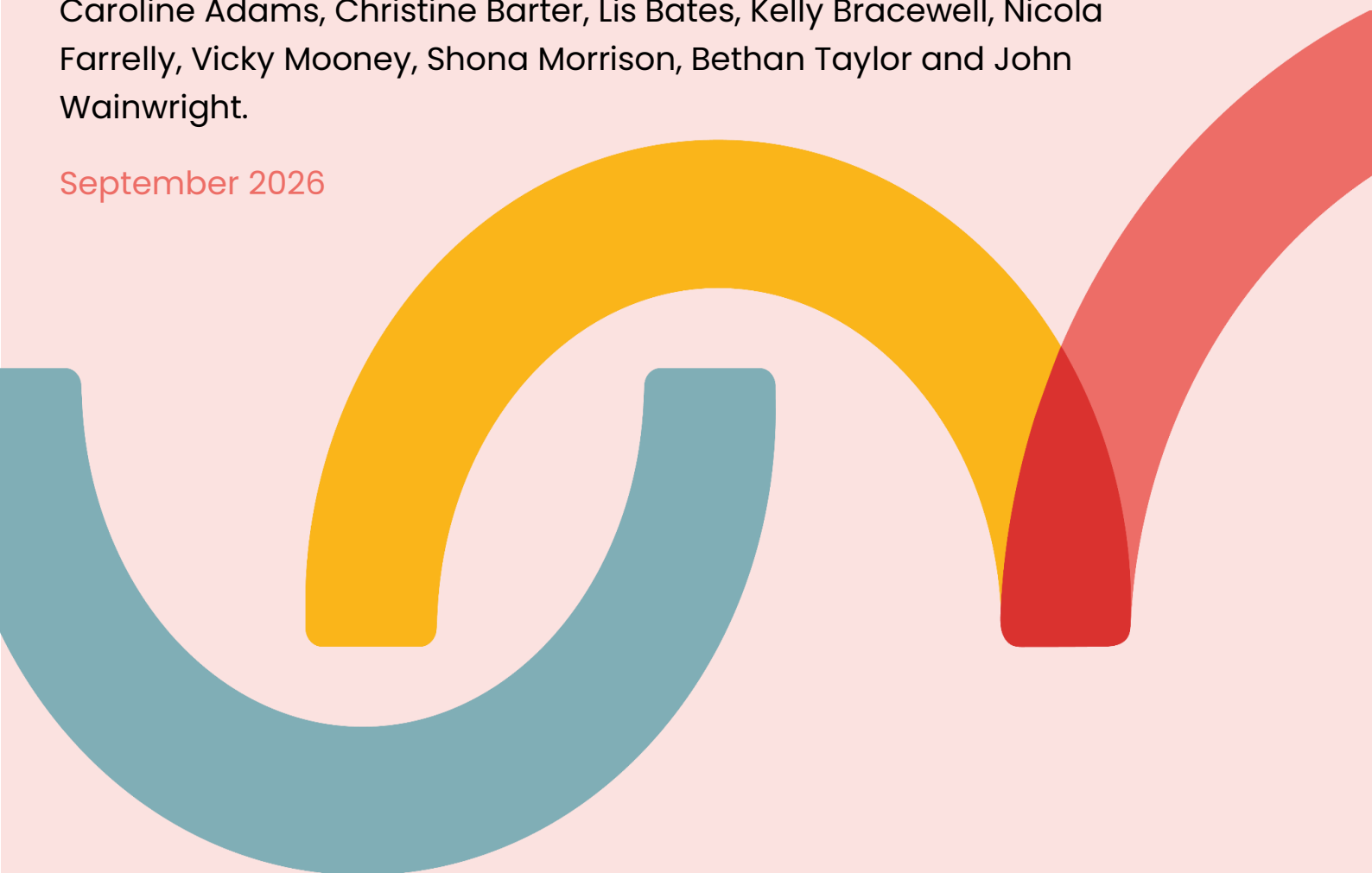


Safeguarding children involved in violence: Insights for 'best practice' in policing

Exploratory study report

Helen Beckett, Debra Allnock and Helen Richardson Foster, with Caroline Adams, Christine Barter, Lis Bates, Kelly Bracewell, Nicola Farrelly, Vicky Mooney, Shona Morrison, Bethan Taylor and John Wainwright.

