young people's participation was largely restricted to the peripheral decisions that affected them. This included the time and location of meetings with their social worker, and, within reason, what work was focused on during one-to-one sessions. This type of participation suggested that young people were provided with space, voice, and audience. However, authentic influence over decision-making remained restricted and within the control of the social worker and their manager. Consequently, restricted participation is not full participation, as defined by Kennan *et al.* (2018), as social workers control the areas in which young people can express their views.

2. **Forced participation:** this type of participation appears to be a direct response to restricted participation (described above), when young people are denied authentic participation, and their views are not given due consideration in line with their age, circumstance, or level of understanding. Considering Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of participation, forced participation is a reaction to young people's rights to space, voice, audience, and influence not being authentically upheld. Young people often responded to the restrictions placed on participation with actions or behaviours that forced social workers and professionals to reconsider the young person's needs. Examples of forced participation from the case file analysis included when young people did not think their social worker was listening to their concerns about their home life, they ran away from home.
3. **Negotiated participation:** this type of participation occurs when young people self-identify and source solutions and/or support to meet their own needs. Crucially, negotiated participation still requires the approval of social workers, social work managers, and safeguarding partners to be acknowledged and accepted as a legitimate form of support. Considering Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation of participation, two features of negotiated participation are the young person creating 'space' and 'voice' for themselves. This is subsequently facilitated by the social worker.

Examples include young people accessing informal support via friendships or finding alternative coping strategies, such as leaving a classroom to de-escalate arguments with other pupils or teachers. If deemed appropriate by social workers, these expressions of young people's agency would often be incorporated into the young person's plan. Negotiated participation is the closest type of participation to realising Lundy's (2007) conceptualisation, although it is debatable whether 'space' and 'voice' are facilitated by professionals or forced by the young person.

The three types of participation are discussed in detail below, but presenting them next to one another, as above, illustrates the differences between the categories. For example, in negotiated participation, the young person acts independently; this differs from forced participation, where young people react to decisions made by social workers and other adults in their life, in response to their views not being heard. The list above highlights the relationships between the three types of participation; however, the findings suggest that these relationships are not linear. The three types of participation should not be considered as a process or phased approach. Indeed, as highlighted by the following case note extract, social workers and young people can move between all three types of participation during a single interaction.

## **Background to the case note**

Lucas was moved from Portugal to live with his father in England. The social work file stated that he was 'mixing in the wrong crowd' whilst living in Portugal. His case file states that he was stealing money and selling and smoking cannabis. Lucas was also recorded as being aggressive towards his mother. Lucas was diagnosed as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which he took medication for in Portugal. Lucas waited almost one year to be assessed and receive ADHD medication in England. The medication he was prescribed in England was different from the medication he was prescribed in Portugal:

*This afternoon Lucas and I visited the college where he will start next month. Lucas was originally registered to start a bricklaying course, however, during the*

*car journey he told me that he had changed his college course. Lucas changed his bricklaying course to an art and design course. Lucas said he doesn't like English weather and doesn't want a job working outside. I praised Lucas for showing maturity and using his initiative. Lucas said that his dad was also happy that he was taking responsibility...*

*... On the way to the college, Lucas told me that he had stopped taking his ADHD medication. I asked Lucas why, especially since we had previously discussed this and agreed that he would give his new medication a couple more weeks. Lucas said since he started taking his new medication, he is always angry and in a bad mood, and that his mouth is always dry and his breath smells. He said no one is listening to him and that he had told me, his mum and dad about his medication but no one was helping him get back on 'Medikinet' [the medication prescribed in Portugal]. I explained to Lucas that he shouldn't just stop taking prescribed medication and that we will need to discuss this with his dad and CAMHS...*

*... Before arriving back home, Lucas asked if we could stop at the café near his house to get something to eat and chat. As we sat in the café, we spoke about his new college course. Lucas said he can't wait to leave Willow High for good and that he liked his new college teacher...*

(Case file 15, social worker case note)

As highlighted by the above case note extract, interactions between social workers and young people can be responsive and fluid. The case note extract illustrates the different types of participation. For example, Lucas is praised for using his initiative by changing his college course; this interaction could be perceived as negotiated participation, whereby the young person independently made a decision, and, because of its positive implications, this young person's decision was welcomed by the social worker and was accepted as part of the young person's plan. When Lucas informed his social worker that he had stopped taking his medication, this is an example of forced participation. The social worker's case note appears to suggest that Lucas had previously informed the adults in his life about the negative side effects he was experiencing, asking them to support him in changing his ADHD medication. However, he acted and exerted control when he was not being listened to. By stopping his medication, Lucas effectively forced the adults around him to listen and pay more attention to his concerns about the side effects he was



experiencing. Finally, Lucas' request to stop and get something to eat provides a basic example of restricted participation. This type of participation provides young people with a sense of partnership and decision-making. The findings from the case file suggest that young people can contribute to social work decisions, but only within narrow, set boundaries. The findings suggest that this includes where and when the young person meets the social worker and what they focus on during their time together (within reason). Each of the three types of participation are discussed in detail below.

## **Restricted participation**

As highlighted by the case note extract below, at first glance, restricted participation can appear as though social workers are taking a measured response to safeguarding, attempting to balance the well-recognised tension between protecting young people from harm and promoting their participation (Cossar *et al.*, 2013; Warrington, 2013; Lefevre *et al.*, 2017). However, upon closer inspection, the social worker maintains control, and levels of participation appear predetermined. The case note extract below is taken from the social worker's case notes relating to Kris. The case note relates to an interaction between Kris and his social worker in preparation for a pending multi-agency meeting:

*... I met with Kris today to prepare for the child in need meeting on Tuesday. We reviewed the plan and looked at what is working well and what needs to be changed. I started by praising Kris on his recent school report and him not arriving to school under the influence of alcohol or cannabis. I also praised Kris for attending most of our sessions. I suggested that the plan continues to focus on him coming home on time and not staying out overnight. I would also like him to continue arriving at school sober and not smelling of cannabis. Kris said that he didn't mind meeting with me but wanted to change the times. Kris wanted our sessions to start directly after school so I could drop him back off at home. He also said that he wants to stop seeing his substance use worker and he wants the safety plan changing [sic], so his dad stops looking through his phone. I shared with Kris my concerns about ending his involvement [with] his drugs and alcohol worker so early. We agreed that he would continue to see his worker and we would review his progress at the following meeting in 6 weeks. I shared with Kris, that the local authority also continues to be concerned that he is being*

*exploited to sell drugs and we think his safety continues to be at risk. Therefore, we support his dad randomly checking his phone as part of his safety plan. Kris appeared to accept this decision. We did agree that our sessions would take place at the end of the school day ...*

(Case file 14, social worker case note)

Taken by itself, the case note above appears to capture an interaction between a social worker and a young person discussing what changes will be made to the young person's plan. The interaction appears reasonable and age appropriate. However, when considered in the context of the findings from all the case files analysed, the above interaction demonstrates a familiar and formulaic pattern: the social worker provides the appearance of participation and shared decision-making, but the young person's contribution is predetermined and restricted to peripheral issues. As Kris' example illustrates, his input was permitted only in relation to the times he met with his social worker. The more substantial and potentially risky requests (ending his involvement with the substance use service and stopping his dad searching his phone) were refused by the social worker. Data from the case file analysis appears to suggest that, although young people are provided with the appearance of choice, their input is in fact predetermined and restricted. It is also worth noting that data from Kris' case files revealed that Kris attended only one further appointment with his substance use worker. After this appointment, Kris refused to attend any more, indicating that he relied on physical actions (forced participation) to get his voice heard in relation to stopping his contact with the substance use worker.

Though young people's participation was not defined or explicitly stated in any policy or procedure in either local authority, similar restrictions in participation were observed multiple times across all young people's case files in both research sites. The case note extract below provides another example where the appearance of participation is provided by social workers, whilst still upholding unspoken restrictions. The example demonstrates the limitation of young people's rights to express their views and for their views to be acted upon, as appropriate (Lundy, 2007; Kennan *et al.*, 2018). The following excerpt from Ella's case file shows the social worker subtly reinforcing the restrictions of

participation by providing opportunities for Ella to have superficial input into decision-making:

*Ella and I visited the equestrian centre this afternoon. Ella picked where we held today's session... As we walked and watched the horses, we discussed her move to her sister's and the pending police interview. Ella was happy about the move and said that her sister said they could get a dog if she did well in school. Ella said she did struggle with low mood at her mum's flat and feels having a dog could be her own 'little friend' that would be only hers and that she could love. Ella asked if she could spend a couple of nights at her mum's so she could get away from her sister's kids, who can be 'annoying'. I explained that this cannot happen right now, but we can look at it again once we see how she settles at her sister's. Ella appeared more relaxed than I had previously seen her. Although she still didn't give any eye contact, she did not fidget as much or pick at her fingers...*

(Case file 9, social worker case note)

In the extract from Ella's case notes, the social worker appears to have demonstrated sensitivity to the purpose of the planned visit (preparing Ella for a pending police interview) by making the session as pleasant as possible. However, when Ella, who was fifteen years old at the time of the case note recording, asked to stay at her mum's house as a respite from her nephew and niece, Ella's request was refused. The information in Ella's case files suggests that Ella's mum was an alcoholic, and this resulted in her chronic neglectful parenting of Ella. The social worker's case file does not indicate that her mother posed any immediate risk or harm. Nonetheless, the case note above suggests that Ella's request to spend the night at her mother's house was refused without further discussion. Whilst there are recognised limitations of analysing case file data, such as the data providing only a partial and biased view (Hayes and Devaney, 2004), the above case note appears to suggest that Ella's views and wishes were not considered in line with her rights and developing sense of agency and maturity.

The social work case notes quoted throughout this section illustrate a pattern of restricted participation, observed across all case files, whereby young people are invited to participate in decisions on a restricted basis. The research participants in the focus groups also acknowledged that participation could be

restricted, but as the quotations below suggest, the social workers largely felt that this had to do with the availability of time and resources:

*I think we are much better at getting young people involved in decision-making than we used to. We spend more time with them in places they prefer. Of course, we would like to do more if there was more money, and we had more time.*

(Hannah, social worker, court team)

*The young people I work with are definitely encouraged to participate. They help shape their care plans. They choose which professionals they engage with. When I meet my young people, they usually pick where we go and what we talk about. Mostly we drive around in my car listening to their music and talking. I'll pay for us to get a milkshake or a hot chocolate. There's rarely any money to do bigger things, like the cinema, unless it for a specific reason like their birthday or following court or something like that.*

(Charlie, social worker, adolescent team)

The social workers' comments above perhaps challenge the notion of restricted participation. The social workers appear to suggest that young people's participation is recognised and facilitated. Furthermore, their comments imply that it is not individual social workers who set the parameters of participation but limited resources, such as time and funding. Both finances and social work availability are well-recognised factors in social workers being able to achieve meaningful participation (Diaz, 2020). However, the argument that there are limited resources perhaps contrasts with the findings from the case file analysis that demonstrated that, on average, young people worked with twelve different professionals (see Table 7), all of whom completed bespoke work with young people. For example, Keira had twenty-two professionals allocated to her during the time she was working with the child exploitation social worker. This is not to say that individual social workers can influence how local or regional budgets are allocated; however, it highlights a resource paradox, whereby there appears to be abundant resources, yet professionals feel that the converse is true.

Additionally, the data from the case file analysis appeared to suggest that, even against a backdrop of limited budgets and constraints on time, social workers frequently refrained from including young people in particular types of decisions. As highlighted by the case examples above, this often included when young

people wanted to have a say in how policies and procedures were applied to them, or how their contact with friends or family was managed. Diaz (2020) suggests that social workers may not be committed 'to the concept of meaningful participation' and may consider some topics as 'adult issues'. Consequently, professionals may refrain from sharing decision-making with young people, as it possibly interferes with the young person's experiences of being a 'normal' child (Diaz, 2020). Restricted participation is perhaps also influenced by adultist approaches to social work practice in child exploitation, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 7. Adultism manifests in a variety of implicit and explicit ways, including the expectation that, unlike any other group, children and young people are required to demonstrate a level of approved maturity to be granted their full rights (Flasher, 1978; Shier, 2012).

## **Forced participation**

The findings on forced participation first emerged during event-by-event coding (Charmaz, 2008, 2014) when analysing Keira's case file, which was the first to be analysed. Keira was referred to children's services in early August 2018 due to concerns about being frequently missing from home, and about potential CSE and substance misuse. Keira was allocated a social worker at the end of January 2019. In the six months prior to Keira being allocated a social worker, 103 individual social work actions and decisions were taken (see Figure 3). This included social workers convening and attending five separate meetings and communicating with Keira's parents and other agencies on thirty-one occasions. During this time, Keira was not directly contacted by social workers. Keira was aged sixteen years at the time and specifically requested social work support.

During the six months between the first referral and Keira being allocated a social worker, Keira was provided with support from early intervention services. However, concerns continued to escalate, resulting in twenty-three referrals to Trent children's services by external agencies. Professionals were concerned about the increasing risk of CSE, as Keira was repeatedly being found in cars with men in the city centre whilst under the influence of drugs and alcohol. When spoken to by agencies, such as the police, CAMHS, paramedics, and youth workers, Keira clearly stated that she 'hates it at home' and that 'she

hates her brother being there'. Keira's case file also shows that she repeatedly requested social work support and to be placed in foster care.

The data from Keira's case file appeared to indicate a relationship between Keira's views not being listened to (i.e., not being allocated a social worker or being taken into foster care) and an escalation in the frequency and intensity of her behaviour. Using Lundy's conceptualisation of the child's right to participate (Lundy, 2007), it appears that Keira's right to participate in the decisions that affected her were not upheld by social workers during those initial six months. This is illustrated by Keira being denied an audience to have her views appropriately listened to and acted upon accordingly. As Lundy points out '... children have a right to have their views listened to (not just heard) by those involved in the decision-making processes' (2007, p. 936). As Figure 3 indicates, only Trent Council's social workers were involved in making decisions about the allocation of a social worker, and Keira's input was not sought by social workers during those initial six month.

Figure 3. Social work decision-making – Keira



The findings from the subsequent fourteen case files analysed suggested that Keira's experience of participation (or lack thereof) was an outlier, and this level of unilateral decision-making by the local authority was not observed in any other case file. However, the findings from other young people's case files did reinforce the relationship between a lack of participation and young people's behaviours and actions to get their voices heard. Below is a more subtle example of a young person responding via their behaviour to not getting their voice heard. The extract relates to Sara and has been taken from the minutes of a strategy meeting. The meeting was convened because Sara contacted the police and informed them that she was raped at a party. The text below is Sara's social worker's account of a visit between her, Sara, and a police sergeant. The extract highlights Sara's behavioural response to professionals after Sara said that she did not want to meet with them:

*I arrived at the foster carer's house with the police. Sara was still up and appeared unhappy to see us. We went into the living room for some privacy. Straightaway Sara seemed uninterested in speaking to me or the police officer. During our conversation she sat there and flicked through Netflix. When Sara did speak, she was blasé and not very forthcoming with her answers. Sara did not give any eye contact with me or the police sergeant during the visit. She appeared rude and said that we were wasting her time and that she had better things to be doing. Throughout her account Sara was very matter of fact and when the police asked her questions, Sara looked at her as if it was the most ridiculous question she had ever heard. The sergeant tried several more times to engage Sara, but Sara just turned her back to us and sat in silence for the remainder of the visit.*

(Case file 9: strategy meeting minutes)

In the above example, Sara used the only power available to her to get her needs met. She was explicit in her wishes about not wanting to meet with the social worker or the police. However, her wishes were not listened to, and Sara was placed in a situation she did not want to be in. Sara used her behaviour (being rude, flicking through Netflix, and sitting silently) to get her 'voice' heard.

Keira's and Sara's experiences can be interpreted in many ways. For example, the social workers deciding whether to allocate a social worker to Keira may have been concerned about local thresholds. They may have been satisfied that other agencies were adequately supporting Keira, allowing them to gatekeep



and protect limited resources (MacAlister, 2022). Local authorities' children's services can receive more than 300 referrals per month through their 'front door' services (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, ensuring Keira's participation may not have been feasible with the specificity of the social worker's role on the front door, which necessitates timeliness over depth of decision-making (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010). Likewise, Sara's social worker and the police sergeant may have been insistent that the visit took place as they wanted to provide Sara with the best possible chance to preserve evidence and provide support at the earliest opportunity. However, in both scenarios, it appears that both young people felt that their wishes were secondary to professional priorities and processes.

The data from the case file analysis indicates that, when young people are denied participation, they rely on physical actions and behaviours to get their voices heard. Lundy's model (2007) does not stipulate that young people's views should always be acted upon for full participation to be realised. However, the model does state that young people should be given the space, time, and consideration for their views to be listened to and understood. As highlighted by the research participant's comments below, when discussing participation during the focus groups, the social workers recognised that young people would use physical communication (behaviour and actions) to assert themselves and ensure their voices were heard:

*Some of my young people have acted out of frustration, exactly because no one is listening to them. I've worked with boys who've purposely threatened foster carers and residential workers knowing their actions will get them moved. They're not bad kids, they just know how to play the system.*

(Charlie, social worker, adolescent team)

*It must be difficult being a teenager and having all these professionals telling you what to do and no one seems to be listening. I've seen lots of young people presented at [child exploitation] panel who responded by becoming angry or aggressive. Smashing classrooms to get kicked out of school on purpose. I'm not saying it's right, but these young people become labelled for this behaviour. This can impact them in the future. Like, if they need a foster placement, their past behaviour plays a massive part in who will accept them.*

(Pamela, social worker, exploitation panel)

Both the above comments encapsulate forced participation. They make the connection between young people not being listened to by social workers and professionals and subsequently responding physically. Both research participants also suggest another layer to this type of participation. Charlie suggests that young people are adapting their responses to how 'the system' operates. Pamela touches on the possible unintended consequences of young people relying on behaviour and physical actions to get their voices heard. Pamela suggests that young people can earn a reputation that may negatively affect future support.

The challenge for young people to be consistently provided with opportunities to meaningfully participate is not only associated with child exploitation. There is also little evidence that participation has been fully realised in traditional safeguarding settings (Diaz, 2020; Hill and Warrington, 2022). However, the findings from this research seem to suggest that, when social workers do not provide meaningful participation, young people often resort to physical actions to get their needs met. This is possibly particularly evident in child exploitation cases because they generally involve adolescents, as opposed to younger children (Firmin and Knowles, 2022). As discussed in the literature review, adolescence is recognised as a period of significant psychological, biological, and social change for young people, when young people's independence grows and the influence of adults wanes (Steinberg, 2015; Blakemore, 2018). This adds a dimension to social work practice that is perhaps less of a feature in traditional social work settings, which is designed to protect younger children from harm within the home (Firmin and Knowles, 2022). Consequently, social workers and the wider safeguarding system must recognise that adolescents require a safeguarding response different from that for other age groups, recognising their developing autonomy and changing social networks (Coleman and Hagell, 2022).

## **Negotiated participation**

Negotiated participation can be defined as young people independently sourcing their own support that is subsequently considered acceptable by social workers and safeguarding partners. This activity or action is then officially or discreetly considered part of the young person's plan (i.e., the young person's

social worker monitors the activity by asking for formal updates in meetings or informally during conversations with the young person). In comparison to the two previous types of participation, negotiated participation is the least well developed. This is because it appeared less frequently during the case file analysis, and the research participants only lightly touched upon it during the two focus groups.

Negotiated participation is closer to restricted participation than to forced participation, as the social worker still maintains authority by either officially accepting or denying the young person's expression of agency. The extract from Toni's case file below provides an illustration of negotiated participation. The case file extract has been taken from Toni's looked-after review meeting minutes<sup>18</sup>. The meeting was held because of concerns about Toni's safety whilst visiting his grandfather's house. Professionals previously agreed that Toni would move from his grandfather's house to his uncle's house, due to concerns that Toni's mum was visiting the grandfather's property. Toni's case file stated that Toni's mother was a chronic heroin user, and it was strongly suspected that she exploited Toni's loyalty to her by encouraging him to sell heroin and crack cocaine for her boyfriend. The extract below shows that Toni independently found a solution to reduce rising tensions at home between him and his uncle by leaving the house to spend time with his grandad:

*Since the last meeting Toni has maintained a close relationship with his grandad and continues to visit him unplanned and unsupervised. Though this is concerning due to the presence of Toni's mum, Toni states that he only visits his grandad when he is feeling anxious, or when he feels stressed at his uncle's house. Toni and his uncle have both found these breaks useful and report that it has eased pressure in the house and in their relationship. Toni's uncle has said that without this regular respite it's unlikely that Toni would be able to remain in his care. Toni's grandfather has agreed to do his best to keep Toni's mother away.*

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<sup>18</sup> A looked-after review is a meeting that includes all involved in the care and support of young people in foster or residential care. This can include the young person, the social worker, parent(s)/carer(s), teachers, foster carers / residential workers, and other relevant professionals. During the meeting, the allocated social worker explores how things are going and whether the plan is meeting the young person's needs.

### *Agreed Actions*

*Toni's unsupervised contact with his grandfather is to be kept under review. Social worker to advise Toni that if his mum attends the property whilst he is there, he is to leave and return home immediately. If this does not happen the contact will be stopped, and consideration will be given to serving granddad with a CAWN [Child Abduction Warning Notice]<sup>19</sup> if contact continues.*

(Case file 09: looked-after review meeting minutes)

Toni's experience illustrates that young people often have the insight required to identify the most appropriate and sustainable forms of support (Hill and Warrington, 2022). The extract from the meeting minutes indicates that Toni sourced his own solution outside the social worker's plan. However, although Toni's expression of agency was accepted, the power remained with the social worker and the police, as demonstrated by the threat of a CAWN.

It is also of note that the social worker was tasked with advising Toni that, should his mother visit his grandad's whilst he is there, he should immediately leave. This action provides an illustration of social work interventions possibly contrasting with what is known about adolescent development. For example, Blakemore and Robbins (2012) found that, although understanding of risk and consequence are largely developed by mid-adolescence, young people are more likely than children and adults to take risky decisions in emotionally 'hot' contexts. Therefore, it is perhaps unreasonable for Toni to be held accountable for leaving his grandad's house should his mother arrive, especially when Toni's case file indicates that Toni has previously been unable to respond in such a rational manner in the presence of his mum, as demonstrated by Toni previously selling crack cocaine and heroin for his mum's boyfriend.

