

Why We Need a National Public Awareness Framework for Protecting Children

Closing the Gap Between Law, Safeguarding and Public Understanding

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Executive Summary

The protection of children from child sexual abuse and exploitation in England and Wales is underpinned by a clear legal framework. The law defines consent, establishes age thresholds, and places responsibility firmly on adults. National inquiries, including the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), have produced extensive recommendations designed to improve safeguarding, accountability and prevention.

Despite this, failures persist.

Children are still not consistently recognised as victims. Known risks are not always acted upon. Parents and carers report not being listened to. Safeguarding responses vary between areas, services and leadership structures. The same patterns identified over decades continue to emerge.

This is not due to a lack of law, nor a lack of professional knowledge.

It reflects a deeper issue:

A lack of shared understanding, consistent application, and cultural alignment across society.

At present, there is no clear, publicly accessible foundation that enables every adult to understand:

- what the law says
- what consent means in practice
- what grooming looks like
- and what responsibility they hold

This paper argues that without this shared foundation, safeguarding will remain fragmented. It proposes the development of a national public awareness framework, grounded in law, that enables individuals, families, professionals and systems to operate from the same understanding.

Because child sexual abuse is not a single-issue problem.

It is multi-layered, multi-faceted, and evolving — and it cannot be addressed through isolated interventions alone.

Framing This Paper - This is not a theoretical piece.

It is informed by lived experience, professional practice in trauma recovery, engagement with the criminal justice system, and direct involvement in national inquiry processes and policy discussions.

It is also informed by what has been consistently observed:

- the gap between what is known and what is done
- the gap between policy and practice
- and the gap between professional understanding and public understanding

This paper is not directed at a specific group, community or profession.

It is directed at: **every adult.**

The protection of children is not a political issue, nor a cultural one. It is a legal, moral and societal responsibility that applies to everyone within England and Wales. This paper does not seek to sensationalise or inflame. It seeks to bring clarity to a subject that is often obscured by complexity, discomfort, or public narrative.

The Legal Framework

The law relating to child sexual abuse in England and Wales is clear and well established.

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 sets out the legal framework governing consent and sexual activity involving children. It establishes that children under the age of 13 cannot consent to any form of sexual activity under any circumstances. It further establishes that sexual activity under the age of 16 is unlawful, and that for 16–17-year-olds, consent must be freely given and not influenced by coercion, manipulation, or exploitation.

Guidance from the Crown Prosecution Service reinforces this position, making clear that apparent compliance does not constitute consent where power imbalance, grooming or control are present (CPS, Consent Guidance: <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/rape-and-sexual-offences-chapter-6-consent>).

The Children Act 1989 further establishes that:

The welfare of the child is paramount

(<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents>)

Taken together, these frameworks leave little ambiguity.

Child sexual abuse is not a grey area in law.

It is clearly defined and clearly prohibited.

There is also a long-standing legal principle that applies:

Ignorance of the law is no defence.

The issue, therefore, is not whether the law is clear.

It is whether it is consistently understood and applied beyond professional contexts.

Every Adult's Responsibility

The law does not place responsibility on the child to understand abuse.

It places responsibility on the adult not to commit it and to act when risk is present.

This responsibility applies universally.

It does not depend on where an individual was born, how long they have been in the country, their culture, religion, or personal beliefs.

The law of England and Wales applies to every adult within it.

The law does not adapt to the individual.

The individual must comply with the law.

This creates a clear and non-negotiable expectation:

Every adult must:

- understand the legal position
- recognise risk
- and act in a way that protects children

Failure to act when harm is known or suspected is not a neutral position.

It contributes to safeguarding failure.

The Reality of Abuse

Child sexual abuse does not occur in a single environment, nor does it follow a single pattern.

The majority of abuse continues to occur within the family home or within environments of trust. This remains a central and often hidden reality.

However, this does not exist in isolation.

Abuse also occurs:

- within communities
- within care systems
- and increasingly across digital environments

Children who experience harm or unmet needs within the home may be more vulnerable to external exploitation. They may seek connection, validation or escape, making them more susceptible to grooming.

At the same time, children from stable and supportive homes are not immune.

Exposure to online environments, algorithm-driven content and grooming behaviours can create additional pathways to harm.

There is no single profile of a child at risk.

Vulnerability is not fixed.

It is shaped by context, experience and exposure.

The Perpetrator

Clarity about responsibility is essential.

Child sexual abuse is not the result of misunderstanding or miscommunication.

It is the deliberate exploitation of vulnerability.

In many cases, this exploitation is facilitated through grooming. This may begin with attention, affection and the creation of a perceived relationship, but over time it becomes a mechanism of control.

What may appear externally as a relationship is, in reality, a structured process of removing choice and autonomy.

