

Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership



Sadistic Online Exploitation – GSCP Briefing

Q&A Handout

1. What is the scale of online exploitation and why is it a concern?

The internet is accessible to over 5.5 billion people globally. Children as young as 11 in the UK now have mobile phones, and platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Discord are widely used. This widespread access means even a small percentage of adults with harmful intentions can pose a significant risk to children online. The landscape is increasingly sinister due to the ease of communication and anonymity online.

2. Who are the main perpetrators and victims in these online groups?

Most offenders are boys aged 14–17, often socially excluded, who form “comm groups” to share extreme materials for notoriety and clout. Victims are often young girls coerced into self-harm, abuse, or even suicide, sometimes live-streamed for others’ entertainment. There is also evidence of cruelty to animals and abuse of siblings or friends.

3. What motivates these groups and how do they operate?

Motivation is often about gaining credibility and notoriety among peers, not always sexual gratification. These groups share child sexual abuse material, violent content, extremist ideologies, and engage in cyber offences. The behaviour is driven by a desire for clout, competition between groups, and sometimes financial gain through cybercrime.

4. What are the challenges for law enforcement and safeguarding professionals?

The threat is complex and crosses traditional boundaries (child sexual abuse, terrorism, cybercrime). Law enforcement is organised by subject matter expertise, but these groups operate across multiple domains. International cooperation is essential, as offenders and victims are often in different countries. There is a need for better understanding of criminal pathways and more effective prevention strategies.

5. What are the physical and behavioural signs professionals should look for in victims?

Key signs include:

- Self-harm, especially cutting symbols, numbers, or letters into the skin (often the “brand” of a group)
- Blood signs on walls
- Increased interest in extreme material, occult, or nihilistic ideologies
- Social isolation, secrecy about online activities
- Unexplained injuries to pets or siblings
- Sudden changes in behaviour or interests

6. How are children both perpetrators and victims, and how should this be managed?

Children engaging in these behaviours are often victims themselves. The NCA’s approach is to treat them as children, not criminals, and to avoid unnecessary criminalisation. Guidance is provided to police and social workers to ensure a child-centred approach, with multi-agency support where possible.

7. What interventions or referrals are available for children at risk?

There is a pilot in Worcestershire County Council called “below the threshold,” which uses a multi-agency approach for children who do not meet the criteria for counter-terrorism Prevent but are at risk of online radicalisation. Nationally, there is a need for more robust referral pathways and interventions.

8. What advice is there for parents and carers?

Parents should show an active interest in their child's online behaviour, ask about platforms and contacts, and create an environment for honest conversations. The NCA is developing educational products for parents and teachers, but caution is needed to avoid creating curiosity about harmful behaviours.

9. Are there specific risks for ethnic minority or marginalised children?

While there is no specific data showing increased risk for ethnic minority children, social exclusion is a key factor. Marginalised groups, such as Gypsy Traveller communities, may be more vulnerable due to lack of education about online risks and exclusion from mainstream education. Training for staff working with these groups is recommended.

10. What are the current prevention strategies?

Prevention is approached at three levels:

- **Tertiary:** Disrupting active offenders through arrest and platform takedown
- **Secondary:** Intervening with children on the cusp of offending, e.g., through Cyber Prevent or Prevent programmes
- **Primary:** Education and behaviour change for all internet users, though this is ambitious and still under development

11. What are the main challenges and next steps for safeguarding partnerships?

There is a need for ongoing discussion, better understanding of local safeguarding policies, and development of early warning indicators for frontline professionals. Multi-agency child protection teams are being set up, but more work is needed to mature proposals and share best practice.