Other examples of negotiated participation include Hope frequently walking out of lessons without gaining the teacher's permission. Hope was initially sanctioned for this behaviour by way of lunchtime detentions. The social work case files suggested that these sanctions were discussed and agreed upon during a multi-agency child-in-need meeting. However, despite the sanctions

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<sup>19</sup> A CAWN is a tool used by police and social care to protect children from people who may place them at risk. In essence, CAWNs are warning letters to those who are believed to be involved in harbouring children. They are relevant to the following sections of legislation: Section 2, Child Abduction Act 1984, and Section 49, CA 1989.

being put in place, Hope continued to walk out of class several times a week. Hope's social worker raised this with Hope, and the case note states, '*Hope leaves the classroom whenever she feels a panic attack coming on. Hope doesn't want to faint or panic in front of her friends*'. Shortly after this recorded discussion between Hope and her social worker, the school agreed that Hope would be given class passes that permitted her to leave the class only when she felt she was about to have a panic attack. Hope was provided with three passes per week. From the information in Hope's case file, Hope used her passes as needed. The child protection officer at Hope's school stated at a child-in-need meeting that '*Teachers are no longer raising concerns about Hope walking out of her classes. Hope uses her passes appropriately. She leaves the class when she is feeling unwell and returns with no issue.*'

Toni's and Hope's examples demonstrate the sophistication of young people's understanding of their needs and the professional systems they must navigate. Both examples show that young people can make decisions and express agency in a nuanced and mature manner. If Toni or Hope had made their requests verbally, both are likely to have been refused. However, due to their ages and levels of agency, they could negotiate complex systems and power dynamics to achieve their goals. Though unlike forced participation, negotiated participation differs because the young person acts independently, not in response to the decisions made by social workers and other adults. By contrast, forced participation is a young person's response to not being listened to or having decisions thrust upon them.

The data from the case file analysis suggests that negotiated participation is a form of self-identified and independently sourced support. Research suggests that young people value their independence in their search for support (Rickwood *et al.*, 2015; Pretorius *et al.*, 2019). This aligns with research on adolescent development, which indicates that by mid-adolescence, young people have a growing need for independence and autonomy (Steinberg, 2015; Blakemore, 2018). Social workers' requirement to formalise, record and approve young people's self-sourced support may be understandable from a safeguarding perspective. However, this approach perhaps disrupts and institutionalises a normative feature of adolescent development. Furthermore, as social workers and partner agencies continue to legitimise which of the

young people's self-directed sources of support are acceptable, negotiated participation also possibly signifies the presence of adultist views and practices. Adultism refers to the legal and socio-economic responsibilities, authority, rights, and privileges adults hold over children (Flasher, 1978).

The social workers in the focus groups did not explicitly discuss manifestations of negotiated participation. However, they provided some insights into the dilemmas they face in providing full participation to young people in the context of child exploitation. As highlighted by the comments below, social workers are cautious about young people's involvement in decision-making because there is always the potential that the young person's exploiter is behind the scenes manipulating the young person's requests:

*Not everything young people do or say is safe or can be trusted. As professionals we have to work with the young person and try and work towards an agreement of what can go in the plan and what is not realistic or safe. That decision cannot be left to young people who are being exploited by others. They are often just repeating what their abusers have told them to say.*

(Louise, social worker, duty team)

The responsibility of determining whether a young person's expressed wishes are authentic and self-derived or coerced and manipulated by an abusive individual is part of the social worker's role. It is imperative that social workers do not dismiss young people's views or deny them their right to have a say in the decisions that impact them because there is a possibility that the young person is being exploited and told what to say. Such actions would contravene young people's rights as stipulated in Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989).

## **6.3 Summary**

Using Lundy's (2007) model of participation, this chapter explored how young people influence social work decision-making through participation. Three types of participation were presented to illustrate the findings from the case file analysis and the two focus groups. 'Restricted participation' was most frequently observed across the case files. Restricted participation provides young people with the appearance of participation. However, their input was confined to peripheral issues such as the time and location of social work visits. Forced

participation' describes the actions young people feel forced to take to ensure that their views are listened to. This chapter highlighted the responsive nature of forced participation and its relationship to restricted participation. The findings suggested that, if social workers and the wider system were able to approach participation in a more open and less restrictive manner, the incidence of forced participation may reduce. 'Negotiated participation' was introduced as the third and final type of participation. This form of participation was the least observed in the data. However, it appeared to play an important role in how young people get their voices heard and listened to when their requests were unlikely to be granted. The study highlighted that the three participation types are better understood as situational, rather than as a phased approach to facilitating young people's participation in child exploitation.

## **Chapter 7 Young people's influence, pt. 2: Social work responses to young people's 'demand characteristics'**

This chapter examines the influence that young people's individual characteristics can have on social work decision-making and interventions, as determined by analysing the findings from the case file analysis and the two focus groups. While various intersecting characteristics are discussed throughout this chapter, including sexual orientation and learning disabilities, this chapter primarily focuses on what Bronfenbrenner labelled 'demand characteristics' (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 1995). An individual's gender, ethnicity, and age are considered to be 'demand characteristics' as they 'invite or discourage reactions from the social environment' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 813). The focus on young people's demand characteristics reflects the strength of the findings from the research data relating to these specific demographics.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section reintroduces the reader to Trent and Hampstead local authorities (LAs), with a specific focus on placing young people within their localities. The second section introduces the findings primarily relating to the influence of age and gender on social work decision-making. This section focuses on the experiences of boys and young men. The third section examines the intersecting influence of age, gender, and ethnicity. This section is specifically concerned with the interactions between social workers and Black boys and young men.

### **7.1 Young people in their localities**

Before exploring how social workers and the wider safeguarding system respond to young people's intersecting characteristics, it may be helpful to locate the young people in the areas they live. The role and influence of external factors, such as local demographics and access to peers and groups with whom young people identify, are particularly pertinent to child exploitation, as it principally involves adolescents (Firmin and Knowles, 2022). Adolescence



is a distinct process of human development, during which the forming and significance of peer relationships and gaining a sense of identity and belonging become increasingly important (Tomova *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, how young people relate to and interact with their surroundings, including the people around them, also becomes more relevant.

## **Trent Council**

The four boys (Jack, Jamie, Dylan, and Noah) working with Trent Council's specialist child exploitation team due to concerns about criminal exploitation lived in some of the most deprived wards in the borough, where poorer housing, higher unemployment, poorer health outcomes, lower educational outcomes, lower income, and higher crime rates were recorded (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019). These are important external factors for social workers to consider because issues such as poverty and being excluded from mainstream education have been found to increase vulnerability to criminal exploitation (ADCS, 2019; NCA, 2019; Turner *et al.*, 2019; Beckett and Lloyd, 2022). In addition to the above, it has also been found 'that boys from black and minority ethnic backgrounds appear to be more vulnerable to harm from criminal exploitation' (CSPRP, 2020, p. 8).

It is worth noting that only one of the four boys who received support from Trent Council's specialist team due to concerns of criminal exploitation was from a Black background. This is significant due to the high levels of diversity in some of Trent's wards, where there are also recognised external push factors including poorer housing, higher unemployment, lower educational outcomes, lower income, and higher crime rates (ADCS, 2019; NCA, 2019; Turner *et al.*, 2019; CSPRP, 2020). Moreover, boys from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds are also thought to be at higher risk of criminal exploitation (CSPRP, 2020). The combination of these factors possibly raises questions about the accessibility of the council's support services for boys and young men from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

The girls (Keira, Hope, Sara, and Ella), who were all allocated a social worker from Trent Council's specialist team due to concerns about CSE, were from a mixture of the more affluent areas and the areas that were considered neither affluent nor deprived. Although any child or young person can be at risk of

sexual exploitation, there may be factors and experiences that make some young people more vulnerable than others. These include gang association, substance use, deprivation, and previous experiences of familial abuse (Phoenix, 2019; Coy, 2016; Coy *et al.*, 2017). Research has also shown that young people with learning disabilities can be at increased risk of CSE due to societal attitudes that refuse to view young people with learning disabilities as sexual beings (Franklin *et al.*, 2015). As highlighted in Chapter 6, the case files for Keira, Hope, Sara, and Ella indicate that all four young people had additional factors in their lives that may have increased their levels of vulnerability. This includes Keira's and Hope's suspected developmental disability and Ella's and Sara's prior experiences of neglect and abuse within the family home. Ryan, the only male to be allocated a social worker from Trent Council in relation to CSE, resided in the most deprived ward in Trent Council.

## **Hampstead Council**

Hampstead Council is approximately three times larger than Trent Council in size and population and is located approximately ten miles from a major city region, which has a hyper-diverse and more youthful population (ONS, 2021). Due to the proximity of Hampstead Council to a major cultural and hyper-diverse centre and the nature of adolescence increased mobility and a strong developing sense of identity (Steinberg, 2015), it is perhaps understandable that many young people from Hampstead Council are drawn to the city area. This may be particularly true for young people who perhaps do not see themselves as fitting in with the overall demographic of Hampstead Council. It is evident from the case file analysis that social workers based in Hampstead were in frequent contact with social workers in the city region. Correspondence between social workers was often in response to young people going missing in the city region. Additionally, Hampstead Council social workers would also attend child safeguarding meetings after a young person had been identified as being at risk of harm or had been harmed in the city region. From reading the case files, it was difficult to ascertain whether the social workers in Hampstead Council undertook work with young people about the draw of, and increased risks associated with city centres.

According to Hampstead Council case files, Damian, Zac, and Tanya lived in the most deprived wards. Damian's ethnicity was recorded as Black African, and Zac's ethnicity was recorded as being from a GRT background. Damian and Zac are the only non-White European young people included in the research sample from Hampstead Council. Both young males were recognised victims of criminal exploitation and trafficking. Tanya is the only other young person to be recorded as living in one of the most deprived wards. Tanya's ethnicity was recorded as White British. Tanya was a suspected victim of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. The remaining three young people whose case files were accessed in Hampstead Council (Kris, Toni, and Lucas) were recorded as White British / White European. All three young males were from wards recorded as in the top 20% of the nationally most deprived areas (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019).

Varying degrees of family financial problems were noted in all the case files accessed in Hampstead Council. This included families frequently accessing food banks and requesting financial support for travel, school uniforms, and paying utility bills. However, when referring to social issues in assessments, such as poverty, crime, and poorer housing, social workers appeared to personalise these social issues, addressing them as a family matter. An example included the repeated revisiting of budgeting work with Toni's grandfather. The data in the case files made little reference to the broader social context and the decline in living standards and social support that has been evident since the introduction of austerity in 2010 (UN, 2019). The disconnect between children's social work practice and societal inequality has also been observed in traditional social work settings; academics have urged child protection policy and practice to reconnect with social policies on poverty and inequality to improve the effectiveness of safeguarding policy (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018).

## **Common findings across both local authorities**

It is important to note that both research sites include some of England's wealthiest and poorest wards. Nonetheless, in both areas, all young males identified as being at risk of CCE and whose case files informed this study resided in the most deprived wards. Whilst it is important to recognise that all

young people can be at risk of exploitation, the findings from this study appear to reinforce similar messages found elsewhere, which highlight the potential impact of structural issues, such as inequality, socio-economic disadvantage, and exposure to crime, and increased vulnerability to exploitation (ADCS, 2019; Bernard, 2019; NCA, 2019; Beckett and Lloyd, 2022; Firmin *et al.*, 2021; 2022a). Collectively, these findings invite social workers and policymakers to look beyond a young person's individual circumstances and explicitly consider and respond to the potential relationship between structural inequalities, experiences of deprivation, and increased vulnerability to exploitation. This includes gendered expectations and the role of racial stereotypes, as will be discussed in the following sections.

## **7.2 Social work perceptions of gender and vulnerability**

Indicators that a young person's gender had a meaningful impact on social work decision-making started to emerge as a potential finding before accessing social work case files. The significance of gender became of note whilst agreeing which Trent Council case files would be accessed as part of this research. As the extract from my reflective journal below highlights, when Trent Council shared its list of open child exploitation cases, there appeared to be a relationship between gender and the type of exploitation young people were recognised as experiencing:

### **Reflective memo**

*In preparation for my case file analysis, I was provided with a list of all the young people open to Trent Council where concerns relate to child exploitation. This includes open cases and those closed within the last 6 months. There are 26 young people's names on the list. The list includes young people's names and gender and whether they are open or closed. The list also indicates whether the concerns relate to CSE or CCE. Except for one young person, all the young people on the list open due to CSE are recorded as female and all the young people open due to concerns of CCE are recorded as male. CSE makes up 12 of the cases (one being a male). CCE makes up the remaining 14 cases. The list does not indicate whether young people are at risk of both CSE and CCE...*

As highlighted above, from the data shared by Trent Council, there appeared to be a gender divide: boys were more likely to be associated with criminal exploitation and girls with sexual exploitation. This split in gender and exploitation type was expected as it reflects the wider body of research and literature on child exploitation (Lillywhite and Skidmore, 2006; Cockbain *et al.*, 2017; Fanner, 2019; NCA, 2019; CSPRP, 2020). The current evidence base indicates that most victims of sexual exploitation are girls (Coy *et al.*, 2017) and that boys appear more vulnerable to criminal exploitation (CSPRP, 2020). However, due to significant under-reporting in both areas, the true extent of these issues may not be accurately reflected (Cockbain *et al.*, 2017; Maxwell *et al.*, 2019).

Although gender emerged as a possible influencing factor in social work decision-making before the case file analysis, issues relating to gender did not appear again until the seventh case file was analysed. At this point, there was enough data to compare the different gendered experiences. Through the process of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014), the difference in response between boys and girls started to develop (see Appendix 4). The two case studies below highlight occasions when young people appeared to be at risk; however, possibly due to the young person's gender and other intersecting factors, their social workers appeared less able to recognise their vulnerability. The two case studies draw from Jack's and Ryan's social work case files. While the case studies are closely based on the information recorded in the case files, the data has been abridged to provide a snapshot of multiple interactions between the young person and their social worker.

### **Case study one: Jack**

The social worker's case notes describe Jack as 'immature' and 'honest'. The social worker's assessment also states that Jack is 'extremely vulnerable' as he has 'a strong desire to fit in with his peers', but this is made more difficult due to his small stature. Jack's case file indicates that he may have foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD); consequently, 'Jack's physical appearance is more like that of a ten-year-old as opposed to his actual age' (fourteen years).

Recently, Jack shared with his mum and social worker that he has a drug debt with the local drug dealers. Jack shared on multiple occasions that he does not want to deal drugs again, but the people he owes money to are pressuring him to sell drugs to pay off his debt of £200. Jack informed his social worker and his mum that he does not want to attend school as he is scared that he is going to get 'shanked' on the way to school due to refusing to sell drugs to pay off his debt.

The social worker's case notes indicate that both the social worker and Jack's mum believed that Jack was trying to get out of attending school. Jack requested that the social worker arrange transport to and from school to address these suspicions. The social worker refused this request and provided Jack with alternative school bus routes and times.

Jack eventually started to attend school again after his mum was threatened with formal action and a fine. However, Jack continued to state that he was in danger and that he was scared. Consequently, he refused to catch the school bus. As a result, Jack's school attendance was sporadic, and when he did attend, he was significantly late. During a multi-agency child-in-need meeting, which Jack attended, the minutes indicate that the social worker raised Jack's request for transport. The meeting minutes state that '... it was unanimously agreed that Jack would not be provided with transport to or from school' and that the 'professionals in the meeting convinced Jack to catch the morning school bus so he can start the day well with his friends.' The social work case notes indicate that within a few weeks of catching the school bus, Jack was attacked by three men with a metal tool. Jack's injuries included a broken cheekbone and fractured eye socket.

### **Case study two: Ryan**

Social care received a referral from the police stating that Ryan was found in bed with two men in a city centre hotel. The referral stated that Ryan claims to have known the two men, stating that they are 'just friends'. The police referral indicated that background checks on both young males were completed, and they were not known to the police. According to the referral, the men were aged nineteen and eighteen years. Ryan was fifteen years old at the time of the referral. The referral stated that the hotel receptionist called the police at 6.15 p.m. as the receptionist was concerned about three males checking into one room and one of the guests appearing to be 'underage'. When the police arrived at the hotel room, Ryan and one of the men were naked in bed. The

male who answered the door was wearing underwear. The police questioned both males and completed background checks. They also took Ryan back home and spoke with his mum.

After receiving the referral, the duty social worker met with Ryan and his mum. The social worker's case notes state that she initially met with Ryan alone and that he seemed 'nervous and embarrassed'. The social worker discussed the referral with Ryan, reporting that he denied anything sexual had happened in the hotel room and that the two males were friends from the local area. The social worker's case notes from this home visit state that 'Ryan does not appear comfortable talking openly about his sexuality. I reassured Ryan that if he does identify as gay or bisexual, I can support him to access groups or online support.' Ryan told the social worker that he did not identify as being gay and did not want any further support.

The case notes indicate that, during the visit, the social worker also met with Ryan's mum and aunt. The case notes state that Ryan's mum informed the social worker that Ryan is 'usually well behaved', that he does not drink or take drugs, and that he has never gone missing. The case files state that Ryan's mum is 'appropriately worried about the incident and has spoken to Ryan about keeping safe.' The social worker's written assessment concludes that 'Ryan is well loved by his mother and maternal aunt. They are caring and will support Ryan to explore his sexuality when Ryan is ready.' The social worker shared information relating to local LGBTQ+ services with Ryan's mum, and the case was closed.

When considering both case studies, it is possible that many factors influenced the social workers' actions and inactions, for example, the competing demands placed on social workers, including access to limited resources (MacAlister, 2022). As illustrated by Jack's and Ryan's case studies, the social workers in each scenario did not appear to explore the vulnerability of either young man, even though there were indicators of risk and harm in both cases. For example, Jack clearly articulated that he feared being attacked. He also provided a potential solution to prove that the threat to his safety was stopping him from attending school and not a lack of wanting to go to school.

However, Jack's social worker, his mum, and the professionals in the child-in-need meeting continued to pressurise Jack and disregarded his feelings. This was also against a backdrop of Jack previously being arrested by the police in a

flat with a significant amount of cannabis. The data from Jack's case file appears to suggest that his social worker did not fully consider his vulnerability to potential violence and continued exploitation. This is despite his history, his small stature, and his potential diagnosis of FASD<sup>20</sup>. Jack's experience is representative of similar findings from the case file analysis, findings that appear to suggest that a young person's gender can influence who is deemed vulnerable and who is not. This is despite other factors (such as health issues) potentially increasing risk.

The role and influence of gender were also recognised by the research participants attending the focus group. As suggested by the social workers' comments below, when working with females, social workers appeared to routinely consider issues of vulnerability to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. The data from the case file analysis and the two focus groups suggests that these considerations were less apparent when considering the needs of boys and young men:

*When working with females, collectively, we [social workers] consider the coercion, the control, the threats of physical violence, potential sexual abuse, and those types of things. I don't think they're systematically viewed as factors for young males in my experience, and it's a sort of differentiation in response.*

(Dora, social worker, exploitation team)

Dora's account possibly reflects how ideas of masculinity can influence a social worker's ability to consider young males, such as Jack, as being vulnerable to coercion and threats of abuse and violence. When considering Ryan's case study, the social worker does not appear to consider the potential threats of physical violence or the sexual exploitation or abuse that Ryan may have been subjected to in the hotel room. The information contained in the case notes appeared to suggest that the social worker accepted Ryan's account at face value. The social worker seemed to lack professional curiosity about Ryan's experiences in the hotel. The possibility that Ryan may be a victim of sexual abuse or exploitation seemed to be clouded by issues relating to his potential sexual orientation. It is recognised in the literature on sexual abuse that, while

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<sup>20</sup> FASD affects children differently depending on how often and how much the mother drank during pregnancy. Characteristics of FASD can include poor concentration and memory, difficulties in managing emotions and developing social skills, and poor impulse control (National Health Service, 2023).



disclosing sexual abuse is challenging for all children and young people, boys and young men may face additional barriers. These barriers may include internalised homophobia and dominant discourses of masculinity (Nelson, 2009; Radford *et al.*, 2011).

In contrast to Ryan's experiences, data from the case file analysis indicated that social workers responded differently when working with girls and young women at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation. As the extract below from Hope's case file suggests, when working with girls, the data from the case file analysis indicated that social workers sensitively explored whether females were at risk of harm or exploitation:

*I met with Hope this afternoon to discuss her recent missing episode. Hope appeared sheepish and did not want to talk about where she had been. I explained that it would help me keep her safe if she could provide me with some information. Hope said that she is fine and that she stayed at a friend's house all night. I asked her if she felt safe at her friend's house and if she was afraid at any point? Hope said that she felt safe and did not feel afraid. I asked Hope if she would like to speak to anyone else confidentially, such as the school councillor or a nurse practitioner about contraception or sexual health. Hope declined this offer.*

(Case file 3: social worker case note)

Hope's case note illustrates the contrast in experiences between boys and young men who go missing and girls and young women. Hope's social worker explored whether she wanted further support in relation to her mental and physical well-being. Similar conversations were not recorded as being held with boys after going missing. This is not to suggest that boys were any less cared for than girls by their social workers. Instead, the findings appear to suggest that the vulnerability to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse was less of a consideration in the case files of boys and young men.

The findings from the case file analysis, illustrated by Jack's and Ryan's experiences, suggest that social workers are less likely to recognise vulnerability in boys and appear less responsive to boys' feelings of being scared. Jack's and Ryan's experiences possibly also highlight the hallmarks of adultist actions by their social workers. Adultism relates to the belief that adults

interact with children and young people as subordinates, with inferior 'skills' and 'virtues', until they demonstrate an accepted level of maturity (Flasher, 1978). For example, the frequent overriding of Jack's insight into the risks he was facing by the adults around him suggests that his views were secondary to the collective adult consensus.

When considering Ryan's experiences, as recorded in the social work case file, the combination of Ryan's gender and his presumed sexuality appears to have influenced the safeguards he was afforded. The referral from the police stated that Ryan was found in a hotel room with two older males (aged eighteen and nineteen years), an issue that appears to have been neglected as a safeguarding concern. Instead, it seems that his social worker understood the incident as Ryan exploring his sexuality. Ryan was fifteen years old at the time. A common facilitator of CSE is the power difference between the exploiter and the young person. As Cook and Mott highlight, 'Age difference is one of the power imbalances observed' in CSE cases (Cook and Mott, 2020). Research suggests that professionals should be alert to the possibility of CSE when there is an age gap of four years or more when considering the needs of young people aged between thirteen and sixteen years (Cook and Mott, 2020). The incident recorded in Ryan's case file raises possible questions about the combined influence of gender and sexuality on social work decision-making. If Ryan was a fifteen-year-old heterosexual girl, would the safeguarding response have differed? However, in Ryan's case, his age was not considered a vulnerability factor.

In contrast to other case files, it is possible that the dynamic of Ryan's gender and the query about his sexuality diverted the social worker's attention from the potential abuse Ryan experienced. Green (2005) found that, for boys who were sexually abused, assumptions were made by professionals about them having latent gay tendencies. This led to a blurring of their abusive experiences, and in some way made them complicit in their abuse. The findings from the case file analysis suggest that Ryan's social worker considered him to be sexually mature and responsible enough to be in a hotel room with two older men as a way in which to explore his sexuality. Ascribing high levels of maturity and culpability to young people are indicators of adultification. The adultification of young people includes a reduction in notions of innocence and vulnerability and

can result in young people not being afforded the protection they require (Davis and Marsh, 2022). These factors appear to be present in Ryan's experiences.