September 2026



University of
Lancashire



University of
Bedfordshire



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Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks to all who participated in this research and shared their experiences and insights so openly, whether via consultations, case studies or surveys. Thanks also to those who kindly shared participation opportunities among their networks, to Cordis Bright for including questions in their survey for us, and to the Youth Endowment Fund Youth Advisory Board and Young Researchers Advisory Panel at the University of Bedfordshire for the critical insights they shared during our consultations with them.

Team contributions

Contributor roles are reported in line with the UK Research Integrity Office guidance on good authorship practice to ensure transparency and appropriate recognition of individual contributions to the research.

- **Professor Helen Beckett (Co-Principal Investigator):** Funding acquisition, conceptualisation, methodology, investigation (all strands), analysis, validation, writing – original draft and revisions, supervision and project management
- **Professor Debra Allnock (Co-Principal Investigator):** Funding acquisition, conceptualisation, methodology, investigation (all strands), analysis, validation, writing – original draft and revisions, supervision and project management
- **Dr Helen Richardson Foster:** Methodology, investigation (all strands), analysis, validation, writing – original draft and revisions
- **Caroline Adams QPM:** Investigation (stakeholder consultations), project administration
- **Professor Christine Barter:** Investigation and analysis (case study)
- **Dr Lis Bates:** Investigation and analysis (case study), reviewing and editing
- **Dr Kelly Bracewell:** Investigation (secondary research and case study), analysis, validation, reviewing and editing
- **Dr Nicola Farrelly:** Investigation (secondary research and case study)
- **Dr Vicky Mooney:** Investigation (secondary research, stakeholder consultations and case study)
- **Dr Shona Morrison:** Methodology (survey), investigation (secondary research and survey), analysis (case study), project administration, reviewing and editing
- **Dr Bethan Taylor:** Methodology, investigation and analysis (youth consultations)
- **Dr John Wainwright:** Investigation (stakeholder consultations and case study), reviewing and editing; project racial disparity lead
- **Isla Fisher:** Administrative support

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Abbreviations

Acronym	Full Name
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
A&E	Accident and emergency
APPG	All-Party Parliamentary Group
BTP	British Transport Police
CCE	Child Criminal Exploitation
CID	Criminal Investigation Departments
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CPRL	Centre for Policing Research and Learning
CSAE	Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation
DfE	Department for Education
EBP	Evidence-based Policing
EHCP	Education Health and Care Plan
GBH	Grievous Bodily Harm
GMP	Greater Manchester Police
HMICFRS	His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services
HMIP	His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation
HSB	Harmful sexual behaviour
JTAI	Joint Targeted Area Inspection
KPI	Key Performance Indicators
LCSPR	Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews
MACE	Multi-Agency Child Exploitation
MASH	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub
NFA	No further action
NCLCC	National County Lines Coordination Centre
NCVPP	National Centre for Violence Against Women and Girls and Public Protection
NPCC	National Police Chiefs' Council
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PC	Police Constable
PCC	Police and Crime Commissioner
PCSO	Police and Community Support Officer
PDP	Potentially Dangerous Person
PIED	Prevention through Prosecution, Intervention, Education and Diversion
PPU	Public Protection Unit
RQ	Research Question
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SCB	Safeguarding Children Board
SCP	Safeguarding Children Partnership
SYV	Serious Youth Violence
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector
VKPP	Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme
VRU	Violence Reduction Unit
YEF	Youth Endowment Fund
YEO	Youth Engagement Officer
YEW	Youth Engagement Warning
YFPP	Young Futures Prevention Partnerships
YJB	Youth Justice Board
YJS	Youth Justice Service
YRP	Youth Risk Panel
YVIU	Youth Violence Intervention Unit

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Executive summary

1. Introduction

This executive summary provides an overview of the conduct and key findings of Youth Endowment Fund (YEF)-funded research into how police in England and Wales safeguard and protect children involved in violence.

Although violence involving children is a significant societal issue, both in terms of prevalence and impact (YEF, 2024), responses remain underdeveloped and inconsistent, with *“a failure to consistently identify serious youth violence as a safeguarding issue...leaving too many children at serious risk of harm”* (Ofsted et al., 2024a; no pagination). The YEF commissioned this research in response to these issues and in recognition of gaps in the existing evidence base around what constitutes ‘best practice’ in relation to safeguarding and protecting children involved in violence.

The study was led by Professor Helen Beckett from the University of Lancashire and Professor Debra Allnock from the University of Bedfordshire, with support from colleagues at these universities, the Open University and the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme.