Where grooming is present:

Consent is not valid in law.

Understanding this is critical in challenging narratives that minimise or misinterpret abuse.

System Failures

The failures in protecting children are not new, nor are they isolated.

They have been documented extensively through national inquiries, including:

- Jay Report (2014): <https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1407/independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-exploitation-in-rotherham>
- IICSA Final Report (2022): <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports/final-report.html>
- Casey Review (2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-audit-on-group-based-child-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse>

Across these inquiries, consistent themes emerge:

- children not recognised as victims
- parents' concerns not acted upon
- known risks not escalated
- inconsistent safeguarding thresholds
- delays in intervention

These are not failures of knowledge.

They are failures of application.

In many cases, practitioners recognised risk but were constrained by system structures, thresholds or leadership decisions.

Contemporary Evidence: Digital Harm, Access and System Gaps

While it is essential to recognise that the majority of abuse occurs within the home, the nature of harm is evolving.

Digital environments now play a significant role in how abuse is initiated, facilitated and sustained.

Research from Protect Children, supported by Ofcom (2026 CSAM Perpetrator Research Report), highlights that exposure to harmful content is increasingly occurring through mainstream platforms, often via algorithmic recommendation rather than active searching.

This means that:

Exposure is not always a matter of choice — it is often a function of platform design.

Child sexual abuse material does not exist in isolation. It is often encountered alongside other forms of harmful content, including violence and self-harm, creating an ecosystem in which normalisation and desensitisation can occur.

Repeated exposure can contribute to progression, where individuals move from passive consumption to more active engagement.

This is further compounded by the use of digital platforms in the organisation and continuation of abuse. Communication between perpetrators and children frequently occurs through messaging and social media platforms, which are used to build trust, coordinate contact and maintain control.

Online systems are not separate from abuse — they are part of how it is carried out.

The emergence of AI-generated material introduces an additional layer of complexity. Such content can be highly realistic and difficult to distinguish from real abuse material, contributing to normalisation and escalation.

Importantly, evidence suggests links between online offending behaviour and contact offending.

At the same time, research shows that intervention can be effective. A significant number of individuals exposed to prevention resources engaged with them and reported reflection or behavioural change.

This demonstrates that early intervention is both necessary and possible.

However, these developments expose a widening gap between the scale of harm and the capacity of current systems to respond.

A Multi-Layered Problem

It is critical not to interpret digital harm as the sole focus for intervention.

Measures such as age restrictions or platform regulation may reduce certain risks, but they do not address the full reality.

Abuse continues to occur:

- within the family home
- within communities
- within care environments

Removing access to digital platforms does not remove the risk of abuse.

It changes the environment, but not the underlying behaviours or vulnerabilities.

Child sexual abuse is:

- multi-layered
- multi-faceted
- and interconnected

We cannot solve a multi-layered problem with single-layer solutions.

The Role of IICSA and Structural Reform

The recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA, 2022) provide a comprehensive foundation for reform.

They address:

- prevention
- reporting
- accountability
- system oversight

However, these recommendations are not self-executing.

Without cultural understanding and consistent application, even the strongest recommendations cannot achieve their intended impact.

This includes:

- mandatory reporting (not yet fully implemented)
 - the need for a Child Protection Authority
 - improved system coordination
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Public Awareness and Shared Understanding

This is where a national public awareness framework becomes critical.

Public awareness is not an alternative to safeguarding systems.

It is the foundation that enables them to function effectively.

Without shared understanding:

- risk is not recognised
- action is delayed
- responsibility is unclear

Public awareness creates:

- clarity
 - consistency
 - and a shared reference point
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Conclusion

The law exists.

The evidence exists.

The recommendations exist.

The question is not what we need to do.

It is why we are not fully doing it.

We do not need more knowledge. We need shared understanding, consistent application, and accountability.

Call to Action

This paper is not intended to be the end of a conversation.

It is intended to be the beginning of coordinated action.

The law is clear.

The evidence is clear.

The recommendations have been made.

What is required now is: alignment, implementation, and shared understanding.

I am now seeking to work with:

- policymakers
- safeguarding leaders
- researchers
- survivor organisations
- and media partners

to develop a clear, accessible public awareness framework that ensures every adult understands the law and their responsibility to protect children.

For professionals working within safeguarding, justice, education, health and policy: This paper is an invitation to align practice with what we already know.

For parents, carers and members of the public: This is an opportunity to understand the law, recognise risk, and engage in conversations that are too often avoided.

For government and national bodies: There is a clear and urgent need to prioritise a national public awareness campaign on child sexual abuse and exploitation, in line with the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

We cannot expect consistent safeguarding without a shared understanding across society.

Every adult has a role to play in protecting children.

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