The research participants also discussed the influence of young people's identity on social work decision-making during the focus groups. As highlighted by the quotations below, the social workers attending the focus groups appeared acutely aware of the different support provided to boys and girls:

*Basically, boys are always seen as perpetrators first, whereas girls are always presumed to be victims. I am currently working with three young males. They are all victims of criminal exploitation and there's sort of a general consensus amongst professionals that they could just say 'no'.*

(Samantha, social worker, family support team)

*Boys are more difficult to read than girls; they do not talk about their feelings as much. They are also seen as stronger and able to say 'no' to the people exploiting. These things combined can stop professionals seeing them as victims, which makes them the perfect victims in a way, if you get what I mean?*

(Charlie, social worker, adolescent team)

*I could be wrong, but I don't think it's about whether they are a boy or girl. I think there's more of an understanding of CSE, and we're still developing our understanding of CCE. So, I think that's [why] we are unable to effectively face some of those challenges yet.*

(Emma, social worker, exploitation team)

The above social work comments reinforce the findings from the case file analysis regarding differences in the service provided to boys and to girls. The first two quotations emphasise similar points, suggesting that boys are generally perceived as being less vulnerable to abuse and exploitation than girls due to notions of masculinity. Interestingly, the language used by Charlie, which suggests that boys are more challenging to read, reflects national CSE guidance from 2009, which stated that boys are 'generally harder to work with and less willing to disclose this type of information' (HM Government, 2009). Sentiments like this appear to individualise the issues and do not address societal factors relating to masculinity and male stereotypes. In contrast, Emma suggests that there is a disparity in service due to the lack of understanding of CCE, and not the young person's gender. It is acknowledged that research

relating to CSE is more developed than that for CCE (Firmin *et al.*, 2022a), which may contribute to the compromised response received by boys. However, this does not adequately acknowledge Ryan's experience related to CSE.

The findings that suggested that boys received a compromised safeguarding response, compared with girls, did not seem in dispute in either focus group. As highlighted by the conversation extract below, the social workers in Hampstead Council went on to have a detailed conversation about the possible reasons for this disparity in social work support:

**Anne** (social worker, duty team): *Most of my team don't like working with CCE or CSE. They're scared of it. I don't mind working with CSE and girls, but I have no idea of how to work with CCE. I am old; I only just know how to use Facebook and I'm 5 ft 3". How am I going to relate to a 6-ft tall, teenage boy who is selling drugs on Snapchat? If I am being honest, I work best with families. I relate better to parents and grandparents than teenagers.*

**Charlie** (social worker, adolescent team): *I don't think boys are selling drugs on Snapchat, but I get what you mean. I like working with boys. I rarely have any girls on my caseload, but I get what you mean about not relating to them as easily. I think that's also because we are not used to working with teenage boys. We are used to working with families, like what you said. I have also worked in CSE, so I suppose it's a bit easier for me.*

**Anne** (social worker, duty team): *No, I didn't mean 'selling drugs' – I just meant to say social work is always changing priorities and it's hard to keep up. I mean, I have worked on specialist teams over the years, and we go round in circles. Social work has changed a lot since then, but I don't think all these changes are making kids any safer.*

**Maria** (social worker, looked-after children's team): *I disagree. Sorry Anne. I think we have to change our approach and update our knowledge as new risks emerge. I just don't think everyone has had the training needed. I suppose we know more about some young people than others.*

The conversation above highlights that, whilst social workers might agree that boys are at risk of receiving a less comprehensive service than girls, the reasons for this appear varied and less straightforward. For example, Anne highlights her lack of confidence in relating to teenage boys; this includes a lack of experience and knowledge about technology. Anne's comments also suggest that she may feel small and vulnerable when working with boys and young men. While Charlie and Maria appear more comfortable working with boys, both indicate that there are some challenges. Charlie states that boys are more challenging to relate to. Maria touches on the lack of training and development available to social workers working with boys and CCE.

Though the gender of the young people was discussed in detail (albeit through the male lens), the gender of the social work workforce and the social workers attending the focus groups, who were all female, were not featured as part of the conversation. It is perhaps of significance that 87% of the children's social work workforce is female (DfE, 2023); therefore, understanding the experiences of adolescent males and being able to relate to them is likely to be reduced.

The findings from this research suggest that social workers perceive and interact with adolescent boys and girls differently. This appeared to result in boys frequently being considered less vulnerable and, therefore, in need of less protective interventions from their social workers. The findings also suggest that boys' emotional and psychological well-being was frequently overlooked. This is possibly due to notions of masculinity and social workers being unable to relate easily to boys. This appeared to be true for boys regardless of whether they were at risk of CCE or CSE. Explanations for the disparity in services provided by social workers include a lack of skills, knowledge, and experience, and issues with relatability.

### **7.3 Social work perceptions of ethnicity, gender, and vulnerability**

This section primarily explores the combined influence of gender and ethnicity on social work decision-making, though it is important to highlight that the findings relate to the experiences of two Black young males. This is due to the limitations of the small sample size included in the case file analysis.

Furthermore, it is recognised that the term 'Black' includes people from many different ethnic and cultural groups; however, the findings from the case file analysis were not expansive enough to understand how these differences affected social work decision-making and interventions. As suggested by the research participant's quotation below, although detailed conversations were held in the focus groups about the experiences of Black boys and young men, the social workers in the focus groups also did not distinguish between young people from different Black ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This is despite research indicating that Black African and Black Caribbean children, young people, and families have significantly different experiences in the child protection arena (Bernard and Thomas, 2016):

*I worked with lots of Black boys when I worked in London. Black boys are more mistrustful of statutory services, and I can see why. I saw how differently professionals treated them. It goes much deeper than individual social workers, but we can all start to make sure we take responsibility for our practice.*

(Anne, social worker, duty team)

Anne's comments illustrate the tendency for practitioners and researchers to 'lump' Black and ethnic minoritised young people's experiences together (see CSPRP, 2020). 'Ethnic lumping' relates to the use of broad labels, such as BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) and GRT, that lump two or more groups of people together despite distinct differences in culture and lived experiences (Fontes, 1993). The impact of this form of ethnic lumping includes arriving at findings that homogenise individual experiences (Fontes, 1993).

The sample population for this research was mostly White European ( $n = 11$ ). The three young males from ethnic minoritised backgrounds were Dylan, who was recorded as 'Mixed White and Black Caribbean'; Damian, who was recorded as 'Black African'; and Zac, who was recorded as being from a GRT background. Hope was the only female to be recorded as Black Caribbean. While it is recognised that Black girls' experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation are largely missing from the research literature (Bernard, 2019; Davis, 2019) and that Black girls are more likely to be adultified and considered sexually mature (Epstein *et al.*, 2017; Davis, 2019), this research focuses on the experiences of Black boys and young men. This is because the data from

Hope's case file did not indicate the same level of disparity in service provision. Furthermore, the experiences of Black girls were also absent during the focus group discussions. The lack of prominence of Black girls' experiences with social workers in these research findings is by no means a comment on Black girls' interactions with state institutions. Indeed, it is possibly more reflective of Davis' finding that Black girls are persistently 'missing' in child sexual abuse and exploitation research, practice, and policy (Davis, 2019).

Notwithstanding the limitations highlighted above, including the small sample size, and reporting on just two young Black males' experiences, the data from the case file analysis suggests that there are some differences in how social workers and safeguarding partners viewed and interacted with young Black males compared with their White peers. The two case note excerpts below compare two young people's experiences, exploring how race and ethnicity may influence interactions with social workers. Though these case notes cover just two young people's experiences, the themes discussed represent wider patterns observed across the data.

The first case note was taken from Trent Council, from Jamie's case file. Jamie was recorded as being White British. He was fifteen years old and lived with both of his parents. Jamie and his family had no previous recorded involvement with social workers. The second case note was taken from Damian's case file in Hampstead Council. Damian was recorded as being Black African. He was fourteen years old and lived with his mother and younger brother. Damian and his family were recorded as having seven years of social work involvement. This was due to issues of child neglect. Both Jamie and Damian were known victims of CCE.

## **Jamie**

As the case note extract below highlights, Jamie lived at home with a supportive family who worked closely with services. Social work assessments stated that Jamie was selling drugs to pay for his personal drug use and to pay off a drug debt. Allowing drug debts to build up (debt bondage) is a well-known approach to trapping young people into criminal exploitation (Home Office, 2023). Jamie informed his social worker that he used drugs to manage his feelings of depression and anxiety.

Telephone call to Donna (Jamie's mum):

*I called Donna this morning after I received a referral from City's A&E Department relating to Jamie's attendance at A&E over the weekend. Donna reports that Jamie was missing for much of the weekend, arriving back home on Sunday night looking very distressed and dishevelled.*

*Donna said that they've had a terrible night last night as Jamie was threatening to harm himself and to take an overdose. Donna and Mike [Jamie's dad] managed to calm Jamie down enough to get him to A&E. Jamie was seen by the duty psychiatrist and was kept in overnight. Jamie disclosed to the psychiatrist that he was under the influence of several drugs, including MDMA and Ketamine. Jamie was discharged this morning and is now sleeping it off. Jamie has an appointment with his GP [general practitioner] on Wednesday*

*Donna asked whether Jamie could be placed in a children's home far away from the family home. Donna is worried that if Jamie remains in the area, he is going to continue to be forced to sell drugs. I tried to explain that taking Jamie out of the area was not the answer. I suggested that [it] is likely that Jamie will continue to sell and take drugs until he is ready to address his underlying anxiety and depression. Donna appeared to understand. I arranged to see Jamie later today to see how he is and to gain information about his whereabouts over the weekend. Donna will take Jamie to his GP appointment on Wednesday.*

(Case file 5: social worker case note)

## **Damian**

From the data in the case file, Damian's experience of social work involvement appeared to be unwelcome. It is recorded that Damian does not like social workers and that he had 'an issue with people in authority'. Damian's case files stated he is 'fed up with social workers interfering in his life'. Damian has had social work involvement since he was seven years old. Damian had been subject to a child protection plan due to the severity of the neglect he experienced. The case file indicated that this included a general lack of supervision, a history of poor home conditions, and a lack of emotional warmth from his mother. Below is an excerpt from Damian's case files.



Case discussion with manager:

*I shared my concerns with my manager that Damian was missing from home over the weekend and only returned today [Tuesday]. Damian was not reported missing by his mother or school. This goes against the safety plan agreed less than a fortnight ago. I explained to my manager that I telephoned Damian's school about a different child on my caseload and made an informal inquiry about Damian's attendance. I was told that Damian was not in school yesterday. I was informed that the school's safeguard lead did speak to Cheryl [Damian's mother] yesterday. Cheryl told the safeguard lead that she had not seen Damian since Saturday daytime. Cheryl informed the school that Damian had remained in touch over the weekend via WhatsApp. Damian had also recently been in touch and said he was on his way home.*

*I informed my manager that I spoke with the safeguard lead and asked why they did not report Damian missing or share this information with core group members. The safeguard lead stated that she spoke to Cheryl a second time, one hour later, and Damian had returned. Therefore, Damian was no longer missing. I explained that Damian's plan stated that all missing episodes must be reported. The safeguard lead repeated that Damian was not missing and that he arrived at school this morning and seemed fine.*

*I also shared that I had spoken to Cheryl about Damian's missing episode. Cheryl and the school are of the same opinion that as Damian remained in contact, he was not missing. I explained that I am growing increasingly worried about Damian and the low level of supervision and support he receives. My manager stated that due to the strategy meeting being less than a fortnight ago I should send an email reminder to all professionals about the need to follow the safety plan agreed in the strategy meeting. This includes reporting all missing episodes. It was also agreed that I would invite Cheryl into the office for a meeting with me and my manager to discuss our concerns and next steps if concerns continue to escalate. The family aide is to provide support with transport for this meeting.*

(Case file 12: social worker case note)

The case note excerpts from both Jamie's and Damian's case files provide insight into the uniqueness of young people's circumstances, where a combination of their past experiences, their current context, and their relationships with their parents and social workers create significantly different

responses. Although it is difficult to ascertain the level to which Jamie's and Damian's ethnicities influenced the decision-making, what the above case notes indicate is that two vulnerable and exploited young males received different social work responses. In Jamie's case note, the adults in his life appear responsive to Jamie's needs. Each of the caring adults in Jamie's life appears to have worked, directly and indirectly, together to promote his safety and well-being. This included his parents, the duty psychiatrist, and the social worker.

In contrast, Damian's case note suggests that the adults around him seemed less protective and concerned for his well-being and safety. For example, neither his mum nor the school's safeguard lead reported him missing to the police or the social worker. This is despite a recent safety plan being put in place. Additionally, Damian's social worker and their manager did not consider it important to visit Damian to check on his welfare. This is evident from discussions and actions recorded in the case note and reading Damian's wider case file. This appears to be out of kilter with Jamie's experience. Furthermore, the lack of action does not appear to recognise Damian's younger age or that he was missing for a longer period. Additionally, as stipulated in statutory guidance, when young people return from a missing episode, they 'must be offered an independent return interview', and this should be carried out within seventy-two hours (DfE, 2014, p. 14). Although neither Jamie nor Damian received this level of safeguarding, Jamie did receive a visit from his social worker later that day. In contrast, according to Damian's case file, he was next visited by his social worker six days later.

The findings from the case notes suggest that professionals acted in a less protective manner towards boys from Black and other ethnic minority backgrounds than towards their White peers. The sample population for this research was small and only three of the males were from Black or other ethnic minority backgrounds; however, on multiple occasions across the data sets, social workers and partner agencies frequently appeared to respond in a less supportive and less protective manner to Black males than to White males, as observed in the case files. In Damian's example, this is evident from the social work and school professionals' lack of interest in speaking directly to him about his missing episode. This contrasts with Jamie's experiences: Jamie had the opportunity to speak to his parents, a psychiatrist, and a social worker. By

contrast, it appeared that the teacher and social workers spoke only to Damian's mum about Damian's missing episode.

From reading Damian's case file, the above experience was not isolated. Damian's case file contained other interactions with social workers where a diluted safeguarding response was provided. This includes when Damian's mother left him unsupervised while she left the country for ten days. Damian's mother forewarned the social worker about her intentions one week before flying out of the country. Damian's case file states that, during this time, Damian resided at an 'unknown male's house at an unknown location'. Though superficial attempts to see Damian were made by the social worker (such as telephoning Damian's school to see if he was in attendance), he was not seen by social workers, his school, or other safeguarding partners for the duration of his mother's absence. From the data recorded in the case files, it appears that the lack of proactive action taken by social workers left Damian at significant risk of harm. Damian was aged fourteen years at the time and a known victim of CCE. Damian also had a long history of neglect, which potentially increased his levels of vulnerability (Hanson, 2016).

Though the data contained in Damian's case file suggests that time constraints and the social worker's annual leave impinged on their capacity to successfully locate Damian and ensure his safety, the findings from this research also indicate that Damian's intersecting characteristics (gender, ethnicity, and class) may have influenced the social work response. The response by social workers and other professionals suggest that Damian was possibly seen as less vulnerable and less in need of protection than his White peers in similar circumstances. The response to Damian from professionals bears the hallmarks of adultification bias (Goff *et al.*, 2014; Davis and Marsh, 2020, 2022). Goff *et al.* (2014) found that, from the age of ten years, Black boys are perceived as older and more culpable for their actions than their White peers. The lack of care and concern shown to Damian on multiple occasions possibly indicates that he was considered as more mature, less vulnerable, and more capable than his age suggests.

Though the examples above relate to one young person's experiences, similar incidences were also observed in Dylan's case file. This includes following an

incident when Dylan was restrained and assaulted with a bladed instrument by the adults who were exploiting him. The assault resulted in a significant injury to Dylan's knee and thigh. As can be seen from the case note below, the social worker's interaction with Dylan appears formulaic and possibly lacks consideration of the trauma Dylan experienced. The case note details an interaction between the social worker and Dylan at the hospital following the assault:

*I met with Dylan at the hospital. Dylan presented as OK. Dylan did not want to talk about the incident. I let him know that I am here if he wants to talk. Before leaving I informed him that a strategy meeting with the police is going to be held later today.*

(Case file 8: social worker case note)

Whilst recognising the limitations of retrospectively analysing secondary data, the social worker's case note, which captures the social worker's first interaction with Dylan immediately following him being violently assaulted, appears void of context. The social worker's case note does not indicate that the social worker showed any signs of comforting Dylan or how she assessed Dylan's needs. The case note states that 'Dylan presented as OK'. While it is impossible to know the broader context in which the case note was written, such as time constraints or the emotional impact of Dylan's assault on the social worker, stating that Dylan presented as 'OK' perhaps undermines the potential physical and emotional impact of the assault he experienced. As highlighted by the strategy meeting extract below, the disconnect between the social worker's recorded response and Dylan's experience also appeared evident in the subsequent strategy meeting minutes:

*Dylan's social worker informed the meeting that she visited Dylan at the hospital following the assault. Dylan appeared in good spirits and was possibly still in shock. Dylan appeared physically well and was able to walk and move about.*

(Case file 8: strategy meeting minutes)

When read in conjunction with the case note from the hospital visit, the data from Dylan's case files appears to suggest a lack of understanding of the violent assault Dylan experienced. The social worker appears to disregard Dylan's emotional and psychological well-being. Whilst there may be several

contributing factors for the social worker's response, such as training needs or social workers emotionally guarding themselves against the worst types of abuse and exploitation, the findings of this research appear to indicate that social work responses to Dylan and Damian differed from responses to their White peers. These findings resonate with Sharpe (2005), who states that people from the 'black diasporas' are subject to daily 'symbolic assault and denigration' and 'unfair and unjust handling' from powerful institutions and statutory bodies.

The influence of race and ethnicity on practitioner responses was also discussed during the focus groups. As highlighted by the conversation below, social workers attending Hampstead's focus group also appeared to have professional experience of Black boys and White boys being perceived and interacted with differently:

**Maria** (social worker, looked-after children's team): *Boys are labelled as perpetrators or criminals. I see this with boys and Black boys in particular – when they're still kind of children.*

**Anne** (social worker, duty team): *Yeah, that would certainly be my experience. I am working with two boys, who were very quickly labelled as perpetrators by social workers due to them drawing a lot of police attention. They were both thirteen-year-old Black boys. When some of my girls who, even at seventeen, were still causing a lot of trouble for the police through their criminal behaviour, you know, because of the impact of the harm they'd experienced through CSE. However, social workers and the police were still viewing the girls as victims when the boys were actual victims. If I am being honest, I am finding it difficult to convince others, including some managers, that the boys are victims of exploitation and not perpetrators.*

**Jazz** (social worker, adolescent team): *Yeah – I agree. It makes it harder to get Black boys the help and the support they need. It makes it harder for them to engage with professionals because, you know, they feel like everybody is looking at them like criminals and judging them.*

Although the social workers' conversation focused on the perpetrator-versus-victim narrative, which misses some of the subtleties and blurring of roles in criminal exploitation (Wroe, 2020), the sentiments expressed by the social workers reinforce the findings from the two case files analysed. They acknowledge that social workers and the wider safeguarding system perceive and interact with Black boys and White boys differently. The findings from two young Black males' case files and the focus group emphasise the notion that in the context of CCE, Black adolescent males are treated with suspicion rather than care. Anne's statement that she finds it difficult to convince others, including managers, that thirteen-year-old boys 'are victims and not perpetrators' indicates that young Black males are not consistently provided with proper safeguarding, as previously highlighted by Damian's experiences. These findings echo similar conclusions from research that focused on safeguarding Black boys' and young men's experiences in Lambeth Council, London (Firmin *et al.*, 2021). The research from Lambeth Council found that the intersectional impact of racism, poverty, and sexism reduced the ability of Black boys and young men to gain access to the support they needed (Firmin *et al.*, 2021).

Though the impact of young people's ethnicity appeared to be a significant research finding, the ethnicity of the social workers providing support was not considered in the case files or during focus group discussions. Similar to the findings relating to gender, the notable lack of attention given to the role of ethnicity and race in relation to social workers is perhaps an indication of the largely monocultural lens of children's social work practice in England, which is primarily female (87%) and predominantly White (77%) (DfE, 2023). The impact of social workers' intersecting characteristics was not a central finding in this research, possibly because of the method of data collection and analysis (for further discussion relating to this topic, see Laird and Tedam (2019)).

## **7.4 Summary**

The findings discussed throughout this chapter established that young people's influence on social work decision-making reaches beyond their active participation, as discussed in Chapter 6. The influence young people can have on social work decision-making and interventions also includes social work

responses to young people's 'demand characteristics'. The findings from this research suggest that this can result in boys and young men being afforded less protection than their female counterparts. In relation to ethnicity, the study's small sample size poses certain limitations regarding generalising the findings. Nonetheless, the findings indicate that, for Black boys and young men, the intersecting characteristics of their gender and ethnicity seem to be a prominent factor influencing their experiences. Across multiple data sets from the case files and the focus groups, social workers seemed to treat Black males with less care, compassion, and protection than their White male and female peers.

Furthermore, although poverty, racism, ableism, sexism, and crime are considered potential risk factors in CCE and CSE (Coy *et al.*, 2017; NCA, 2019; Turner *et al.*, 2019; Beckett and Lloyd, 2022), social work assessments and plans did not explicitly address these issues. To better respond to the needs of young people and families, social workers and safeguarding practitioners are encouraged to adopt a social model for protecting children (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018). This approach addresses the intersection of structural factors, such as poverty, poor housing, and inadequate health outcomes, with issues such as racism, sexism, and ableism. This approach would possibly help reshape social work responses and promote holistic and effective preventative strategies (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018; Firmin *et al.*, 2021).

# **Chapter 8 Discussion and research synthesis**

This chapter has two main purposes. Firstly, it aims to present a comprehensive overview of the study, emphasising the key research findings. Secondly, it seeks to provide a synthesis and conceptualisation of the findings from the standpoint of young people's experiences of social work practice.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section summarises and discusses the study and its main findings. The second section synthesises the findings, examining the layered influences on social work decision-making and their effects on young people's interactions with social workers and the broader safeguarding system. The third section assesses to what extent social work decisions and interventions address young people's needs and reduce professional concerns.

## **8.1 Summary of the study and key findings**

### **Revisiting the aims of the research**

Before exploring how the research findings overlap and interconnect, it is important to revisit the aims of the research and what has been discussed throughout the thesis to this point. Chapter 1 sets out the importance and urgency of developing a deeper understanding of social work decision-making in the field of child exploitation. This included highlighting the risk of harm or death connected to CCE and/or CSE, and the lack of research and evidence on what works in addressing these types of abuse (CSPRP, 2020; Huegler, 2021). Chapter 1 also argued that, although there is a developing body of research on social work decision-making, the text largely relates to child safeguarding in 'traditional social work' settings (O'Sullivan, 2010; Whittaker, 2014; Gillingham, 2017; Munro, 2018; Murphy, 2019, 2021; Killick and Taylor, 2020; McCormack *et al.*, 2020). However, unlike traditional social work, risk and harm in child exploitation typically affects older children and mostly occurs in the extrafamilial context (Firmin and Knowles, 2022). These dynamics are less common in traditional social work settings and can add layers of complexity for social



workers working in child exploitation (Hanson and Homes, 2014; Huegler, 2021). Consequently, it cannot be assumed that the findings of the literature on social work decision-making are applicable to the field of child exploitation.