2. About the study

The study sought to explore five key areas of interest:

- What represents ‘best practice’ in how police safeguard and protect children involved in violence (including with reference to stop and search, possession of a weapon and missing children)
- Barriers and facilitators to implementing such an approach
- Any racial or other disparities in current practice (with specific consideration of Black, Asian and minority ethnic children, children who have special educational needs and disabilities [SEND] or are neurodivergent, and whether the child is a suspect or victim or a boy or girl) and how these could be addressed
- Frontline officers’ awareness of safeguarding-led and child-centred approaches to violence involving children
- The policy and practice changes required to support an improved safeguarding response, both strategically and operationally

The study ran from September 2025 to March 2026 and included six work strands:

- A desk-based review
- A professional stakeholder consultation (interviews and focus groups)
- A national force-level survey

- Questions for police officers/staff, in an evidence-based policing (EBP) survey run by Cordis Bright¹
- Case studies and practice examples
- A youth consultation

The remit and definitions underpinning the study were as follows:

- The YEF's definition of 'children involved in violence' was adopted, which included both children (identified as being at risk of) perpetrating violence and those who experience such violence.
- All forms of violence perpetrated by children were in scope, including those perpetrated in online and offline contexts.
- All aspects of policing were also in scope, within the context of policing in England and Wales.
- The study remit included all children under 18 years of age.

3. Policy and operational contexts

Policing responses to children involved in violence sit within a complex and evolving policy landscape that increasingly emphasises safeguarding and public health approaches. However, inconsistent interpretation and operationalisation of these frameworks across forces and partnerships result in highly variable responses to children's harm and vulnerability:

- National policy sets a safeguarding-led direction, but delivery is uneven. While legislation and guidance position police as a key safeguarding partner and promote child-centred, trauma-informed responses, inspections and reviews continue to evidence inconsistent implementation.
- Where responsibility for violence involving children sits within a force (public protection, serious crime, neighbourhood policing or Violence Reduction Unit-aligned teams, for example) strongly influences how children and their actions are understood and whether they are routed into enforcement-led or support-led pathways.
- The force-level survey reveals that guidance and policies are also inconsistent across forces, with some having child-specific policies on stop and search, missing episodes or weapon possession, while others rely on adult-oriented procedures.
- Differences in thresholds, definitions and responses across local safeguarding partnerships further complicate force-level variation, producing divergent thresholds, inconsistent recognition of underlying harm and exploitation, and different trajectories for children across localities.

4. Police awareness of safeguarding-led and child-centred approaches

Some elements of policing, such as those represented in the case study elements of the research, exhibit strong awareness and implementation of safeguarding-led and child-centred approaches to children involved in violence, clearly demonstrating both the possibility

¹ The two surveys are described in subsequent text as the force-level survey and EBP survey.

and benefits of such an approach. EBP survey findings also indicate broad conceptual support for safeguarding children involved in violence among police officers/staff, with 97% of respondents agreeing that the police have an important role to play in this and 75% believing that a child-first approach could reduce children's involvement in violence.

Findings from other elements of the study, however, suggest that further work is required to translate these conceptual commitments into operational practice. For example, although nine out of ten individual police respondents to the EBP survey said they understood the safeguarding needs of children involved in violence, such understanding and commitment were presented as the exception, rather than the norm, in the other elements of the study. These elements found:

- Significant variations in officers' safeguarding knowledge and child-centred practice, indicating that children's experience of 'best practice'² varies considerably depending on where they live and which officers or teams respond.
- A pronounced divide between specialist teams and general frontline officers, with specialist teams more likely to embed trauma-informed, contextual approaches, while frontline responses are often enforcement-led.
- Concerns around communication and de-escalation skills and a lack of understanding of trauma and neurodiversity during first contact, resulting in unnecessary escalation and criminalisation, unrecognised vulnerability and need, and consequent missed opportunities for intervention.

5. Inequities in practice

In line with existing evidence, this study found widespread inequities in how police respond to different cohorts of children within different contexts of engagement. Importantly, these inequities are system-produced, not child-produced. They reflect how professionals and systems interpret identity, behaviour and context rather than the characteristics of the children themselves. Findings show that:

- Children experience markedly different responses depending on race, gender, neurodivergence/SEND and whether they are initially framed as victims or suspects, with overlapping identities compounding disadvantage.
- Though nuance clearly exists within this, broadly speaking, boys are more likely to be assumed to be, and identified as, causing harm (most often linked to weapon-enabled violence or criminal exploitation); girls are more likely to be assumed to be experiencing harm (particularly of a sexual nature).
- Racialised assumptions drive over-policing and under-protection. Black boys are more likely to experience surveillance and be criminalised, while indicators of exploitation or

² For the purposes of reporting our findings, when we refer to 'best practice' we do so in inverted commas, in recognition of the emerging nature of the evidence base around this (both generally and within this study) and the inclusion of practices that have not been formally evaluated. The consistency of 'best practice' themes arising in the study – from policy, research and practice wisdom – does, however, justify their inclusion and merit further consideration.

vulnerability are frequently overlooked. Black girls' exploitation is often minimised or reframed as choice.