To help address this gap in knowledge, this thesis posed the following overarching question: what are the central factors that most influence social work decision-making in determining support and interventions when working with young people considered at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context?

Following the literature review, the research question was further developed by formulating four sub-questions. These sub-questions provided additional context and depth to the study. The sub-questions focused on identifying the relevant theories and concepts that underpin social work decision-making, exploring the extent to which adolescent development theories inform social work responses, examining the impact of traditional social work practices on decision-making in cases of child exploitation, and assessing whether social work interventions address young people's needs and reduce concerns in child exploitation cases.

As discussed in Chapter 2, whilst reviewing the relevant literature relating to the above research questions, several key themes emerged, including the recent inclusion of CSE and CCE as safeguarding concerns and how the needs of certain groups have been historically overlooked. For example, in the context of CSE, the experiences of boys and young men are less well researched and understood than those of their female peers (Cockbain *et al.*, 2017). The literature review also revealed that social work policy has conventionally been directed towards meeting the needs of younger children and harm caused within the home (Hanson and Holmes, 2014; Firmin and Knowles, 2020; 2022). The rationale for the study was also provided in Chapter 2. Considering the structural, cultural, and personal aspects of the sub-questions, it argued that the best approach to examining social work decision-making regarding child exploitation would be through an ecological framework. This is because an ecological framework recognises the multi-layered factors and allows for all 'dimensions' of decision-making to emerge (McCormack *et al.*, 2020) (see Figure 4).

Chapter 3 set out the research design. The research included the analysis of fifteen social work case files, using techniques from CGT to develop codes and categories (Charmaz, 2014). This was followed by two focus groups, in which the findings from the case files were further developed. The focus groups were attended by twelve qualified social workers, all of whom had experience working in child exploitation. The ethics of this research were also addressed in Chapter 3. Gaining ethics approval from the UREC was necessary due to the confidential nature of the data collected from social workers' case files. An ethics application was sent to UREC; following consideration, ethics approval was given in August 2019 (see Section 3.4).

## **Revisiting the research sites**

To assist in contextualising the key findings, it may be useful to provide a brief reminder of the two research sites where data was collected. The two research sites were selected to provide a contrasting picture of how child exploitation services are designed and delivered across England. The first research site (Trent Council) is in the north of England. Trent Council is the smaller of the two research sites and consists of more urban and inner-city areas than research site 2. Trent Council is also the most ethnically diverse of the two areas, with less than 40% of people living in the most ethnically diverse areas identifying as White British (local authority data). According to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019), Trent Council contains some of the most and least deprived areas (wards) in the country. The second research site (Hampstead Council) is based further south than Trent Council and is almost three times larger. Hampstead Council is made up of towns, villages, and hamlets. Hampstead Council is one of England's 20% least deprived areas (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019). According to the most recent census, Hampstead Council is less ethnically diverse than England's general population, with many of its areas comprising upwards of 94% White British and White non-British residents (ONS, 2021).

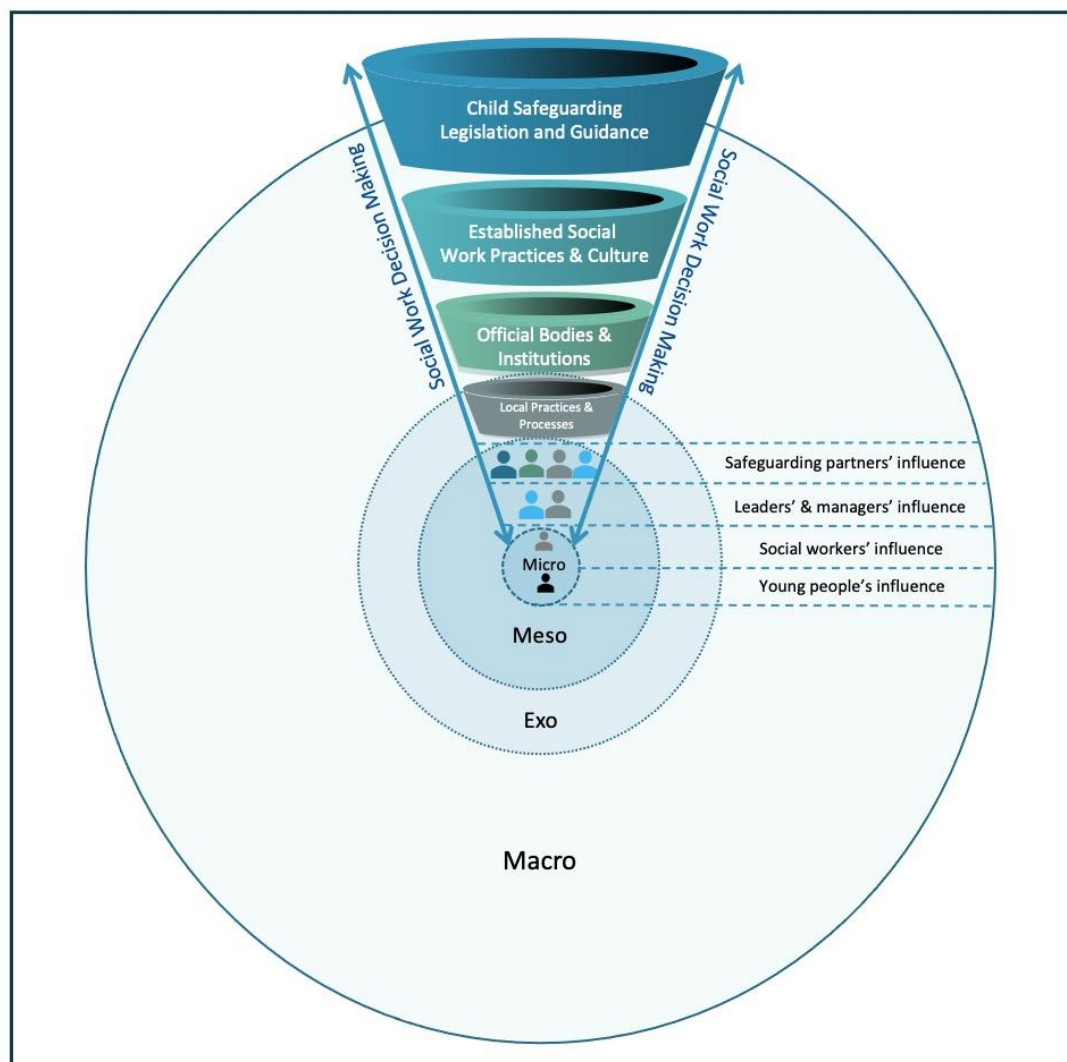
At the time of data collection, both local authorities had received an inadequate rating by Ofsted (detailed in Section 3.5). This is important to re-emphasise at this point because being rated as 'inadequate' has been found to carry substantial additional pressures (Jones, 2015; Local Government Association,

2019). An inadequate rating can often result in reduced staff morale and higher staff turnover (Jones, 2015; Local Government Association, 2019).

## Summary of the research findings

As highlighted in Figure 4, the findings were broadly presented in line with the ecological theoretical framework of the thesis.

**Figure 4. Ecological influences on social work decision-making**



## Professional and organisational influences on decision-making

As illustrated in Figure 4, the findings from this research suggest that macro-level factors provided the firm parameters in which all social work decisions were made. This included the degree to which social workers exercised discretion and the levels of participation afforded to young people. The findings

suggest that traditional social work practices and processes have been transposed to the emerging area of child exploitation. The findings from this research indicate that this can have a restrictive influence on social workers and can negatively impact the effectiveness of the interventions provided. For example, traditional child protection social work has a well-documented culture of being bureaucratic and sometimes defensive (Harris, 1987; Munro, 2011b, 2012; Lees *et al.*, 2013; Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016). Furthermore, this culture is recognised as a barrier to effective social work practice (Munro, 2011b; MacAlister, 2021). Nonetheless, as highlighted by the social worker's comments below, the findings from this research appear to indicate that these professional practices have been transferred to the emerging area of child exploitation:

*It's all the paperwork and management type of stuff that takes up most of your time. It's the same with all social work. You are constantly having to record and evidence your work. I don't think there's much value in these types of things. I think spending time with children and families is more important.*

(Dora, social worker, exploitation team)

Dora's comments suggest that recognised defensive practices observed in traditional social work settings are also present in child exploitation social work. This is despite recommendations to address such practices being explicitly made during the two most recent reviews of the English child protection system (Munro, 2011b; MacAlister, 2021, 2022).

## **Social workers' influence on decision-making**

As can be seen in Figure 4, the findings from this research indicate that the influence individual social workers can have on decision-making can be constrained by multiple overlapping factors. In this study, they are conceptualised as 'exo-level' influences. Exo-level influences are defined as the direct impact of multiple settings in which the individual (i.e., the social worker) is not an active agent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As discussed in Chapter 5, this research includes the significant, and at times forceful, influence of safeguarding partners (such as the police, education, and health).

The findings also suggest that, although the spaces in which social workers could exercise discretion were limited, social workers could still influence the direction of a case and act as gatekeepers to resources. This was demonstrated in how social workers presented information in their assessments and prioritised information during discussions with managers and safeguarding partners. The findings indicated that social workers sometimes prioritised information to help manage finite resources and navigate complex multi-agency relationships. The findings relating to discretion also suggested that social workers used a variety of coping mechanisms to manage the emotional and organisational demands they encountered. This included employing defensive techniques, such as enlisting managers' and multi-agency colleagues' input in decision-making to reduce levels of individual responsibility (Menzies Lyth, 1988).

### **Young people's participation and influence on decision-making**

Lundy's model (2007) of participation was introduced in Chapter 6 to illustrate young people's influence on social work decision-making. According to Lundy's conceptualisation of the child's right to participate, there are four phased factors to be followed if a child's right to participate is to be upheld: 'space', 'voice', 'audience', and 'influence' (Lundy, 2007) (see Section 6.2). The findings indicated that social workers working in the context of child exploitation were unable to consistently apply all four aspects of Lundy's model (Lundy, 2007). This seemed to be largely due to the constraints social workers experienced working in a highly bureaucratic and risk-averse system. These findings echo research on participation in traditional social work settings, where opportunities for young people to participate are also inconsistently provided (Diaz, 2020; Hill and Warrington, 2022).

The findings from this research relating to young people's participation suggest that there are three distinct types of participation in social work practice in child exploitation. The three types of participation were developed from the case file analysis and the focus group data. These are 'restricted participation', 'forced participation', and 'negotiated participation'. Each type of participation was identifiable by a set of distinct features and its relationship to the other two types of participation (see Section 6.2). The levels of participation observed

throughout the case files suggested that, given the older age of the young people at risk of exploitation, participation was compromised and controlled by social workers, who were often constrained by the wider safeguarding system. As highlighted by the research participant's comments below, the findings indicate that, in response to restricted levels of participation, young people would frequently rely on physical behaviours to get their voices heard:

*Some of my young people have acted out of frustration, exactly because no one is listening to them. I've worked with boys who've purposely threatened foster carers and residential workers knowing their actions will get them moved. They're not bad kids, they just know how to play the system.*

(Charlie, social worker, adolescent team)

Charlie's comments highlight that young people may act out of character and become threatening to ensure their views are heard. These comments resonate with the findings from the case file analysis, which showed young people relying on their behaviour to communicate and navigate prescriptive processes that frequently excluded them from decision-making. Young people's behaviour included running away; threatening teachers, foster carers, or social workers; and causing damage to property.

### **The influence of young people's individual characteristics on social work decision-making**

As highlighted in Figure 4, influences at the micro-level (i.e., the interactions between the social worker and the young person) occurred in the layered context of the broader social work profession. This includes the national policy context, the influence of safeguarding partners, local systems and processes, and individual social workers' discretion. When considering the combined impact of these system-wide influences on social work decision-making, the findings discussed in Chapter 7 suggest that they have resulted in disparities in social work responses, whereby a young person's age, ethnicity, and gender can influence the level of support and protection they are afforded. In Chapter 7, the study argues that data from the case file analysis and the focus groups indicates that boys and young men were provided with a reduced level of care and protection, compared with girls and young women. Furthermore, the study highlighted that, when compared with their White male peers, Black young men

and boys appeared to experience additional barriers to receiving an effective safeguarding response. The compromised safeguarding response experienced by Black boys and young men has been a topic of discussion in child exploitation literature (CSPRP, 2020; Davis and Marsh, 2020; Wroe, 2020; Firmin *et al.*, 2021).

## 8.2 Discussion and synthesis of findings

### **Adulthood and adultification: two sides of the same coin: social work responses to young people's age, gender, and ethnicity**

This section synthesises and critically discusses the research findings through the prism of social work responses to young people, and the influence that a young person's age, gender, and ethnicity can have on decision-making. This approach has been adopted because it adds value to the findings by situating them in the context of social work practice and policy. Additionally, this perspective avoids unduly focusing on processes rather than outcomes, a common critique of social work practice (O'Brien *et al.*, 2009; Burton and van den Broek, 2009; Munro, 2011b; MacAlister, 2021).

In this study, the findings suggest that, in relation to child exploitation, a young person's 'demand characteristics' (i.e., their age, gender, and ethnicity) appear to play a significant role in determining social work responses. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), 'demand characteristics' refer to a person's characteristics that encourage or discourage reactions from the social environment.

Using the theoretical concepts of adulthood<sup>21</sup> and adultification<sup>22</sup>, this study illustrates how a young person's age, stage of development, and maturity are often insufficiently considered when making decisions that affect young people's lives. Regarding gender, race, and ethnicity, the findings suggest that boys and young men, and particularly boys and young men from Black backgrounds, received a compromised safeguarding response, compared with their White

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<sup>21</sup> Adulthood refers to the belief that adults are superior to children in terms of capabilities, insights, and virtues (Flasher, 1978).

<sup>22</sup> Adultification involves the ascribing of adult-like attributes to children and young people. This can include emotions, experiences, responsibilities, and exposure to adult-like themes (Davis and Marsh, 2020).

peers. In relation to ethnicity, although the topic of ethnicity and gender was discussed in detail during the two focus groups, it is important to reiterate that only two of the fifteen case files analysed related to Black young males.

The synthesis below is divided into three sections. By applying the concept of adultism to the research findings, the first section explores the influence (or lack of) that young people's age and maturation can have on social work decision-making. The second section uses the concept of adultification to consider the influence that young people's gender, race, and ethnicity can have on the care and protection they are afforded. The third section assesses the impact of the above on the potential effectiveness of social work decision-making and interventions.

### **An age of missed opportunity: The process of adultism in child exploitation cases**

The following section explores the process of adultification observed in child exploitation cases in both research sites. As illustrated in Figure 5, in addition to the transfer of traditional social work practices, the findings indicate that social workers working in child exploitation were also required to navigate additional managerial processes. This included attending additional decision-making forums (e.g., child exploitation and missing panels) and regularly completing and updating specific tools related to child exploitation (see Table 6). This is despite recommendations about the need to reduce levels of bureaucracy being published over a decade ago (Munro, 2011b). Indeed, the most recent review of children's social care in England stressed 'that not enough had changed' in the decade since Munro's review of the child protection system and that the lack of progress continues to affect social workers' capacity to carry out their role (MacAlister, 2021). The review suggests that the reliance on processes and bureaucracy is caused by high levels of anxiety in the system, whereby individuals and organisations continue to 'feel vulnerable to public, regulatory and government scrutiny when things do go wrong' (MacAlister, 2021, p. 38). These sentiments are echoed throughout social work literature, which emphasises the defensive nature of such practices (Littlechild, 2008; Whittaker, 2011; Munro, 2011b; Lees *et al.*, 2013; Warner, 2015; Whittaker and Havard, 2015; Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016).



**Figure 5. Bureaucratic responses to risk: the process of adultism**

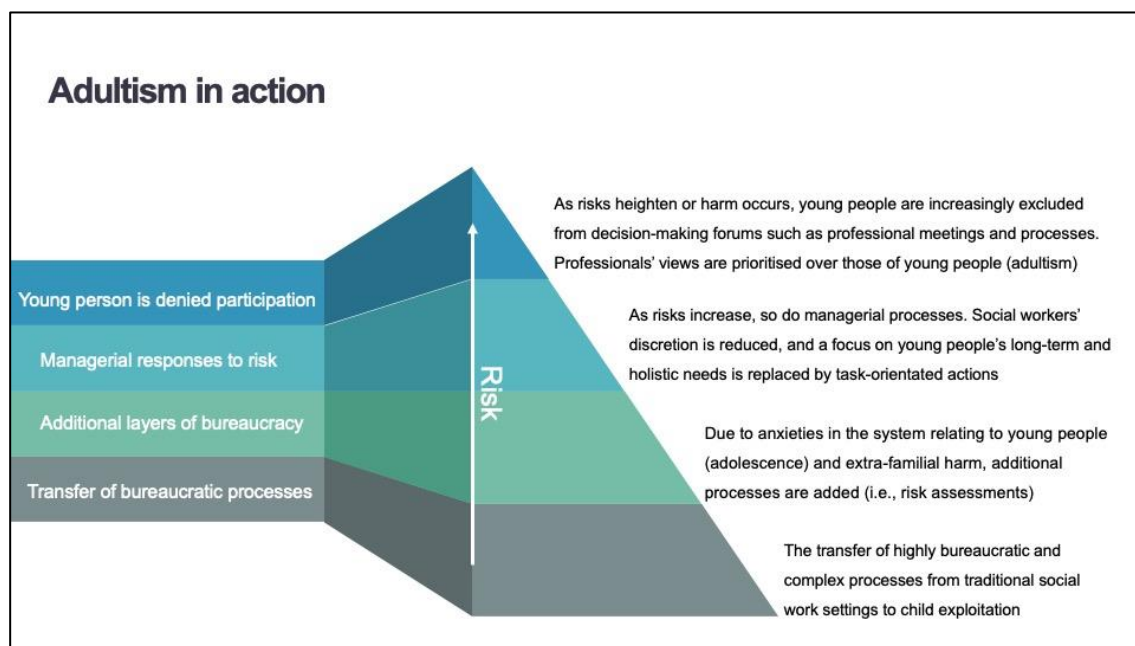


Figure 5 illustrates findings from the study that suggest that, as risk increases, so do professional and organisational anxieties. This in turn intensifies managerialist practices, which often results in the young person being moved further away from decision-making processes. As highlighted by the comments below, social workers attending the focus groups also directly linked these additional processes to anxieties related to working with young people and harm caused in the extrafamilial context:

*Even working on a new exploitation team that's been designed to reduce paperwork and stuff, I still feel that because you're working with teenagers and exploitation concerns are doubly heightened. So, you do get hit with even more paperwork, risk assessments and meetings to evidence what we do...*

(Emma, social worker, child exploitation team)

Emma's comments illustrate the findings from this research, which suggest that social work and organisational anxieties are exacerbated in the context of child exploitation. At an organisational level, this was indicated by the additional managerial processes. At an individual social work level, the findings suggest that social workers managed their anxieties by using a variety of defensive practices. This included social workers forcing decisions upwards, thus increasing the manager's responsibility whilst reducing their own (Menzies Lyth,

1988). Other defensive practices observed included social workers excessively involving safeguarding partners in decision-making to deflect ownership. Research suggests that workers may use such strategies to help reduce the weight of personal responsibility (Menzies Lyth, 1988; Lees *et al.*, 2013).

The data from the case file analysis also indicated that less prominence was given to young people's voices as the number of professionals involved increased. For example, when Jack requested transport to and from school because of threats of violence from his exploiters, Jack's social worker initially and independently denied Jack's request. However, when Jack continued to make the request and informed his social worker that he was scared, the social worker raised the issue in a subsequent multi-agency meeting. During the meeting, the attending safeguarding partners agreed that Jack should not be provided transport to and from school. The meeting minutes also indicate that Jack, who attended the meeting, was persuaded by the professionals in the meeting to catch the school bus. Whilst sharing this decision with safeguarding partners may have reduced the social worker's anxiety and individual responsibility, the involvement of multiple adults compounded Jack's experience of adultism. Jack's views and personal insights were silenced and superseded en masse by the adults in the meeting. A couple of weeks following the multi-agency meeting, Jack was attacked by three males with a metal object whilst waiting for the school bus.

During the case file analysis, the most explicit manifestations of adultism were observed in response to increasing risk and an intensification of managerialist practices. For example, following an incident where Keira was admitted to the hospital due to an incident of potential self-harm, the allocated social worker was required to complete five different referrals, risk assessments, and safety plans and attend nine meetings with safeguarding partners, managers, and senior leaders, all within eleven working days (see Section 4.3). Managerialism has been criticised for failing to recognise social work's individual, emotional, and human aspects (Trevithick, 2014). This is largely due to the focus on the completion of processes, measurable tasks, and outputs rather than prioritising relationships and outcomes (Harris and Unwin, 2009). As the research participant's comments below highlight, social workers attending the focus groups were aware of the impact of managerialism on their practice.

Samantha's comments establish the connection between risk, an intensification of managerialism, and task-orientated practices:

*Something happens to one of your young people and you have to attend all of these meetings. Managers are like 'Tick this off your list, report back at the next meeting'. In the meetings they are like, 'Have you seen the child today?' Tick! 'Have you completed safer relationships work?' Tick! 'Is the risk assessment up to date?' Tick! I sometimes feel my work is a never-ending to-do list.*

(Samantha, social worker, family support team)

Samantha's observations capture a broad finding from the case file analysis: the pursuit of managerialist approaches can lead to the exclusion of young people from significant decision-making processes. The findings suggest that, during meetings, safeguarding partners, and managers, who are typically not directly involved with the young person, take up the space that the young person and their insights would have otherwise occupied.

As exemplified by Keira's experience, managerialist approaches appeared to lead to young people's needs being divided into routine and short-term focused tasks. This includes the completion of risk assessments, welfare checks, attendance at meetings, and routine one-to-one work. The findings here echo other research findings that managerialist practices are not only designed to standardise practice and provide managers and senior leaders with additional prospects for oversight and monitoring but also can limit opportunities for social workers to exercise discretion (Thiele 2006; Harris and Unwin, 2009; Munro, 2010, 2011b). Furthermore, as highlighted in Figure 5, findings from this research suggest that the focus on short-term tasks is often at the expense of young people's participation and their evolving needs and rights.

The research participant's comments below illustrate the potential effects on young people when they are excluded from significant decisions that affect their lives:

*For the young people I work with, I find all these meetings and actions can create a bit of a barrier. There's a bit of mistrust, and anger on their part. They feel that they're being told what to do rather than being involved in the planning and decision-making. They are being told what to do by us and by the people exploiting them.*

(Hannah, social worker, court team)

Hannah's comments suggest that decisions are frequently made through professional channels and in the absence of young people. Moreover, Hannah also makes the link between young people being told what to do by professionals and by exploiters. Hannah's comments are reflected elsewhere in social work literature, which advocates for more meaningful participation in child safeguarding as a form of protection. Participation allows young people to distinguish between safer relationships that provide choice and those that are controlling, abusive, and exploitative (Collin-Vézina *et al.*, 2015; Lefevre *et al.*, 2017; Hill and Warrington, 2022).

The research participants attending the focus groups were divided regarding their thoughts on participation. Most social workers in the focus groups agreed that young people's participation was limited; however, two social workers in Trent's focus group and one social worker in Hampstead's focus group felt that they were 'much better at getting young people involved in decision-making'. Nonetheless, the case file analysis data revealed a more complex picture. The data consistently suggested that young people's participation in decision-making was restricted to peripheral issues. Although social workers sought young people's views and perspectives, any meaningful decisions, such as changing foster placements or gaining access to additional resources, were mostly decided by the social worker and their manager, and in absence of the young person.

As illustrated in Figure 5, the findings from this study suggest that the social work practice observed in the two research sites was underpinned by adultist practices, implying that the opinions of young people were accorded lesser value and significance than those of adults. Although the findings point to the prevalence of such practices across all interactions and decision-making processes, adultism appeared especially pronounced when concerns escalated, or additional resources were required. A significant indicator of adultist practices was the routine exclusion of young people from decision-making processes that involved allocating additional resources, such as commissioning specialist services. The systemic nature of this practice implies that only adults

(professionals) have the necessary skills and expertise to contribute meaningfully to important safeguarding and budgetary decision-making.

## **The unequal safeguarding response experienced by boys and young men and the effects of adultification bias**

### **Protecting and neglecting boys and young men**

The study findings suggest that boys at risk of, or experiencing, child exploitation receive less comprehensive support than their female peers. The findings build on previous research that highlights how practitioners are likely to consider boys to be more culpable for their actions than their female counterparts due to notions of masculinity and vulnerability (McNaughton Nicholls *et al.*, 2014; ATCM, 2018; Violence and Vulnerability Unit, 2018). The findings from this study also indicate that social workers may lack the confidence, experience, and knowledge to effectively support adolescent boys affected by exploitation. This study argues that this is perhaps influenced by national safeguarding policy and legislation, which has historically contributed to boys' and young men's safeguarding needs being either downplayed or considered secondary to those of girls and young women (Children's Charter, 1889; Children Act, 1908; Sexual Offences Act, 1956; HM Government, 2018b; Home Office, 2018; 2023).

During preparation for the case file analysis, there were indicators that a young person's gender had a significant impact on social work decision-making and interventions. This primarily stemmed from a comprehensive list received from Trent Council detailing all young people known to the council for whom concerns of child exploitation had been raised during a six-month period. The list indicated that, of twenty-six cases, fourteen related to CCE, all involving boys, and twelve cases related to CSE, eleven involving girls and one involving a boy. Although the list did not indicate whether there were dual concerns about CSE and CCE, upon further investigation, one of the young people was at risk of both CCE and CSE. As highlighted by the research participant's comment below, similar patterns were also apparent in Hampstead Council:

*I have worked with teenagers and exploitation for about five years. We used to see mostly girls and CSE, but I would say over the past two years it's mainly boys and CCE. I think I have only worked with two CSE cases and girls in the last few years.*

(Charlie, social worker, adolescent team)

Charlie's comments and the data from both local authorities indicate the predominance of boys and criminal exploitation. This split in gender and exploitation type reflects the wider body of literature on child exploitation (Cockbain *et al.*, 2017; Fanner, 2019; CSPRP, 2020). Current evidence states that girls are more likely to be sexually exploited and boys are more likely to be criminally exploited, but it is also recognised that there is probably significant under-reporting in both areas (Cockbain *et al.*, 2017; Fanner, 2019; NCA, 2019).

The above quotation also suggests a relatively recent shift in focus, both in terms of gender and type of exploitation. This change in practice was commented on in both focus groups and reflects national data, which states that since 2017/2018, there has been a recorded decline in the number of local authority assessments that report sexual exploitation as an issue (Karsna and Bromley, 2023). The decline in CSE coincides with CCE being recognised as a safeguarding concern and the publication of the first CCE practitioner guidance (Home Office, 2018).

As the research participant's comments below highlight, this shift in practice is possibly leaving social workers feeling unprepared and, consequently, resulting in young males being less well served than females:

*I suppose, what I see in practice is that there is disparity of understanding. Young males, in my experience, are not getting the same responses that maybe young females would. We don't always know how to protect males from CCE – especially when it includes sexual violence.*

(Jenny, senior practitioner, child exploitation team)

This quotation implies that the combination of criminal exploitation and the gender of a young person can lead to a disparity in service provision. For instance, Jenny's language frames male sexual assault through the lens of

violence rather than sexual abuse. The findings from this study suggest that social workers frequently perceived and interacted with adolescent boys with less explicit consideration for their emotional and physical well-being than they did for their female counterparts. Examples of this were observed throughout all ten case files relating to boys and included the language used by social workers and partner agencies to describe the abuse and violence experienced by boys. For example, when a fourteen-year-old boy was threatened with a knife and forced to conceal over twenty bags of cocaine in his anus, his social worker recorded this as the boy 'plugging drugs' to prevent detection when he was trafficked around the country. The use of this euphemistic term downplayed the fact that this young person was the victim of violent sexual abuse (JTAI, 2018). Furthermore, the term 'plugging' appeared to mask the potential need for sexual abuse support. The findings from the case file analysis indicated that when boys experienced harm or sexual abuse, it was often given less significance or went unaddressed. Social workers attending the focus groups largely agreed that boys received a compromised level of service; however, as highlighted by the comments below, they could not agree whether it was due to gender or the relatively recent addition of CCE to safeguarding practice:

*I could be wrong, but I don't think it's about whether they are a boy or girl. I think there's more of an understanding of CSE, and we're still developing our understanding of CCE. So, I think that's why we are unable to effectively face some of those challenges yet. It's that simple.*

(Emma, social worker, exploitation team)

One of the challenges to the above argument is that research has found that male victims of CSE had similar experiences even when CSE responses were relatively well-developed (McNaughton Nicholls *et al.*, 2014; Cockbain *et al.*, 2017). Emma's comments also appear to position gender and criminal exploitation as 'either/or'; however, the findings from this research suggest that it is the combination of both factors that influence social work decision-making. These findings also echo those from the CSPRP (2020), which suggest that local areas and safeguarding partners are moving from a place of experience and confidence when working with CSE (which mostly affects girls) to a place of doubt and not knowing how to help when working with young people who are victims of CCE (which mostly affects boys) (CSPRP, 2020).

When considering the ecology of social work decision-making and the different influences on social work practice, it is reasonable to propose that social workers are likely to have been influenced by national policy and legislation, which has arguably overlooked and downplayed the safeguarding needs of boys and young men. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 2, this commenced with the first piece of child protection legislation, which recognised the vulnerability of girls up until the age of sixteen and boys up until the age of fourteen (Children's Charter, 1889). This was followed by the Children Act 1908, which protected girls under the age of sixteen from being 'encouraged' into 'prostitution' but did not consider boys as being vulnerable to 'prostitution'. It was not until the Sexual Offences Act 2003 that boys were provided with the same legal protections as their female counterparts. This imbalance in approach indicates a general gendered bias in how services and institutions have understood and responded to the harm and sexual abuse of boys and young men, a disparity that is arguably still present in contemporary practice (Nelson, 2009; Cockbain *et al.*, 2017; Fanner, 2019; Mitchell *et al.*, 2017; Moynihan *et al.*, 2018).

In the context of contemporary practice, the remnants of the inequality in legislation and policy can still be seen in the development of child exploitation services. The responses of both Trent and Hampstead Councils to CCE stemmed from CSE, where most victims are girls and young women (Coy *et al.*, 2017). The fact that most identified victims of CSE have been female has resulted in a gendered bias in the 'prevailing discourse, research and interventions', which have overwhelmingly focused on female victims (Cockbain *et al.*, 2017, p. 1). Thus, although the observed local responses to exploitation had been significantly developed, the foundations of the services were based on interventions that were arguably designed on the premise that females are the victims and boys are the perpetrators (Cockbain *et al.*, 2017).

## **The adultification of Black boys and young men**

Building on the previous discussion of the unequal safeguarding responses offered to boys and young men versus their female counterparts, this study argues that Black adolescent boys experience less support and protection in relation to CCE than their White male peers. The findings from the case files and the focus groups suggest that when Black boys were missing from home,



or were physically assaulted, social work responses did not consistently ensure that the young person's physical or emotional well-being needs were met. These findings resonate with research undertaken in Lambeth Council, London (Firmin *et al.*, 2021). The research found that services and professional interventions were inadequate in meeting the intersectional needs of Black boys and young men, who faced disadvantages based on their gender, race, age, and class (Firmin *et al.*, 2021).

A recognised limitation of this study is that the findings are based on two young Black males' (Dylan and Damian) experiences; nonetheless, combined, the two case files reviewed as part of this research provided multiple examples of compromised safeguarding responses across two years and nine months of data. Furthermore, as illustrated by the research participant's comments below, social workers in both focus groups explicitly acknowledged the reduced safeguarding response experienced by some Black boys:

*I worked with lots of Black boys when I worked in London. Black boys are more mistrustful of statutory services, and I can see why. I saw how differently professionals treated them. It goes much deeper than individual social workers, but we can all start to make sure we take responsibility for our practice.*

(Anne, social worker, duty team)

Although there is a paucity of research on Black children's and young people's experiences within the safeguarding system (Bernard and Harris, 2016). Anne's comments reflect sentiments from the literature that suggest that Black young people's trust in statutory services is diminishing (Firmin and Pearce, 2016; Williams, 2018; Firmin *et al.*, 2021). As suggested by the quotation above, this is often due to direct experiences of discrimination and 'vilification' by state agencies (Williams, 2018).

The findings from this study suggest that one of the challenges for social workers and safeguarding partners is recognising and responding to the vulnerability and innocence of all young people in a fair and equitable way. In both research sites, there were multiple incidents where Dylan's and Damian's experiences differed from those of their White peers. The most overt example related to an incident when Damian was left in the care of an unknown adult male at an undisclosed address whilst his mother left the country for ten days.

Damian was aged fourteen years at the time and a known victim of CCE. During this time, Damian was not seen by professionals, including social workers and school professionals. Furthermore, the data in the case file indicates limited action was taken to locate Damian and check his safety and welfare. This example illustrates a lack of recognition of Damian's age and the associated vulnerability. Damian's experience reflects the literature on the adultification of Black boys, which suggests that Black boys as young as ten years old are perceived to be more mature and less innocent than their White peers. The literature on adultification highlights that Black boys are more likely to be viewed as criminals and as needing a criminal justice response rather than a response that prioritises welfare (Goff *et al.*, 2014; Davis and Marsh, 2020).

The case file analysis also highlighted other potential incidences of the adultification of boys. One regarded Ryan, who was found naked in a hotel bedroom with two men. According to the police referral, the men were nineteen and eighteen years old. Ryan was fifteen at the time. From the information recorded in the social worker's case file, it appeared that the social worker accepted Ryan's account that nothing untoward took place. The prospect of Ryan being a victim of sexual abuse or exploitation seems to have been overshadowed by assumptions about his sexual orientation, even though a known facilitator of CSE includes power differences, such as age, between exploiters and young people (Cook and Mott, 2020). The social worker appears to have adultified Ryan by concluding in her assessment that Ryan was exploring his sexuality. This suggests that Ryan was not considered to be vulnerable and that he was sexually mature and responsible enough to be in a hotel room with two older men. Adultification involves the ascribing of adult-like attributes to children and young people. This can include emotions, experiences, responsibilities, and exposure to adult-like themes (Davis and Marsh, 2022).

Although the above example involved a young White male, unlike Damian's and Dylan's experiences, such incidents did not appear to be as systemic. During both focus groups, social workers were able to identify multiple professional experiences of Black boys and young men being routinely treated with suspicion and a lack of care. This included Anne, a duty team social worker, who was working with two thirteen-year-old Black boys whom she had

assessed as being victims of criminal exploitation. Anne shared in the focus group that she was finding it difficult to 'convince' other professionals, including social work managers, that they were vulnerable and victims of CCE. Anne compared this experience to the ease with which seventeen-year-old White girls were considered victims of CSE.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this study to establish the factors causing the adverse treatment of Black boys and young men, research suggests that a contributing factor may be an inability of practitioners to acknowledge and discuss racism and its impact on service provision (Firmin *et al.*, 2021). In line with this study's ecological theoretical framework, it is also important to recognise the wider system in which social workers and Black boys and young men interact with one another and operate, a system where Black boys are persistently excluded from school at disproportional rates and are educated in Pupil Referral Units at nearly four times the rate of the national pupil population (Gill *et al.*, 2017). The rates of exclusion of Black boys are important contextual factors, as research has found that there is a link between school exclusion and risk of criminal exploitation (Graham, 2021).

The issue of addressing the disadvantages experienced by Black boys is conspicuous not only in the domain of child safeguarding (including child exploitation) (Firmin *et al.*, 2021) and education (Gill *et al.*, 2017) but also in the highest echelons of the government. For example, a recent parliamentary report on support for vulnerable adolescents found that the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office appeared to 'lack curiosity' and were unable to explain why Black and 'mixed heritage' boys are more likely to come to the attention of youth justice than their White peers (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2023). Given this backdrop, the present study's findings, which highlight the compromised safeguarding response received by Black boys, are possibly indicative of broader systemic inequities and institutional prejudices.

The research findings discussed above argue that the gender and ethnicity of a young person play a significant factor in social work decision-making. However, the gender and ethnicity of social workers providing support were not documented in the case file data nor discussed during the focus group sessions. The limited focus on the gender and ethnicity of social workers during

the research may indicate the monocultural perspective that dominates children's social work practice in England. For example, female social workers account for a majority (87%) of registered social workers, with the majority identifying as White (77%) (DfE, 2023). It is worth noting that all twelve social workers who participated in the two focus groups identified as female and White British or White European. This limitation of the research is duly acknowledged. (see Section 9.2 for further discussion relating to the study's limitations).

### **8.3 Examining the effectiveness of social work decision-making and interventions in reducing the original concerns**

This section examines the extent to which social work decision-making and interventions have reduced the original concern (i.e., the reason the young person was referred to the specialist team). The findings from this study have been unable to arrive at a clear answer to the above question. This is because the social work case files lack agreed or explicit measures of overall effectiveness, posing challenges for assessing effective practice. The findings from the case file analysis show that young people and families are subject to intervention plans, which are reviewed regularly by social workers and safeguarding partners. However, these plans are often task-focused and change frequently due to the complex and dynamic needs of the young person's situation.

In addition, when young people were referred to children's services, at least in Trent and Hampstead Councils, the referral listed the risks and concerns the young person, and their family were experiencing. However, measuring effectiveness by eradicating the identified concerns did not appear helpful. Indeed, as highlighted in Table 9, the concerns recorded in the case file at the start of social work involvement were still present, to a degree, at the end of social work involvement in almost all cases. Though the data from the case files indicated that concerns for the young person's safety and well-being may have reduced somewhat, the headline concerns broadly remained the same.

**Table 9 Concerns at the start and end of social work involvement.**

#	Young Person	Age	Concerns recorded at the start of SW involvement	Concerns recorded at the end of SW involvement
1	Keira	16	CSE, MFH, SU, PR, MH, SH	CSE, MFH, SU, PR, MH, SH
2	Jack	14	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, MH, Ed, Health	CCE, MFH, SU, MH, Ed, Health
3	Hope	13	CSE, MFH, SU, SH, PR, MH	SH, PR, MH, Ed
4	Ryan	14	CSE, MFH, PR, PI, SU, SH, Ed	CSE, MFH, PR, PI, SU, SH, Ed
5	Jamie	15	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, MH, SH, Ed	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, MH, SH, Ed
6	Dylan	13	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, MH, Ed, PI, PR, Vio,	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, MH, Ed, PI, PR, Vio,
7	Sara	15	CSE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, Ed, Vio, SM,	CCE, MFH, SU, PI, Ed,
8	Noah	14	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, Ed, SHB	CSE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, Ed, SHB
9	Ella	13	CSE, MFH, PR, PI, MH, Ed, MFH, SM, Neg	PR, MH, Ed, SM, Neg
10	Tanya	14	CSE, PR, MH, Ed, SM	CSE, PR, MH, Ed, SM
11	Zac	14	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, MH, Ed	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, MH, Ed
12	Damian	13	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, MH, Ed, Neg	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, MH, Ed, Neg
13	Toni	16	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, Ed, Vio	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, Ed, Vio
14	Kris	14	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, MH, Ang	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, MH, Ang
15	Lucas	14	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, MH, Ed, SHB	CCE, MFH, SU, PR, PI, MH, Ed, SHB

**Key:** CSE: child sexual exploitation | CCE: child criminal exploitation | MFH: missing from home | SU: substance use | PR: parental relationship | PI: placement instability | MH: mental health | SH: self-harm | Ed: concerns with education | SHB: sexually harmful behaviour | Vio: violence | Ang: issues with anger | SM: social media use | Neg: neglect in the family home | Health: outstanding health issues

As illustrated in Table 9, when Noah was referred to children's social care, concerns were raised about CCE, being missing from home, substance misuse, his relationship with his parents, instability in his home life, difficulties in education and professionals were concerned he was displaying sexually harmful behaviour. These concerns were still raised as issues at the end of social work involvement, albeit less frequently. This perhaps suggests that effectiveness is subjective and relates to a professional's and family's capacity to accept risk.

Therefore, the findings from this research raise questions about what is deemed effective social work decision-making and whose perspective takes priority. As illustrated by the comments below, data from the focus groups suggests that social workers' and their managers' ideas of effectiveness are not always aligned:

*I think measuring effectiveness is quite a tough one to answer because obviously management want the hard individual outcomes. Like, have the risks reduced, if we revisit the risk assessment, what does that tell us about missing from home or reduced drinking? I suppose the softer outcomes are harder to measure. Is the young person better at asking for help? Do they know where to get help? In my opinion, these are more accurate measures of effectiveness.*

(Jenny, senior practitioner, exploitation team)

These comments highlight some of the challenges of measuring effectiveness. Jenny highlights that managers appear to prefer measurable outcomes, such as those explored in risk assessments; however, these do not appear to align with her ideas of effectiveness. In addition, the findings from this study suggest that risk assessments, such as those referred to above, are largely organisational tools and contribute to dividing young people's needs into discreet actions. These findings reflect previous research, which highlighted that such tools often become ends in themselves, resulting in insufficient attention being paid to overall outcomes as experienced by the young person (Hallett, 2017; Franklin *et al.*, 2018).

This study sheds light on the challenges of assessing the impact of decision-making and interventions in child exploitation social work. An emphasis on bureaucratic procedures and task-based monitoring has led social workers to

prioritise administrative duties over the potential usefulness of their work. These findings align with earlier research that underscores how, due to excessively bureaucratic and risk-averse processes, social workers concentrate on completing tasks rather than achieving outcomes for families (O'Brien *et al.*, 2009; Munro, 2011b; MacAlister, 2022). Moreover, the absence of reliable evidence on effective approaches to addressing child exploitation (CSPRP, 2020; Huegler, 2021) may also contribute to the vagueness of effectiveness measures. Consequently, the inability to determine the effectiveness of social work decision-making and interventions may reflect the inconsistent response of contemporary child exploitation social work across England.

## 8.4 Summary

The aim of this chapter was to provide an overview and synthesis of the key research findings. This was achieved by initially detailing the headline messages from the research findings chapter by chapter. This included highlighting that child exploitation social work practice relies on many of the same approaches, systems, and processes as traditional child protection social work. Consequently, many of the same issues associated with traditional social work practice also seem to be present in the emerging area of child exploitation, including high levels of bureaucracy and risk-averse and prescriptive practices.

The synthesis presented the findings in relation to young people's experiences and interactions with social workers. This approach provided unique and practical insights into the research findings, for example, highlighting adultism's potential impact on social work practice. It was argued that, due to the significant influence of systems and processes transferred from traditional child protection social work, individual social workers were often limited in how responsive they could be to evolving adolescent needs. This often resulted in professionals' perspectives being given priority over those of young people.

This chapter also explored the roles that gender and ethnicity can have on social work decision-making and interventions. The findings from this research suggest that, due to an uneven historical approach to safeguarding legislation and policy developments, boys and young men are at greater risk of receiving a compromised safeguarding response. This appears to be particularly true for

boys and young men from Black backgrounds due to racialised notions of criminality, maturity, and vulnerability.

Finally, this chapter highlighted the limitations of measuring the effectiveness of social work decision-making and interventions in child exploitation. These challenges are partly due to a lack of clarity from an operational and organisational perspective about what effective practice looks like. In addition, further complicating factors include the need for a national framework and robust, reliable evidence on what works in addressing exploitation.



# **Chapter 9 Critical considerations and conclusion**

In this chapter, I critically discuss the data collection and analysis steps and the extent to which the research questions have been answered. I draw out the potential implications for social work policy and practice and suggest further research. I critique the strengths and limitations of the research and outline how the findings will be disseminated. In the concluding section, I identify the study's original contribution to knowledge and share my final reflections.

## **9.1 Consideration of the research process and research questions**

This study aims to help inform or influence future practice, policy, and research in CSE and CCE by exploring the central factors that influence social work decision-making and interventions. The following section critically reflects on the extent to which this study has achieved the research goals. I assess whether the study has answered the overarching research question and the sub-questions, to ascertain to what extent this study expands existing knowledge in social work decision-making in the context of child exploitation.

### **Revisiting the research questions**

The central research question this study sought to answer is as follows:

What are the central factors that most influence social work decision-making in determining support and interventions when working with young people considered at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context?

Chapter 8 highlighted the key findings demonstrating the extent to which the central research question has been answered. In brief, the key findings are as follows:

1.

This study's findings suggest that the transference of social work systems and processes from traditional social work settings sets the parameters for understanding all other factors influencing social work decision-making. For example, the findings indicate that prescriptive and procedural social work practices associated with traditional social work (Munro, 2011b) have been transposed to the emerging area of child exploitation. The findings suggest that these practices confine social work decision-making and interventions to linear processes. These processes appear to reduce social work autonomy significantly and can affect the levels of participation social workers provide young people.

2.

The research findings also suggest a relationship between an increase in risk and a corresponding increase in managerial practices. A reliance on such practices resulted in social work decision-making being increasingly influenced by professionals, managers, and senior leaders and less by young people. Managerialist practices also appeared to compartmentalise young people's needs into measurable actions, such as completing risk assessments and safety plans, making a set number of visits, or attending meetings. This approach reinforced adultist practices, as they routinely prioritised adult views over those of young people, thereby limiting young people's right to participate in decisions that affect them. Additionally, process-focused and managerialist practices frequently appeared to contradict adolescent developmental theories regarding the waning influence of adults, the increasing importance and influence of peer groups, and normative developmental behaviours such as risk-taking and sensation-seeking (Steinberg, 2015).

3.

The findings also suggest that, due to an uneven approach to national safeguarding legislation and policy development, boys and young men, were at an increased risk of receiving a compromised safeguarding response. The study argued that this was particularly true for Black boys and young men. Furthermore, the findings suggested that social work decision-making and

interventions concerning Black boys and young men were possibly influenced by adultification bias, resulting in Black boys and young men being viewed and interacted with as more mature, culpable, and stronger than their White peers. The findings suggest that social workers afforded Black boys and young men less care and less protection due to adultification bias.