- Though less frequently discussed, racialised frames and cultural assumptions were also identified for Asian children and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children.
- Children who have SEND or who are neurodivergent were also repeatedly identified as having their needs and behaviours overlooked or misinterpreted. Distress, sensory overwhelm and communication differences are often read as defiance or non-compliance, particularly in high-pressure contexts, such as stop and search or custody, leading to escalation and delayed safeguarding.
- Children known or suspected to be perpetrating harm are markedly less likely to receive safeguarding-led responses, despite strong evidence of an overlap between victimisation and perpetration. Only one in five forces reported having a specific policy on the victimisation/perpetration overlap, and only half reported routinely monitoring these patterns.
- Inconsistent or fragmented demographic, perpetration and vulnerability data obscures patterns of disproportionality and related areas for redress.

6. Barriers to safeguarding-led policing

The study found a series of barriers to safeguarding-led policing, spanning frontline encounters, organisational cultures, inter-agency working and wider structural conditions. Together, these barriers constrain professional curiosity, favour enforcement-led responses and limit the capacity of policing to deliver consistent, child-centred safeguarding. Study findings show that:

- Safeguarding is often constrained at the point of first contact. Fast-paced, crisis-driven encounters, limited confidence in engaging with children and gaps in trauma-informed practice restrict officers' ability to look beyond presenting behaviour to identify underlying harm or need.
- Enforcement-oriented priorities, number-driven performance frameworks, workforce inexperience and high turnover in specialist teams weaken the embedding and sustainability of safeguarding-led practice.
- Inconsistent training, limited opportunities for reflective practice and a lack of an integrated, vulnerability-focused support structure leave officers underprepared and unsupported to enact child-centred responses.
- Fragmented partnership working impedes safeguarding. Variable thresholds, incompatible information systems and inconsistent information-sharing across agencies result in delayed, partial or fragmented responses to children's needs.
- Wider system constraints, such as resource pressures and high intervention thresholds, result in a prioritisation of post-harm, reactive interventions over prevention or early intervention. Children known to be or suspected of perpetrating violence are often marginalised within mainstream safeguarding pathways.

7. 'Best practice' safeguarding-led policing

Collating key learning from across all phases of the study (including the case studies and other identified examples of safeguarding-led policing in practice), ten key principles of 'best practice' have been identified (Figure A).³

Figure A: Ten principles of 'best practice'

Child-centred	Contextual & holistic
Prevention & early intervention	Trauma-informed
Collaborative partnership working	Proactive anti-discriminatory practice
Transparency & accountability	Procedurally just & proportionate
Evidence-informed	Whole-systems change

Though the operationalisation of these principles will vary according to the specific context or interaction, there was remarkable consistency across the study's different strands regarding what these principles should be. The principles were viewed to apply irrespective of the nature of violence, the differing contexts of police–child encounters and the characteristics or offending histories of the child being engaged with. Furthermore, although considered in this study in relation to children involved in violence, they also hold relevance to broader police encounters with children and closely align with the NPCC Child-Centred Policing Strategy.

Though presented individually here, the principles are both interconnected and mutually reinforcing and, as such, need to be implemented as a whole across both strategic and operational practice. It is of note that, although many of the premises and practices outlined within these principles (Table B) are not new, with some notable examples (such as the case studies included in the main report), they are still viewed as more aspirational than

³ These were initially developed from the desk-based review and refined on the basis of the findings of other phases of the study.

operational. This highlights the need for concerted action to translate professional rhetoric into real changes in children's lives.