The findings highlighted above are evidence of the comprehensive capacity of the qualitative research strategy in answering the overarching research question. Despite certain constraints inherent in the research methods employed (as described in Section 9.2), the research paradigm used, which involved CGT techniques to collect and analyse qualitative data from fifteen social work case files and two focus groups, proved consistent with the objectives of the study.

The section below explores the extent to which each sub-question has been answered.

**A) What practice concepts and theories help develop an understanding of influences on social work decision-making and interventions when working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context?**

The findings from this research have highlighted a variety of social work concepts and theories that help us to understand what influences social work decision-making and interventions. These include Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy (1980), SBP, RBP, and managerialism. However, when it comes to social work decision-making and interventions that directly affect young people, it was argued in Chapter 8 that three youth-related concepts and theories best encapsulate the findings. These are Lundy's participation model (2007), and the concepts of adultification (Davis and Marsh, 2022) and adultism (Shier, 2012). The binding feature of these concepts and approaches is that they are all underpinned by children's rights, as enshrined in the UNCRC (1989), whether that is in relation to a young person's right to participate in decisions that affect them, ensuring that their rights evolve along with their age and development, or a child's right to be treated fairly and free from discrimination (UNCRC, 1989).

In the absence of an agreed child exploitation or EFH national strategy (CSPRP, 2020; Huegler, 2021), it is arguably unfair to expect social workers, specialist teams or safeguarding partners to explicitly evidence adherence to specific theories or approaches. Nonetheless, in the context of child exploitation and EFH more broadly, there are several approaches and frameworks that are recognised as supporting a holistic response to young people and families. These include being strengths and relationship-based; being child-centred (including recognising child development and promoting participation); recognising and responding to trauma and adopting a contextual approach to interventions (Eaton, 2017; Maxwell *et al.*, 2019; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a; JTAI, 2022; HM Government, 2023). While strengths and relationship-based practice and being child-centred have been discussed at length throughout the four findings chapters, the role of trauma-informed practice and contextual safeguarding did not emerge as central influencing factors on social work decision-making and interventions.

Hampstead Council did state in their Practice Framework that a trauma-informed approach (TIA) underpinned social work responses to child exploitation (see Table 1). However, as discussed in Chapter 4, it was difficult to identify to what extent a TIA was used by social workers from the data collected from case file analysis and focus group. This is perhaps due to a TIA being a relatively recent development in child safeguarding in the UK and the recognised gaps in understanding interpretations of TIA and its applicability (Taggart, 2018; Hickle, 2020). In contrast, contextual safeguarding has been an officially recognised approach to intervention in EFH since its inclusion in statutory guidance in 2018 (HM Government, 2018). However, as an approach, it did not feature as a central influencing factor in social work decision-making from the data collected as part of this research. Embedding contextual safeguarding into daily practice has been identified as challenging and a long-term commitment which must weather localised changing priorities and external forces, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Lefevre *et al.*, 2023).

When considering the study's research methods, there are potential limitations to the study's ability to fully address the first sub-question. For example, despite explicit national practice standards in relation to social work case recordings (Social Work England, 2023), the subjective nature of social work records can

affect the reliability of the data contained in social work case files. Additionally, social workers may use case recordings to justify their decisions and provide a defence against possible criticisms (Denscombe, 2010). Consequently, using social work case files as the initial data source to develop the findings possibly provided a partial and biased insight into social work decision-making.

Furthermore, data collected from case files also requires interpretation via the researcher and their research paradigm (Fuller and Petch, 1995). Therefore, the data presented in this study is based on the researcher's interpretation of social workers' documentation and recordings. The subjective nature of the information contained in social work case files, combined with my interpretation of the data, arguably leaves room for misinterpreting events or overlooking theories or concepts unfamiliar to me as the researcher. While two focus groups were conducted to sense-check the findings from the case file analysis and ground them in social work practice (Bryman, 2016), the number of topics that could be covered in these settings was limited. As a result, the focus group discussions mainly centred on the topics that emerged from the case file analysis as I interpreted them.

Consequently, although this study has effectively conceptualised the findings, as described above, it could be argued that additional and alternative social work theories and concepts would also help develop an understanding of influences on social work decision-making. Perhaps further ethnographic research exploring similar issues would provide new and complementary insights by observing social work actions more closely (see Section 9.2 for further discussion on the study's strengths and limitations).

**B) Do social workers use adolescent development theories to help shape and/or inform their response when working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context? If so, to what extent?**

Despite the limitations of this study's data collection and analysis approach, as discussed above, the findings relating to the lack of reference to adolescent development theories are robust and compelling. This was particularly evident in the lack of opportunities for young people to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes, as detailed in Chapters 6–8. Young people's right to participate should recognise adolescent development in that it should be 'consistent with the evolving capacity of the child' (UNCRC, 1989). The findings from this study indicate that young people's levels of participation were more closely associated with the level of risk the young person faced, as opposed to their age, level of understanding, and stage of development.

Furthermore, priority was given to completing individual tasks to manage risk and monitor social work activity, resulting in young people's needs being dissected into tangible actions. These findings echo previous research that suggests that task-focused and risk-averse practices not only lose sight of young people's medium- and long-term outcomes but also overlook young people's holistic needs, including promoting age-related needs and experiences (Hallett, 2017). For example, the findings from this research show multiple occasions when the expectations placed on young people seemed contrary to what is known about adolescent development. For instance, social workers frequently asked young people to withdraw from close peer groups due to the potential risks they posed. This is despite strong evidence that peer acceptance and peer relationships are particularly important during adolescence (Blakemore and Mills, 2014).

Additionally, social workers routinely provided 'keeping safe' one-to-one work. The data from the case file analysis indicated that these interventions largely focused on educating young people about risk and encouraging them to act in the moment to remove themselves from the situation when risk escalates. However, research suggests that, although young people's comprehension of risks and probability appears to mature by mid-adolescence, their ability to make use of this reasoning in 'hot' contexts is not yet fully developed (Blakemore and Robbins, 2012). This suggests that social workers' interventions could perhaps better reflect adolescent development theories. For example, rather than repeatedly revisiting keeping-safe work, perhaps a more useful and mid-to-late adolescence-friendly method of intervention would be to

promote a harm-reduction approach. This would allow practitioners to recognise and respond to the personal and social contexts in which the risk occurs (Hickle and Hallett, 2016).

In addition to the above, although social workers in both focus groups did examine topics relating to young people's identity, these were principally in relation to gender, race, and ethnicity. Any discourse relating to age and adolescent development was superficial and related to a young person's chronological age and the vulnerability associated with younger adolescents. The findings from the focus groups and the case file analysis strongly suggest that adolescent development theories do not significantly influence social work decision-making. It was beyond the scope of this research to develop an understanding of the levels of social worker knowledge of adolescent development theories and their confidence in applying such theories to practice.

**C) Do established children's social work practices influence social work decision-making and interventions when working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the extrafamilial context? If so, to what extent?**

As discussed in Chapters 4, 5, and 8, the most prominent research finding from this study is the influence of established children's social work practices on social work decision-making and interventions in the context of child exploitation. Indeed, the findings from this research suggest that established social work practices provide firm parameters in which all other findings should be understood.

This study resonates with the literature on traditional social work settings, including the finding that social workers spend more time completing administrative tasks than they spend with young people or families (Parton, 2008; Gillingham, 2009; White *et al.*, 2010; Murphy, 2021). More significantly, this research suggests that traditional children's social work practices, particularly managerialist approaches, have been transferred from child protection social work to the emerging field of child exploitation. The findings from this study support the literature that indicates that managerialist approaches not only increase management oversight, whilst standardising

social work practices, but also limit opportunities for social workers to exercise discretion (Munro, 2011b).

Social workers participating in the study's focus group meetings also explicitly and repeatedly stated that systems and management processes stopped them from effectively carrying out their role and reduced the time spent with young people. During both focus groups, extensive discussions were held on how child exploitation systems mirror those from traditional settings. This appeared to be a particular frustration in Trent Council, where the child exploitation service was specifically designed to provide an alternative to traditional practices, including a reduction in levels of bureaucracy.

**D) To what extent do social work decisions and interventions reduce the original concerns (i.e., reasons the young person was referred to the specialist team)?**

The findings from this research have been unable to answer the final research sub-question comprehensively. This is due to the absence of recorded, agreed measures of effectiveness for social workers, safeguarding partners, young people, and families to work towards. Although the fourth research sub-question has not been fully answered, I would argue that the research methods used remain an appropriate part of the research paradigm. Combined, the methods ensured that the official and regulated record of social work decision-making was methodically analysed. In addition, the findings from the case file analysis were subsequently developed with social workers working in child exploitation. The findings from the case file analysis and the two focus groups suggest a general lack of clarity regarding what is deemed effective for addressing young people's needs and reducing concerns.

The primary function of social work case files is to capture decision-making and to allow for retrospective scrutiny (Social Work England, 2023). Social work case files should capture what life is like for a child or young person at any given time (Stanley, 2019). Aside from directly asking young people and their families, social work case files appear to be the most appropriate data source when determining the impact of decision-making and interventions. Therefore, the inability to ascertain the extent to which social work decisions and



interventions reduce the original concerns arguably reflects the ambiguity of the national response to child exploitation. This includes a lack of an agreed national framework, local authorities taking different approaches, an absence of reliable evidence of what works, and no central organisation or department responsible for evaluating and disseminating effective evidence (CSPRP, 2020; Huegler, 2021).

## **9.2 Strengths and limitations of the study and recommendations for future research**

As detailed in Chapter 8, this thesis has evidenced the central factors that most influence social work decision-making in determining support and interventions when working with young people considered at risk of exploitation. The findings have provided novel insights into social work practice, including the categorisation of young people's participation in decision-making through the adoption of an ecological theoretical framework combined with the use of inductive research methods (e.g., CGT research techniques). While it was not the aim of this study to add to the plethora of youth participation models (Diaz, 2020), the three participation types (i.e., restricted, forced, and negotiated) that emerged from the data illustrated the inability of overtly bureaucratic systems to accommodate the voices of young people on matters that concern them.

Other strengths of the research design are the inclusion of social workers' voices and experiences via the two focus groups. This provided an opportunity to test the findings from the case file analysis against the reality of social work practice. This was an important iterative feature of the research design due to my position as a social worker-turned-researcher (an insider–outsider) and the reliance on my interpretation of the secondary data contained in social work case files. The focus groups provided depth and context to the findings from the case file analysis. Developing the findings in the focus groups also reaffirmed the conclusions being drawn about the compromised responses to boys and young men, including the specific experiences of Black boys and young men.

Whilst the iterative research design described above has arguably enhanced the credibility of the findings, it also entrenched one of the study's limitations. The foundations of the findings are based on my interpretation of the data

contained in the fifteen social work case files. Consequently, while the research was inductive in its approach, the data was identified, coded, and categorised by me (the researcher) through the prism of my professional and personal experiences and knowledge base. Therefore, what was presented to the social workers during the two focus groups was a filtered and an inter-subjective interpretation of social work practice. Perhaps an ethnographic study would have arrived at different conclusions due to being able to directly observe interactions between social workers, young people, and families. However, due to the time constraints associated with ethnographic research, this would have significantly reduced the volume of social work activity available to analyse, compared with case file analysis. The data from the case file analysis spanned a combined period of fourteen years and nine months. Although I am pleased with the research process and the insights the thesis has provided, perhaps an ethnographic study is something to consider for future research in child exploitation to expand the findings presented in this thesis.

Other limitations include the small sample size of the social work case files analysed relating to Black boys' experiences. While the data from the two focus groups contributed to the development of the findings, only two of the fifteen case files related to Black boys. Therefore, whilst this research provides insights into social work decision-making and interventions relating to Black males' experiences, caution should be exercised regarding the ability to generalise these findings. A further limitation of the findings when considering transferability includes the inadequate rating given by Ofsted to the two local authorities that took part in this research. Only 11% of local authority children's services were deemed inadequate at the time of writing. Consequently, some of the findings may be less relevant when applied to other children's services.

During the process of data collection and analysis, two themes repeatedly surfaced: the role and influence of young people's parents/carers, and social work responses to young people with learning disabilities. However, in the context and limitations of this research, the data relating to these topics was not as prominent as the data connected to the themes that have been discussed throughout the thesis. It is my intention to continue to develop and publish my findings in relation to these two topics, as both areas remain under-researched.

Another limitation of the study is the sample population of the focus group attendees, all of whom identified as White British or White European and female. Therefore, the study is unable to provide diversity in social work opinion in terms of ethnicity or gender. I did not ask social work participants questions relating to sexual orientation, disability, or neurodiversity. On reflection, this would have been a more inclusive approach to adopt and would have possibly provided further context to the findings. Although young people's identity formed a significant part of this study, the influence that social workers' individual characteristics may have in decision-making remained absent from discussions. Perhaps the influence of social worker demographics should be considered for future research in this area.

## **Recommendations for future research**

- Further research is needed to determine young people's views in terms of social work decision-making and interventions in the context of child exploitation. This should include the direct involvement of young people and their experiences. This research must ensure that the young people included represent diverse backgrounds and experiences, including in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability.
- Future research is also needed on the influence parents and carers have on social work decision-making and interventions in the context of child exploitation. The literature relating to parents/carers and social work largely relates to traditional children and family social work, yet the dynamics of child exploitation and EFH are notably different. In the context of child exploitation, the parent/carer role is significantly different. Parents and carers are possibly more able to act as a partner in the safeguarding response (Firmin *et al.*, 2022a). Further research in this area must ensure that the adults included represent diverse backgrounds and experiences, including in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability.
- As the knowledge base on adolescent development continues to grow, it would be useful for future research to examine how these new advances can inform safeguarding and child exploitation practice. While adolescent development theories and scientific discoveries have influenced many exploitation services, it is unclear how robust the application of these

theories has been. Consequently, further research is necessary to examine the potential impact of an adolescent development informed approach to tackle child exploitation. This research must ensure that all research participants involved represent diverse backgrounds and experiences, including in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability.

### **9.3 Potential implications for social work policy and practice**

Whilst undertaking this research, several insights for social work practice and policy emerged. Although the suggestions below are anchored in the findings of this research, they largely reinforce messages from safeguarding research, previous reviews of the English child protection system, and prior government publications. The suggestions are divided into two sections. The first section focuses on implications for national policy; the second section shares suggestions for social work practice.

#### **Key learning for national child exploitation policy**

The first suggestion is to develop a national statutory framework in response to child exploitation and EFH. This should include revisiting the legal basis and statutory duties related to this area of social work practice. Whilst the Department for Education has recently published its practice principles, which are designed to inform local and national responses to child exploitation and EFH (HM Government, 2023), the principles act ‘as a compass, rather than a map’; consequently, they are neither mandated nor funded. Continuing with this piecemeal approach to tackling child exploitation leaves young people across the country with under-resourced and inconsistent support. The practice principles produced by the Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme are evidence-based with contributions from professionals, parents, carers, children, and young people (HM Government, 2023). Therefore, they provide a strong and informed foundation from which to develop an accountable and funded statutory and legislative framework.

The second suggestion is for national guidance and policies to be more explicit about young people’s differing experiences of exploitation as influenced by their

intersecting needs (including gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and socio-economic factors). While any child or young person can be sexually or criminally exploited, the gradual move to more inclusive language has arguably resulted in national guidance superficially addressing the reality of the gaps and disparities in knowledge and responses to young people from marginalised and minoritised groups. This approach downplays the structural inequalities and oppression that young people from marginalised and minoritised groups experience. Furthermore, this approach does not account for the under-representation of certain groups in professional safeguarding fields, such as child social work in England, which is primarily female (87%) and predominantly White (77%) (DfE, 2023). Explicitly acknowledging the experiences and risks that certain groups of young people face may contribute to improving policy and practice.

The third suggestion is for the government to seriously consider the recommendations provided in the report by the Commission on Young Lives (2022). Whilst acknowledging recent developments in response to child exploitation and EFH, as evidenced by the latest review of children's social care (MacAlister, 2022) and the recent publication of the practice principles discussed above (HM Government, 2023), overall, there has been a chronic lack of focus on young people's needs. Indeed, a recent parliamentary report identified the 'reluctance across Whitehall to provide any strategic leadership' or ownership of the problems facing young people with complex needs. The report highlighted the failures of the government to understand '... the cumulative scope and impact of avoidable adverse outcomes for vulnerable adolescents' (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2023). Consequently, I urge the government to meaningfully consider the recommendation made by the Commission on Young Lives (2022). These include responding to the serious violence and exploitation experienced by young people as a national threat; adopting a national approach to reforming children's social care to ensure that high-quality care is provided to all young people; and developing (re-establishing) and fully funding youth-based services, such as community-based youth workers and adolescent-focused youth centres (Commission on Young Lives, 2022).

## **Key learning for child exploitation social work practice**

The first suggestion for social work practice reiterates sentiments from the two most recent reviews of the child protection and wider social care system in England, which highlight the bureaucratic and defensive nature of restrictive and prescriptive social work processes (Munro, 2011b; MacAlister, 2021). Children's services should review and reduce the number of administrative tasks and processes that social workers must navigate when working in child exploitation. Whilst acknowledging the need for accountability and record-keeping, the findings indicate that localised responses are overly bureaucratic and get in the way of social workers exercising discretion and carrying out their roles effectively. Additionally, this research suggests that these processes actively discourage approaches that recognise adolescent development. This is partly due to the focus on the completion of individual tasks and outputs that divide young people's holistic needs into measurable and short-term activities.

The second suggestion is to equip social workers with the necessary skills, tools, and processes to meet young people's and families' needs. This recommendation resonates with the recently published practice principles (HM Government, 2023). The practice principles underscore the need for services to adapt to the changing nature of child exploitation and EFH. They also encourage organisations to 'demonstrate a commitment to using robust research evidence' to inform practice wherever possible (HM Government, 2023). This study's findings highlight a need to focus on adolescent development theories, youth participation theories, and equity, diversity, and inclusion from an intersectional perspective.

Additionally, where local approaches include specified theories, such as SBP and RBP, the organisation should be obligated to provide ongoing training and guidance. This must also incorporate rigorous local frameworks that support system-wide implementation and continued evaluation. This research suggests that social worker knowledge and practice remain variable in relation to locally espoused theories and approaches, such as SBP and RBP. Furthermore, these approaches appeared to reach only as far as frontline practice and did not filter through to management and senior management interventions.

The third suggestion for practice is to provide comprehensive and joined-up support for social workers to help them identify and manage the risk of vicarious trauma. This recommendation aligns with the recently published national practice principles (HM Government, 2023). It is vital that this recommendation is considered part of the above suggestions because providing emotional support for social workers whilst not examining potential contributing environmental factors effectively treats the symptoms and not the possible cause. The findings of this research highlighted the intensity of social work practice when working in adolescent safeguarding, child exploitation, and EFH. This included one social worker sharing that she emotionally broke down during a strategy meeting due to feeling overwhelmed by the abuse, rape, and exploitation perpetrated against a boy she was working with by an organised crime group. The social worker's caseload also included two young people who had been seriously assaulted, one with a bladed instrument. Social workers and other professionals who are habitually exposed to the intentional violence, sexual abuse, rape, and exploitation of young people require well-informed and well-resourced support.

## **9.4 Dissemination of research findings**

From the outset of my PhD, I was keen to disseminate the research findings as they developed. This has included writing about the sexual abuse of boys for *Community Care* (a social work magazine), writing about social work responses to EFH in England for *The Conversation* (an international research-based news publication), and writing blogs for various industry-related organisations (see Appendix 8 for a full list of outputs). Although these are largely non-academic outlets, they allowed me to share my ideas and analysis as they emerged. Other dissemination activities have included speaking at online events and conferences and providing guest lectures on the University of East London social work course. Since moving to the USA in September 2022, a key means of disseminating aspects of my findings has been teaching social work students at Western Michigan University and presenting at conferences and events, including the Crimes Against Children Conference in Virginia (2023) and a learning event for the National Association of Social Workers, Michigan Chapter (2023).

My plans for distributing my findings in the future include writing a book with Policy Press to raise the profile of CCE and the experiences of boys and young men. I also aim to disseminate my findings through peer-reviewed journal articles, guest lecturing at universities in the state of Illinois, and presenting at international and US-based conferences. It is also my hope that relevant aspects of my study are transferrable to the US context and that my findings can be operationalised into youth-orientated practice through relevant professional opportunities.

## **9.5 Contribution to knowledge**

This research has contributed to knowledge in relation to social work and child exploitation in two ways. First, the area of child exploitation from a social work perspective is an under-researched area. This is particularly true when considering CCE. This study provides insights into social work practice that have previously been overlooked or amalgamated into broader multi-agency research (Moynihan *et al.*, 2018; Firmin *et al.*, 2022a). This research is unique because it focuses on influences on social work decision-making and interventions in the context of child exploitation.

Second, due to the study's theoretical ecological framework, the findings provide insights into the relationships between legal and policy frameworks, social work systems and processes, social work practices, and young people's experiences. As a result, the study's findings, described above, are novel in terms of conducting primary research that explores the ecology of social work decision-making and interventions in the context of child exploitation.

Consequently, this study is likely to be of interest to social workers, social work managers, senior leaders, and policymakers.

## **9.6 Conclusion**

This thesis explored the central factors that influence social work decision-making in the context of child exploitation. As detailed in Chapter 1, although I commenced this research with prior professional experience and insider knowledge, I have been committed to allowing the findings to emerge from the data whilst recognising the potential influence I may have on the research



process. The research paradigm was carefully considered to facilitate an inductive and qualitative approach to data collection and analysis whilst acknowledging my closeness to the topic of child exploitation social work. I am confident that an appropriate balance has been achieved, and, as a social worker-turned-researcher, I did not fall into the trap of using my preferred theoretical frameworks to 'dress' my data (Charmaz, 2003).

Whilst professional areas of interest were present throughout my thesis, such as understanding the experiences of young people from marginalised and minoritised backgrounds, the themes that emerged from the data were not expected. For example, I did not anticipate the strength of the findings relating to young people's participation or the deficient response to boys and young men.

The findings from this research suggest that the systems and processes inherited from traditional child protection social work restrict young people's meaningful participation in child exploitation cases. These established practices in children's social work do not appear to reflect the increasing body of research regarding adolescent development. As a result, although individual social workers may endeavour to advocate for young people's evolving rights, the safeguarding system reinforces adultist practices. This means that adult (professional) views are routinely prioritised over those of young people, particularly as risk levels increase. Additionally, in relation to gender and ethnicity, due to an uneven approach to safeguarding research, practice, and policy developments, boys and young men appear to be at a heightened risk of receiving a compromised safeguarding response from their social workers, with Black boys and young men being at greatest risk.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this research to arrive at possible solutions to the issues raised above, I hope that the findings from this research prove useful to social workers, senior leaders, and policymakers. The aim of this research has been to explore the central influences on social work decision-making in the context of child exploitation. In the quest to provide answers, I hope that space has been created to reflect on the development of child exploitation social work legislation, policy, research, and practice. I have highlighted that social work responses have developed imperfectly due to historical and contextual factors

and the dynamic safeguarding reaction to child exploitation; however, this thesis does not intend to criticise social work, but rather to contribute to its continued growth.

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# Appendix 1 UREC's ethics approval



Dear Nicholas

**Application ID: ETH1819-0094**

Project title: Adolescents at Risk: A whole system study exploring safeguarding young people from extra-familial harm

Lead researcher: Mr Nicholas Marsh

Your application to Research, Research Degrees and Ethics Sub-Committee meeting was considered on the 15th of August 2019.

The decision is: **Approved**

The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation.

Your project has received ethical approval for 2 years from the approval date.

If you have any questions regarding this application please contact the Research, Research Degrees and Ethics Sub-Committee meeting.

Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly.

Should you wish to make any changes in connection with this research project you must complete '[An application for approval of an amendment to an existing application](#)'.

The approval of the proposed research applies to the following research site.

Research site: West Sussex Children's Services Department and Trafford Council's Children's Services Department

Principal Investigator / Local Collaborator: Mr Nicholas Marsh

Approval is given on the understanding that the [UEL Code of Practice for Research and the Code of Practice for Research Ethics](#) is adhered to. □□

Any adverse events or reactions that occur in connection with this research project should be reported using the University's form for [Reporting an Adverse/Serious Adverse Event/Reaction](#).

The University will periodically audit a random sample of approved applications for ethical approval, to ensure that the research projects are conducted in compliance with the consent given by the Research Ethics Committee and to the highest standards of rigour and integrity.

Please note, it is your responsibility to retain this letter for your records.

With the Committee's best wishes for the success of the project

Yours sincerely

Fernanda Silva

Research, Research Degrees and Ethics Sub-Committee

Docklands Campus  
University Way  
London E16 2RD

Stratford Campus  
Water Lane  
London E15 4LZ

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## Change project title - Mr Nicholas Marsh

Date	10 Jan 2023
Doctoral Researcher	Mr Nicholas Marsh
Student ID	1820275
Doctoral Research Project	Safeguarding young people from extra-familial harm: An exploratory study investigating how social workers make decisions in English child exploitation cases
Project type	MPhil/PhD - PhD
Project mode	Full Time
Project start	24 Sep 2018
School	School of Education & Communities

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## Change request form

### Project title form

Please Note, if you have received Ethical Approval for your research you must also submit an Amendment to an approved Ethics Application. This can be done via the Ethics tab on your record and by starting a new application and choosing the 'Amendment to an application approved outside of ResearchUEL' option.

Failure to do this may result in a case of academic misconduct as your new research title will not have Ethical Approval.

### Proposed new title:

Safeguarding young people from extra-familial harm: An exploratory study investigating how social workers make decisions in English child exploitation cases

### Reason(s) for proposed change:

The original title was set early during my research. However, as my research has progressed it no longer accurately reflects my thesis.

Although my research still uses a systems model as the theoretical framework, it has not been as central to my research as I originally thought. I think the current title creates the expectation that a whole system approach will be a central theme. The revised title more accurately reflects my research and provides the reader with appropriate information about the thesis.

### Researcher form

Did your research require Ethical Approval?

Yes

I confirm that I have completed an Amendment to an Approved Ethics Application form to change the title of my thesis

Having discussed the proposed change of title with my supervisory team, I am satisfied with the change proposed.

Yes

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### **Supervisor form**

#### **Supervisor form**

Did your student require Ethical Approval for their research?

Yes

I confirm that my student has completed an Amendment to an Approved Ethics Application form to change the title of their thesis

We recommend that the change in the registered title of the thesis progress as requested.

Yes

Notes

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### **Research Degrees Leader form**

#### **Second approver form**

Recommend this application for consideration at the School's Research Degrees Sub-Committee

Yes

Notes

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### **School of Education and Communities Research Degrees Sub-Committee report**

#### **Committee report**

Comments

Recommendation

Approve

Dear Nicholas,

**Application ID: ETH2324-0045**

Original application ID: ETH1819-0094

**Project title: An exploratory study: Investigating the socio-political and personal factors influencing social work decision making in child exploitation cases in England**

Lead researcher: Mr Nicholas Marsh

Your application to Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee (EISC) was considered on the 23rd October 2023.

The decision is: **Approved**

The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation.

Your project has received ethical approval for 4 years from the approval date.

If you have any questions regarding this application please contact your supervisor or the administrator for the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee.

Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly.

Should you wish to make any changes in connection with this research/consultancy project you must complete 'An application for approval of an amendment to an existing application'.

The approval of the proposed research/consultancy project applies to the following site.



Principal Investigator / Local Collaborator: Mr Nicholas Marsh

Approval is given on the understanding that the [UEL Code of Practice for Research](#) and the [Code of Practice for Research Ethics](#) is adhered to. □□

Any adverse events or reactions that occur in connection with this research/consultancy project should be reported using the University's form for [Reporting an Adverse/Serious Adverse Event/Reaction](#).

The University will periodically audit a random sample of approved applications for ethical approval, to ensure that the projects are conducted in compliance with the consent given by the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee and to the highest standards of rigour and integrity.

Please note, it is your responsibility to retain this letter for your records.

With the Committee's best wishes for the success of the project.

Yours sincerely,

Catherine Hitchens

## Appendix 2 Permission to conduct PhD research letter



Nicholas Marsh  
PhD Student  
Cass School of Education  
and Communities  
Stratford Campus,  
Water Lane,  
London,  
E15 4LZ  
Email: N.Marsh@uel.ac.uk  
Telephone: 07970 618047

Dear

### **Re: Permission to Conduct PhD Research**

Following previous provisional conversations, I am writing to make a formal request for permission to conduct research with Trent/Hampstead Councils Children and Families Services. I am currently undertaking PhD studies at the University of East London, my research relates to social work practice when working with young people, specifically when the risk is posed from outside of the family home. The working title of the study is Adolescents at Risk: A whole system study exploring safeguarding young people from extra-familial harm.

The request is for access to between 5 - 20 young people's case files where social work support is ongoing and where there are concerns about child exploitation in the extrafamilial context. I am also seeking permission to carry out a social work focus group with social workers from your organisation to discuss the anonymised findings following the case file analysis.

### **The case file analysis**

Please accept my assurances that the case file analysis will be completely anonymised, any young people or professionals will not be identifiable in published research. Should permission be granted an inclusion and exclusion criterion will be shared prior to the research commencing, this will ensure that only young people absolutely suitable for the study will be considered, thus eliminating unnecessary access to young people's confidential information. Access to case files will be agreed locally and in accordance with local arrangements and information sharing governance processes.

**Social work focus groups**

The focus groups will be semi-structured, and the focus will be informed by the outcomes of the study's literature review and the case file analysis. Recruitment to the focus groups will be agreed locally, this may include a general email to all the social workers and senior practitioners who work with adolescents, child exploitation and extrafamilial harm as part of their current role. Each potential participant will receive a participation information pack detailing the purpose of the study, their role and their rights to withdraw at any time.

Your consent to conduct this research with your social workers and in your social work teams will be greatly appreciated. I will follow up with a telephone call at your convenience to answer any questions or concerns you may have. You can also contact me via the details above.

If you agree to the above, please can I ask that you send confirmation of your consent on letter headed paper or via a Trent/Hampstead Councils Children and Families Services' email address to the details provided above.

I look forward to your response.

Yours Sincerely,

Nicholas Marsh

PhD Student,

East London University

cc. Professor S. Briggs

cc. Dr D. Sharpe

# Appendix 3 Participant information sheet



University of  
East London

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET: FOCUS GROUP

University of East London

Stratford Campus, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ

### **Research Integrity**

The University adheres to its responsibility to promote and support the highest standard of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research; observing the appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks.

The University is committed to preserving your dignity, rights, safety and well-being and as such it is a mandatory requirement of the University that formal ethical approval, from the appropriate Research Ethics Committee, is granted before research with human participants or human data commences.

### **PhD Researcher**

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### **Project Title**

Safeguarding Young People: A study exploring social work interactions and interventions when working with people at risk of, or experiencing, extra-familial harm in England



University of  
East London

### **Project Description**

The focus of this study is to explore the complex and interconnected nature of safeguarding young people and what might influence the social work safeguarding response they receive. The research objective is to explore what aspects may inform social work practice to prevent and respond to exploitation in the context of extra-familial harm.

### **Invitation to participate:**

To partake in this study you need to be a social worker, senior practitioner (or equivalent). Participants should also work in a statutory setting and work with young people aged 11 years+. The focus group will include between 6-8 experienced social workers from your local authority and will explore professional perspectives relating to safeguarding and working with young people in the extra-familial context.

### **If you are interested in participating**

Please contact the researcher, Nicholas Marsh on the details provided

### **What will happen if you agree to take part (brief description of procedures)**

Once you have had the opportunity to read and fully understand this document and you have signed the informed consent form (attached) you will be invited to a one-off focus group (details to follow). The focus group will include between 8-10 experienced social workers from your local authority.

The focus group:

- Will last for approx. 90 minutes
- Will take place virtually (organised by the researcher)
- Will be semi-structured including an introduction and a summary at the end
- Conclude with the next steps
- Will provide all participants with the opportunity to share their opinions
- Will be recorded

### **Confidentiality of the Data**

As a participant your confidentiality is paramount and will be safeguarded during and post your participation in the research. All procedures for handling and processing any data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the University's Data Protection Policy.



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All of the data collected in the focus group will be anonymised and remain confidential unless information is shared which suggests that a child, young person or an adult is at risk of harm. In such cases a private conversation will be held between the researcher and the individual (it is worth noting that the researcher is an experienced social worker). During this conversation a plan of action will be drawn up to ensure the appropriate safeguarding actions are taken. Actions may include making necessary referrals or speaking to relevant managers.

**What will happen to any information/data that are collected from you**

The recordings and transcripts of the focus group will be kept in a secure place to ensure confidentiality. Prior to sharing any results of the focus group all data will be anonymised in order to protect your identity. This will be completed via the use of unique identification numbers for participants and if quoted within published research participants will be given pseudonyms.

**Protocol for support if participant experiences psychological or emotional distress:**

Although every effort will be made by the researcher to mitigate the possibility of any psychological or emotional distress of the participants, should you feel worried during your entire time engagement with the research project it is advised, in the first instance, that you contact the researcher directly on the details provided. If the researcher is unavailable or is not considered the appropriate person, for whatever reason, please either contact a member of the researcher's supervisory team (details above).

**What will happen to the results of the research?**

The findings of the study will be published and accessible via the University of East London and other Doctoral Thesis websites. The findings will also be shared with senior leaders across various local authorities, including West Sussex and Greater Manchester. It is also hoped that some of the study's findings will be published via other academic forums and outlets, such as journals and conferences. The final report will not include any personally identifiable information.

**Disclaimer**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time during the research. Should you choose to withdraw from the programme you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason. Please note that your data can be withdrawn up to the point of data analysis – after this point it may not be possible





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### **University Research Ethics Committee**

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of the research in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

**Catherine Hitchens, Research Integrity and Ethics Manager, Graduate School, EB 1.43**  
**University of East London, Docklands Campus, London E16 2RD**  
**(Telephone: 020 8223 6683, Email: [researchethics@uel.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@uel.ac.uk))**

For general enquiries about the research please contact the Principal Investigator on the contact details at the top of this sheet

**UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON**

**Consent to Participate in a Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants.**

**Project Title**

Safeguarding Young People: A study exploring social work interactions and interventions when working with people at risk of, or experiencing, extra-familial harm in England

**Researcher's Name**

Nicholas Marsh

**Email** N.Marsh@uel.ac.uk

Please tick as appropriate:

	YES	NO
I have read the above information relating to the programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.		
I consent to the recording of the virtual focus group and for the purposes of this research and its related work.		
I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential as far as possible. Only the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data.		
I understand that maintaining strict confidentiality is subject to the following limitations:  Although great care will be taken to ensure confidentiality of the data and information generated in the focus group, the researcher cannot be accountable for other focus group members sharing what has been discussed. The researcher will take every precaution to ensure that all focus group members are aware of their responsibility in regards to upholding the confidence of their colleagues.  <i>All of the data collected in the focus group will be anonymised and remain confidential unless information is shared which suggests that a child, young person or an adult is at risk of harm. In such cases a private conversation will be held between the researcher and the individual (it is worth noting that the researcher is an experienced social worker). During this conversation a plan of action will be drawn up to ensure the appropriate safeguarding actions are taken.</i>		

<i>Actions may include making necessary referrals or speaking to relevant managers.</i>		
I consent to direct quotes being used from the focus group in an anonymised manner		
I hereby give permission for the data collected as part of this research project be used in future research projects by the researcher identified above		
It has been explained to me what will happen once the programme has been completed.		
I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I am free to withdraw at any time during the research without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason. I understand that my data can be withdrawn up to the point of data analysis and that after this point it is not possible.		
I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me and for the information obtained to be used in relevant research publications.		

## Appendix 4 Codes and categories matrix

This appendix contains four tables. Each table illustrates a stage in the process of developing the seventy initial codes into the final four research domains:

1. Initial codes and descriptions.
2. Focused codes and descriptions.
3. The development of focused codes into seven categories, and the final four categories.
4. The four final research domains.

As illustrated below, the development of the initial codes into final themes followed several distinct stages of development.

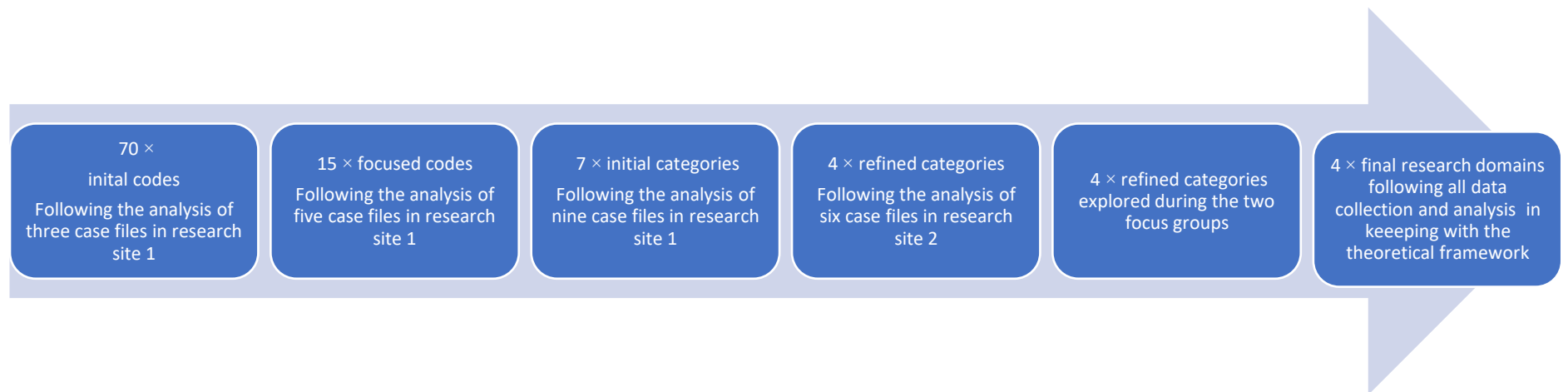


Table A1 provides an overview of the initial seventy codes and the focused codes they informed via a process of constant comparison and memo-writing (Charmaz, 2014).

**Table A1. Initial codes**

#	Initial code	Description	Focused code(s) / not progressed
1	YP not being considered as an active part of their plan	Decision-making processes that exclude the YP and their family from being directly involved. This includes meetings with SWs and managers, supervision, and other professional forums. This practice effectively excludes young people's participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> <li>• Restricted participation of YP</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>
2	Young people taking action to get their needs met	Young people taking direct action to get their needs met or their voices heard. For example, going missing from home or removing themselves from school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Restricted participation of YP</li> <li>• Unaccepted expressions of agency</li> <li>• Self-identified support</li> </ul>
3	Reaching emotional limits	Parents/carers explicitly stating that they cannot carry on – 'We are at our wits' end' / 'We need help, now!'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Ordinary responses to extraordinary risk</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> </ul>
4	YP/family requesting support	Specifically stating they (family/YP) want help. Requesting support directly or indirectly – 'I need to be put into care'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared decision-making with parent/carer</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-identified support</li> </ul>
5	SWs providing the illusion of choice/participation with YP or family	SW asking what support is needed, though there are limited or no options (decisions has already been made). For example, Keira had run away from home again stating that she did not want to return home as she hated her brother and her mum and dad do not like her. The SW was told by their manager to 'Call Keira, ask how she is and whether she needs anything. Tell her she is needs to go back home'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Restricted participation of YP</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>
6	Ending professional involvement before it has commenced	Desk-based decisions by social work front-door services to take no further action (NFA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> </ul>
7	Infantilising the YP in words and actions	SWs and partner agencies using shorthand and infantilising terms that reduce the YP's sense of agency – 'She is attention-seeking', 'She has temper tantrums', 'He's immature'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Unaccepted expressions of agency</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> <li>• Framing narratives of YP</li> </ul>
8	SWs advising physical actions and sanctions to parents	SWs advising parents to input physical sanctions such as turning off the internet, locking doors and windows, and removing the YP's phone as a preventative or disruptive measure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Ordinary responses to extraordinary risk</li> </ul>
9	Parent reflecting on what once was or could have been	Parents wishing what could have been. 'Her behaviour was so good when she was twelve', 'She should be going to college now'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not progressed as had no bearing on aims of research</li> </ul>

10	Social work interventions providing hope	Parents/carers/young people explicitly stating that improvements have been made due to SW involvement or actions – ‘Since **** [SW’s name] has been allocated, our daughter has been home on time.’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> </ul>
11	Telling YP outcomes and actions (no discussion)	SW telling the YP the next steps and direction of the case. ‘I am visiting you on Monday and you are going back to school. I will drop you off’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> <li>• Restricted participation of YP</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP’s identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>
12	Parents and young people freely sharing personal information unaware of impact	An observation of the power imbalance between SWs and parents and young people. Once information has been shared it may have unknown consequences or be shared more widely than parents and young people anticipated – ‘Dad informed me that he grabbed Keira by the neck and thigh to stop her leaving the house... Strategy meeting arranged’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> <li>• Framing narratives of parents/carers</li> </ul>
13	Social care receiving referrals from other agencies	Other agencies referring safeguarding concerns to children’s social care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> </ul>
14	Safeguarding partners supporting social care’s decision-making and interventions	Safeguarding partners endorsing SW decision-making. This is most frequently recorded within meeting minutes such as ‘all agreed’ or ‘***** from the police agreed with the social worker’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> <li>• Action-focused response</li> </ul>
15	Information-gathering to inform action and non-action	Social care contacting partner agencies to inform next steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> </ul>
16	YP making a request that conflicts with safeguarding practices	The YP requesting permission to do something that is outside the child's plan and is unlikely to be agreed. This includes wanting to stay at an address without it being checked by social care or the police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SW discretion and autonomy</li> <li>• Unaccepted expressions of agency</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>
17	SW visiting YP or family in line with process as opposed to purpose	SWs being told to visit the family or YP prior to a meeting or as an action from a panel or during supervision. There is often no context, and its purpose is unclear. 'Social worker to check-in on Keira before strategy meeting'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> <li>• Action-focused response</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>
18	Social work activity being directed and influenced by processes and panels	This code relates to the number of panels and decision-making processes SWs working in child exploitation are required to navigate. Keira's SW's case records indicate nine different decision-making forums and processes (formal supervision, informal supervision, exploitation panels, exploitation risk assessment, exploitation assessment tool, strategy meetings, child-in-need meetings, missing from home and self-harm prevention plans, and meetings with the team psychologist)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> <li>• Action-focused response</li> </ul>
19	Proportioning blame to parents or YP	This occurred frequently, ascribing responsibility to the YP. This also included blaming parents – 'Dad doesn't have a good	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Framing narratives of parents/carers</li> <li>• Framing narratives of YP</li> </ul>



		relationship with her, and he gets into arguments – this is a push factor for her running away’	
20	Planning to tell the YP something and not engage in dialogue	This initial code was quickly integrated into initial code 11	
21	SW sharing decision-making with YP and family members	When the SW speaks to the family members or YP and, together, they explore next steps and decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Framing narratives of parents/carers</li> <li>• Shared decision-making with parent/carer</li> <li>• SW discretion and autonomy</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP’s identity and development (or not)</li> <li>• Framing narratives of YP</li> </ul>
22	YP or family requesting that services are more responsive	This was frequently seen more in terms of parents chasing the SW to follow up actions and referrals. This was also seen with young people too, though less frequently	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Forced actions due to threat, complaints, and the actions of others</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> </ul>
23	SW demonstrating authority in terms of interactions and outcomes for the family	SWs expressing the consequence if actions are not followed – ‘There is no alternative to where Jack lives. If you refuse to have him back home, we will have to share this in a strategy meeting with the police and Jack’s school’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> <li>• Action-focused response</li> </ul>

24	YP self-identifying coping or self-protection strategies	YP explicitly or implicitly finding strategies to manage emotions, situations, or external pressures. This includes Keira stating that she leaves the property when stressed and stays at friends' houses and Jack stating that he smokes cannabis to ease stress and to cope with his anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restricted participation of YP</li> <li>• Self-identified support</li> </ul>
25	Focusing on the behaviour of the YP and not on what the behaviour may be indicating	SWs focusing on the behaviour of the YP in conversations and correspondence and then working to address this outward display of behaviour – 'Hope has been arguing with her parents. This is causing tensions in the house. I will visit Hope in school this week and explore strategies to reduce the arguments.'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Action-focused response</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> <li>• Framing narratives of YP</li> </ul>
26	Holding onto hope whilst being aware of limitations of role	When SWs promote hope amongst professionals, parents, and young people. Conversation with Sara when she wanted to leave the placement: 'I reassured Sara that I have worked with the staff at her placement before and they are caring and will have her best interests in mind. I told Sara she just needs to give it time.'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• SW discretion and autonomy</li> </ul>
27	Referring to other agencies to step down case (close the case)	As states:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> </ul>
28	YP communicating to the outside world	This code appeared frequently and often related to young people drinking, using substances, displaying destructive behaviour (smashing objects), or self-harming. This often resulted in SWs advising the YP or their parents/carers how	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unaccepted expressions of agency</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> <li>• Self-identified support</li> </ul>

		best to manage this situation. It also frequently resulted in further referrals being made	
29	Considering the YP's support and wider systems and networks	This code did not appear frequently; it appeared only in planned pieces of work with the YP or their family. Social work case note: 'I met with Ryan and his mum today and we completed an Eco-map to explore who is best placed to provide support if tensions in the house escalate'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SW discretion and autonomy</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>
30	SW noting strained parent-child / child-parent relationship	SW recording the tensions in the home in assessments or case notes	Not progressed as limited information on this code, compared with other initial codes
31	Considering the YP's behaviour as a form of communication	This initial code was integrated into initial code 27	
32	Carving out quality time with YP	The SW or parenting worker advising parents to spend more quality time with their child	Not progressed as limited information on this code, compared with other initial codes
33	Services imposing pressures on one another	Support services stating that they are not happy with the decisions SWs and their managers are making or the slow pace of change in the YP's life. This may include pressurising the SW to place young people into local authority care (see Dylan's case file)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Forced actions due to threat, complaints, and the actions of others</li> <li>• Action-focused response</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>

34	SWs attending meetings to offer reassurance and refrain from getting involved	SWs on the duty /intake team or specialist child exploitation service attending forums and meetings, openly showing commitment to family and the YP, though frequently judging there not to be a role for their service	Not progressed as limited information on this code compared with other initial codes
35	Relying on physical interventions to instil boundaries	This initial code was integrated into initial code 8	
36	Losing sight of the YP – who they are and the context of their peers	SWs losing sight of the YP due to focusing on addressing individual risks and competing tasks. This is at the expense of the YP's needs and interests (including their intersecting characteristics).  This includes focusing on work such as 'healthy relationships', 'internet safety', and consent, with little to no focus on usual adolescent interests and the importance of peer relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> <li>• Action-focused response</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>
37	YP sharing their pain and showing vulnerability	This initial code was integrated into initial code 27	
38	The completion of a task being recognised as progress	In meetings, SWs, social work managers, and multi-agency colleagues focusing on the completion of tasks. There is limited exploration of impact on outcomes for the YP. This can take the shape of a long list of recommendations for the SW to carry out or the updating of progress as a list of activities undertaken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> <li>• Action-focused response</li> </ul>
39	Reflecting on what was and could have been for the YP	This initial code was integrated into initial code 9	

40	Social work decision-making and interventions designed to address external behaviours but potentially missing the underlying cause	This initial code was integrated into initial code 24	
41	Labelling the YP	SWs sometimes label young people with suspected learning needs, communication difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and mental health problems. These labels may be used as a shorthand communication tool or to explain the YP's behaviour, but often without a formal assessment or diagnosis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> <li>• Framing narratives of YP</li> </ul>
42	Safeguarding partners pressurising SWs to make different decisions	This initial code was integrated into initial code 33	
43	YP being sexually exploited	This code did not develop beyond the initial coding stage. YP's experiences of CSE were integrated into codes relating to systems and processes.	
44	Seeking sexual attention	This initial code was integrated into initial code 27 and 35	
45	Assessing without assessing	SWs and social work team conducting work in the background such as case discussion, attending meetings, and making calls to other agencies (making an assessment) without committing to involving services and allocating a SW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> </ul>
46	YP requesting closure of the case	YP requesting the SW closes the case. In some cases (mainly CSE), case notes reflect a quick closure. Other requests are not as swiftly acted upon (mainly CCE), as seen in both sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>

47	YP communicating in ways that are not understood by professionals	This code was integrated into code 27	
48	The sharing of distressing information – indicating the normalisation of children being exploited	On numerous occasions, sensitive information was shared with partner agencies, young people, and parents and carers without consideration of the impact. An example of this includes discussions with his parents about Jamie trying to kill himself, which were recorded in meeting minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• SW discretion and autonomy</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>
49	The increasing acceptance of risk	As cases progress and move towards closure, SWs, managers, and partner agencies appear to adjust their expectations for risk and what is acceptable. More risk appears to be tolerated as cases are being prepared to be stepped down	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Action-focused response</li> <li>• Adjusting expectations</li> </ul>
50	Recommending arbitrary parenting actions	This initial code was integrated into initial code 8	
51	SW seeking reassurance to ease anxieties	This relates to SWs seeking reassurance by accessing managers and safeguarding partners to confirm responses. For example, Sara visiting another city centre over the weekend for shopping; Sara was aged 16 years at the time. The SW recorded everyone's agreement during a looked after children's meeting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• SW discretion and autonomy</li> <li>• Adjusting expectations</li> </ul>
52	Naming the demands on resources (YP arrived at social work office every day this week)	This code appeared once and did not progress	

53	Suggesting to parents/carers to put control measures in place to manage behaviour	This initial code was integrated into initial code 8	
54	Medicalising the YP	Seeking psychologist/psychiatrist support for YP or informally labelling them as having mental health issues. This initial code was integrated into initial code 41	
55	Not meeting threshold for service interventions	This initial code was integrated into initial code 45	
56	YP choosing who to engage with and who not to engage with (attending and missing sessions)	This initial code was integrated into initial code 27	
57	Sharing decision-making; sharing anxieties (professional to professional)	This initial code was integrated into initial code 51	
58	Labelling concerns in professional shorthand (YP has mental health difficulties)	This initial code was integrated into initial code 41	
59	Conceptualising risky behaviours – what is risky for one child is not as risky for another	This code relates to the conclusions drawn by SWs when assessing the risks a YP faces. This code relates to the framing of the YP and the discretion available to the SW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SW discretion and autonomy</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> <li>• Framing narratives of YP</li> </ul>
60	YP misleading professionals about attendance at services	Some young people frequently stated that they attended appointments or A&E although there was no record of the visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> <li>• Framing narratives of YP</li> </ul>

		or their attendance. This often contributed to the framing of the YP as untrustworthy	
61	SW working within constrained resources (possibly compromising engagement and recognition of YP's age)	SWs trying to work creatively with young people and families with little resources other than time. This included SWs walking around lakes with young people and taking them to museums and other public spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Ordinary responses to extraordinary risk</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>
62	Considering YP as independent and with rights	This code relates to SWs acting as advocates for young people in professional spaces and supporting young people to state their wishes and feelings. This was frequently observed in strategy meetings and other professional decision-making forum minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• SW discretion and autonomy</li> <li>• Restricted participation of YP</li> </ul>
63	Missing the vulnerability of boys	This code relates to a pattern of not responding to the emotional needs of boys or their vulnerability. For example, Ryan was found naked with two males in a hotel room. No concerns were raised about the potential for CSE. Dylan was assaulted with a knife and no emotional support was recorded as being provided	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SW discretion and autonomy</li> <li>• Adjusting expectations</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> <li>• Framing narratives of YP</li> </ul>
64	Providing positive opportunities for young people that do not focus on abuse	This related to code 62. It was observed infrequently across the case files analysed, and mainly when engagement with the YP was at a low ebb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Enacting processes (formal and informal)</li> <li>• Action-focused response</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>



65	YP attending professional spaces	Most social work sessions took place with parents and the YP in official buildings. This included social care offices, education settings, youth centres, hospitals, and police stations. Other frequently recorded places included the family home and the SW's car	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Ordinary responses to extraordinary risk</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> </ul>
66	Dehumanising young people's experiences via shorthand abbreviations from professional terminology	Young people's experiences were referred to in professional shorthand. When reading the case files, various codes appeared that seemed to detach professionals from young people's experiences. Examples include 'YP MFH' (young person missing from home), 'young person displays SHB' (sexual harmful behaviour), and 'Plugging' (forced to conceal drugs internally)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• SW discretion and autonomy</li> <li>• Framing narratives of YP</li> </ul>
67	Parents taking action (looking for their child when they are missing)	This code did not appear frequently enough to develop further and, on the limited examples, it was difficult to link it to the aims of the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Framing narratives of parents/carers</li> </ul>
68	Passing on information knowingly when not having a role/responsibility	Services sharing information with social care where this is no role for them while case was open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> </ul>
69	YP highlighting own coping strategies	This code relates to young people managing their stresses via ways they have found to work for them. This may include running away from home, drinking, going for walks, and leaving the classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> <li>• Self-identified support</li> </ul>

70	YP attending appointments intoxicated	This code appeared several times: young people attended school or appointments either under the influence of substances or suspected to be under the influence. This was always framed as a problem behaviour and responded to in terms of sanction. This included ending the meeting, cancelling an activity, or sending home from school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modality of social work</li> <li>• Unaccepted expressions of agency</li> <li>• Acknowledging YP's identity and development (or not)</li> <li>• Framing narratives of YP</li> </ul>
SW, social worker; YPs, young person.			

**Table A2. Focused codes and descriptions\***

#	Focused codes	Description
1	The modality of social work	This focused code highlights both strengths and limitations of social work practice in child exploitation, for example, social workers' ability to coordinate complex multi-agency plans. However, the system appears to get in the way of them responding to practical requests, as seen in the case of Jack's mother, who sought financial support to replace internal doors in her home to facilitate a house move to get away from Jack's exploiters. The code explores the ability of social work to adapt to new safeguarding concerns
2	Ordinary responses to extraordinary risk	This focused code relates to the ordinary responses social workers provide to the extraordinary risks young people face. This includes highlighting the gaps in social work resources and knowledge of what works in relation to child exploitation. For example, social workers frequently advised parents/carers to lock all doors and windows to stop the young person leaving in the middle of the night. However, this often resulted in the young person becoming aggressive/violent with their parents/carers and placing themselves at increased risk by climbing out of unlocked windows such as those on the second floor
3	Forced actions due to threat, complaints, and the actions of others	This focused code relates to the actions and decisions taken by social workers and their managers that are explicitly linked to external influences. Examples of this code include the collective pressure applied to social care to take more decisive action by partner agencies, as recorded in strategy meetings and in email correspondence. Other examples of this code include parents refusing to have their child back home, thus forcing social care to explore alternative accommodation
4	Enacting processes (formal and informal)	The focused code relates to processes that are both formal and informal. This includes social workers completing risk assessments that contradict the strength-based work the social worker is undertaking
5	Action-focused response	This focused code relates to the number of actions social workers are requested to complete following the various decision-making processes and forums they attend. The action-focused response also includes the continued focus on whether the set tasks are completed or remain outstanding. From the case file analysis, it

		can be difficult to assess the relationship between tasks completed and overall impact on outcomes for the young person and their family/networks
6	Framing narratives of parents/carers	This focused code pertains to the framing of parents/carers as either helpful or unhelpful in social care. The case file analysis shows that parents are categorised as on board or working against social care. Parents who disagreed with the plan or requested additional support were seen as not taking their child's safeguarding and well-being seriously. For example, Hope's parents were initially viewed as supportive, but when they asked for financial assistance and disagreed with the plan, they were perceived as not prioritising their daughter's safety
7	Shared decision-making with parent/carer	This focused code relates to explicit examples of when social workers have worked with parents/carers and shared decision-making with them. Sharing of decisions appeared to be constrained by external factors, including time, the resources available, and the decisions agreed by managers and safeguarding colleagues
8	Social worker discretion and autonomy	This focused code relates to the day-to-day decision-making and discretion individual social workers express that shape the direction of interventions for young people and families. The first observed example of this was in Keira's case file when it was noted on 12 separate occasions that she did not like her brother. Different social workers recorded this information; however, it was never explicitly considered and addressed as a potential push factor for Keira in any meaningful manner. This demonstrates a degree of discretion amongst social workers in relation to which areas of concern are explored and which are not
9	Adjusting expectations	This focused code relates to the adjustment of expectations during social work involvement in relation to safeguarding decision-making and expected outcomes for young people. These adjustments are usually a lowering of expectations and an increase in the tolerance of risk. For example, Sara would return late or go missing from home; at the start of social work involvement, Sara's mum was advised to contact the police if Sara was more than one hour late, even if Sara had been in contact. However, prior to closing Sara's case (14 months later), it appeared to be accepted that the police would not be called if Sara had contacted the home. The same concerns remained regarding sexual exploitation, but the tolerance for risk appeared higher

10	Social worker feeling compelled to provide advice	This focused code pertains to the challenges faced by social workers who appeared to be expected to provide quick solutions to complex issues, including offering advice without clear evidence of its effectiveness. For example, when asked how to stop contact with the exploiter or older peers, social workers often advised limiting internet use or removing the young person's phone at night. However, such advice appeared to have unintended consequences, such as the young person leaving the house to access the internet elsewhere. Despite the risks, this advice was often given without sufficient discussions being recorded about potential risks
11	Restricted participation of young person	This focused code relates to examples when social workers appeared to have shared decision-making with young people, but the decisions young people could influence were constrained by external factors, including time, the resources available, and the decisions agreed by managers and safeguarding colleagues. An example of this includes social workers asking the young people where they would like to go during a one-to-one session. The social worker has limited options in terms of what they can offer (home, school, the car, office, or a café). There was no evidence of social workers meeting young people outside reasonably controlled or structured environments
12	Unaccepted expressions of agency	This focused code relates to young people expressing their autonomy and decision-making in ways that are disapproved of by professionals. Examples include young people who self-harm or use substances to cope with feelings of distress or pain. If young people relied too heavily on these strategies, they were referred to CAMHS, school counselling, or substance misuse services, often without the young person's support or agreement
13	Acknowledging young person's identity and development (or not)	This focused code relates to the absence of explicit consideration of the young person's identity. Examples of this code include assessments that do not mention the young person's age, class capacity, gender, and ethnicity (or other personal characteristics) in terms of how they might be positioned in the world and how services may interact with them. For example, most young people's care plans and interventions looked similar to one another, and this was across the board, regardless of level of risk, abuse type, or the young person's intersecting characteristics, such as learning disability, gender, and/or ethnicity

14	Framing narratives of young person	This focused code relates to the labels and comments made about young people that attest to their character or well-being from a professional perspective. The case of Josh illustrates how his emotional outbursts were initially viewed sympathetically due to his two recent bereavements, but later he was framed as violent and aggressive because he withdrew from social work support. This highlights the ability of social workers to frame young people as vulnerable and in need of protection or as being at risk. This code also highlights the different framing of young people depending on their intersecting characteristics. From the case file analysis, this was particularly true in terms of gender, ethnicity, and criminal exploitation
15	Self-identified support	Young people self-identify their own support, including self-referring to agencies or seeking out adults they feel comfortable with. However, there can be a tension between the young person's self-identified support and the support identified by professionals. For example, friendship networks that the young person found helpful may be deemed unsuitable by social workers, and therefore would be discouraged
*Theoretical framework colour code: blue represents macro-level influences; grey represents exo- and meso-level influences; green represents micro-level influences.		

Table A3 depicts the development of the fifteen focused codes into the initial seven codes at the end of data collection and analysis in research site 1. These categories were subsequently transferred and tested in research site 2. The seven categories were developed into four final categories in research site 2. The final four categories formed the basis of the focus group questions.

**Table A3. Focused codes, seven initial categories, and four final categories**

Focused codes ( <i>n</i> = 15)	Initial categories ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Brief overview of categories	Final categories ( <i>n</i> = 4)
The modality of social work	The modality of social work (social workers not being able to meet the needs of young people and families)	This category highlights the external factors that shape social work decision-making and actions. This includes the reliance on levels of bureaucracy and the influence of safeguarding partners. Social work often appeared inflexible and lacking appropriate resources to respond to the needs of young people and their families	1. Relying on familiar systems, processes, and actions to create feelings of progress
Ordinary responses to extraordinary risk			
Forced actions due to threat, complaints, and the actions of others			
Enacting processes (formal and informal)	Relying on familiar systems, processes, and actions to create feelings of progress	This category highlights the restrictions social work systems and processes have on social workers' ability to deliver what young people want. This category also includes the focus on the tasks social workers complete	
Action-focused response			

		within set time frames. Activity levels appeared to be used as a measure of effectiveness as opposed to impact/outcomes	
Framing narratives of parents/carers	The narrative of the helpful and unhelpful parent	This category highlights the narrative that social workers broadly fit parents into, as either helpful or unhelpful. When parents largely agree with the plan, they are considered supportive and understanding of the safeguarding concerns. When parents disagree with the plan and frequently challenge professionals, parents are recorded as 'parenting is not safeguarding'	Category not developed further as it did not translate to the second research site
Shared decision-making with parents/carers			
Social worker discretion and autonomy	Social workers' discretion and autonomy	This category relates to the spaces where social workers can exercise discretion and autonomy. This includes what information they share with managers and safeguarding partners and how they present information in the assessments they undertake. Social work discretion can shape	2. Social worker discretion and autonomy



		the focus of professional interventions and the allocation of resources	
Adjusting expectations	Social worker self-preservation	This category relates to the category above, although it focuses on how social workers use their autonomy and discretion to safeguard their time and themselves from blame and the emotional dimensions of their role. This includes providing advice that does not appear to be effective or workable, but which demonstrates that the social worker is trying to reduce risk, for example, requesting parents switch off the internet in the evening to stop the young person being online all night. This appeared to cause more issues than it solved. Other examples include the young person's plan being more tolerant of risk towards the end of social work involvement than at the start. These adjustments of expectation	
Social worker feeling compelled to provide advice			

		allowed for social workers to downgrade risk and close cases	
Acknowledging young person's identity and development (or not)	Acknowledging the young person's identity and development	This category relates to the absence of explicit consideration of the young person's identity. Examples of this code include assessments that do not mention the young person's age, class, gender, and ethnicity (or other personal characteristics) in terms of how they might be positioned in the world and how services may interact with them	3. Acknowledging the young person's identity and development (or not)
Framing narratives of young person			
Self-identified support	The boundaries of participation / young people getting their voices heard	This category relates specifically to the role of participation and how young people get their voices heard and their needs met when working within systems that do not facilitate meaningful participation in line with the young person's evolving rights	4. The boundaries of participation / young people getting their voices heard
Restricted participation of young person			
Unaccepted expressions of agency			
*Theoretical framework colour code: blue represents macro-level influences; grey represents exo- and meso-level influences; green represents micro-level influences.			

**Table A4. Four categories into four domains (the findings, Chapters 4–7)\***

Four final categories	Four final research domains
Relying on familiar systems, processes, and actions to create feelings of progress	<b>Domain 1:</b> Professional and organisational influences: familiar responses to unfamiliar risks (Chapter 4)
Social worker discretion and autonomy	<b>Domain 2:</b> Social workers' influences: social work autonomy and discretion (Chapter 5)
The boundaries of participation / young people getting their voices heard	<b>Domain 3:</b> Young people's influence, part 1: Process and procedures versus participation (Chapter 6)
Acknowledging the young person's identity and development (or not)	<b>Domain 4:</b> Young people's influence, part 2: social work responses to young people's 'demand characteristics' (Chapter 7)
*Theoretical framework colour code: blue represents macro-level influences; grey represents exo- and meso-level influences; green represents micro-level influences.	

## Appendix 5 Email invitation for focus group

Recruitment Email to Focus Groups

Dear Social Worker,

### **Invitation to an online focus group**

I would like to invite you to take part in a focus group. The focus group will form part of my PhD studies at the University of East London. The topics discussed in the focus group relate to social work practice and child exploitation.

As such, I am interested in hearing from social workers and senior practitioners who have experience in a statutory social work setting of working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, child sexual and/or criminal exploitation within the extrafamilial context.

If you are interested, please reply to this email by (insert date)

The focus group will be held online via Microsoft Teams.  
The date and time will be confirmed once participants have been identified.

I have included the Participation Information Pack in this email for further details.

If you have any questions, or if you would like to take part in the focus group, please contact me via email.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Nick Marsh  
PhD researcher

## Appendix 6 Focus group schedule

### Focus group schedule

#### Opening question

Please briefly introduce yourself and share your professional links to today's topic of safeguarding young people from exploitation in the context of extrafamilial harm.

(This question encourages conversation and is designed to demonstrate commonalities.)

#### Key questions

1. What factors most influence you when working with young people who are at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the context of extrafamilial harm?
2. Thinking about your work with young people at risk of exploitation in the context of extrafamilial harm, what or who takes up most of your time and why do you think that is?
3. Thinking about your work with young people at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation in the context of extrafamilial harm, what aspects of your work do you take home or have difficulty switching off from and how does this impact you?
4. Thinking about your work with young people in this context, how do their individual characteristics (including age, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation) influence professional responses?
5. Thinking about your work in exploitation in the context of extrafamilial harm, how do you, your managers, and senior leaders know you're making progress and keeping young people safe?

**(These questions relate to the essence of my research findings from the case file analysis.)**

#### Closing question

**I closed the focus groups by providing a short summary of what has been discussed, taken from my written notes. Participants were asked to comment on the accuracy of the summary with any concluding thoughts or questions.**

## Appendix 7 Example of a social work case note.

Case Note

Audit

Attachments (0)

From Context Of Keira Stall (17 years )

Contact Date 24-Jan-2018

Type of Contact Accommodation

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**Contact Regarding**

Relation	Name	Age	At Contact	Interviewed?	Seen?	Alone?	Bedroom?	Regarding Assessment
Children / Young People involved in this Case Note								
▶ Self	Keira Stall (17 years )			✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Adults also present / interviewed								
No Adults recorded...								

**Reason for Contact** This section provides a space for a simple comment about the reason for the contact.

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● **Detailed Notes**

Detailed Notes

The social worker would record the content of the case note in this box. This may include details of telephone calls, home visits or interactions with young people, parents or professionals. Social workers are legally and professionally compelled to maintain clear, accurate, and timely recordings.

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● **Part 2 - Write Up**

Analysis of information

Action

This section is divided into two categories. The first provides a space for the social worker to analyse the content of the activity using their professional judgment. The area focuses on actions the social worker might take following the activity. These two categories were not routinely completed.

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● **Actions**

▶ Update this Case Note

▶ Finalise Case Note

## Appendix 8 List of dissemination outputs

Davis, J. and Marsh, N. (2020), 'Boys to men – The cost of “adultification” in safeguarding Black boys', *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 8(2), pp. 255–259.

Davis, J. and Marsh, N. (2022), 'The myth of the universal child', in Holmes, D. (ed.), *Safeguarding Young People: Risk, Rights, Resilience and Relationships*, Jessica King Publishers, London.

Marsh, N. (2018), 'The wrong end of the telescope', *The National Organisation for the Treatment of Abuse (NOTA) Newsletter*, No 86. Available at: [www.nota.co.uk/nota-newsletter/](http://www.nota.co.uk/nota-newsletter/)

Marsh, N. (2019), 'Sexual abuse of boys continues to be missed: What social workers can do', *Community Care*. Available, at: [www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/03/18/sexual-abuse-boys-continues-missed-social-workers-can/](http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2019/03/18/sexual-abuse-boys-continues-missed-social-workers-can/)

Marsh, N. (2019), 'Care versus control: Reflections on child protection practices', *Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse*. Available at: [www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/blog/care-vs-control/](http://www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/blog/care-vs-control/)

Marsh, N. (2019), 'Teenagers are vulnerable too – How social workers are trying new ways to keep them safe', *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/teenagers-are-vulnerable-too-how-social-workers-are-trying-new-ways-to-keep-them-safe-118294>

Marsh, N. (2020), 'Safeguarding adolescents: Effectively responding to child sexual abuse outside the home', *Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse*. Available at: [www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/blog/safeguarding-adolescents-outside-the-home/](http://www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/blog/safeguarding-adolescents-outside-the-home/)

Marsh, N. (2022), 'Supporting young people who identify as LGBTQ+: Frontline Briefing', *Research in Practice*. Available at: [www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/february/supporting-young-people-who-identify-as-lgbtqplus-frontline-briefing-2022/](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2022/february/supporting-young-people-who-identify-as-lgbtqplus-frontline-briefing-2022/)

Marsh, N. (2023), 'Inclusive practice with young people who identify as LGBTQ+', *Research in Practice*. Available at: [www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2023/february/inclusive-practice-with-young-people-who-identify-as-lgbtqplus/](http://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2023/february/inclusive-practice-with-young-people-who-identify-as-lgbtqplus/)

Marsh, N. (2024), *Child Criminal Exploitation: Protecting and neglecting boys and young men* [unpublished manuscript], Policy Press, Bristol.