Table B: Enacting 'best practice' principles

Practice principle	This means...
Child-centred	• Treating anyone under 18 years as a child first and foremost • Keeping the best interests of the individual child at the heart of interactions and decision-making • Seeing the whole child and adopting a strengths-based, restorative approach to any offending behaviour • Embedding opportunities for them to share their views (at both an individual and strategic level) and taking these into account in line with developmental capacity • Recognising ongoing vulnerability post 17 years of age as a child transitions into the adult criminal justice system
Contextual and holistic	• Seeking to understand the wider context of a child's life (school, peer relationships, family, etc.) • Identifying how relationships and experiences across these contexts can facilitate or mitigate against harm and harnessing protective relationships within these spaces • Ensuring approaches to assessing risk and safety planning consider all potential forms of harm/need and are responsive to the changing contexts and levels of risk, harm and opportunities for intervention • Using knowledge about patterns of harm (in particular locations, for example) to inform wider preventative and early intervention initiatives
Prevention and early intervention	• Investing in prevention and early intervention and working from the dual premises of avoiding harm in the first place and intervening early to divert and restore where harm is seen to be emerging or occurring • Prioritising diversion over criminalisation and focusing on the potential for change, alongside accountability • Creating opportunities for children to engage with police outside of crisis-based engagements and ensuring the continuity of personnel required to allow trust to develop • Creating accessible routes for children to report concerns and seek help
Trauma-informed	• Recognising the potential presence of trauma in a child's life, even when not obviously apparent • Understanding how this can impact their presentation and needs • Actively seeking to avoid re-traumatisation and embedding trauma-informed principles (safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural competency)

Practice principle	This means...
	Recognising and responding to the potential for secondary/vicarious trauma among police
Collaborative partnership working	- Working with both statutory and non-statutory partners in the voluntary/community sectors. This needs to be at both the procedural and operational levels, with appropriate systems in place to support information-sharing and joint-working protocols. - Recognising the role that parents and carers can play and working with them as key safeguarding partners, unless evidence demonstrates otherwise
Proactive anti-discriminatory practice	- Acknowledging and ensuring reparation for harms caused, including through systemic racism - Proactively demonstrating a commitment to anti-discriminatory practice going forward. This requires more than training. It also requires active monitoring of anti-racist practice, inclusive neurodivergent practices, the recognition of the need for an intersectional approach, and swift and strong action where practice falls short of expected standards.
Transparency and accountability	- Ensuring there are clear accountability structures at both the individual and systemic levels and increased transparency about how they operate and the consequences of transgressing expected standards. Identified mechanisms for supporting this include: - Ensuring more consistent and detailed data capture about who police engage with, why they do this and what outcomes result (in relation to stop and search, for example) - Enhancing public oversight of policing practice - Seeking feedback from children on how they experience police engagements - Creating clearer access routes to complaint procedures - Making children aware of expected policing standards and their right to complain should their experiences fall short of these standards
Procedurally just and proportionate	- Embedding fairness, transparency, respectful treatment and proportionate responses as key cornerstones of safeguarding-led and child-centred policing - Supporting due process through clear documentation of the rationale for diversionary or charging decisions and the factors taken into consideration when assessing the proportionality of the response (through, for example, the use of the Child Risk Gravity Matrix) - Being able to share this rationale in an easily understandable form, to defend or amend decisions if challenged and to ensure

Practice principle	This means...
	that children, and those supporting them, are aware of routes for challenge or complaint • Taking time to explain to those who experience harm from a peer that the response being pursued is linked to the age of the child and not reflective of denial or minimisation of the harm they have experienced
Evidence-informed	• Ensuring national and force-level policies and procedures are embedded in up-to-date evidence about 'what works' • Creating opportunities for officers and forces to learn from each other (non-policing partners and children themselves) • Addressing gaps in data capture and usage and ensuring force-level data systems are fit for purpose • Addressing system barriers to multi-agency case tracking • Moving beyond numbers-driven performance indicators to incorporate broader measures that better capture safeguarding outcomes and the impact of diversionary and early intervention initiatives
Whole-systems change	• Acknowledging the need for widespread culture change • Working towards consistency in best practice across all force encounters • Investing in training, reflective supervision and continued professional development • Proactively sharing the learning from 'best practice' in specialist teams in ways that are feasible to implement in different settings and contexts • Ensuring commitment to safeguarding-led and child-centred policing is systemically embedded (in force-wide strategic plans, performance frameworks and governance structures) rather than dependent on individual officers or particular leaders.

8. Progressing change

Across all stages of the research, a consistent picture emerges: Safeguarding-led policing is possible, is occurring in some areas and, where experienced, is valued by children, families and partners. The issue is not that 'good practice' or passionate, committed individuals do not exist but that practice remains uneven, fragile and dependent on local structures, cultures and individuals rather than embedded system design.

Forces themselves recognise the need for more consistent safeguarding-led and child-centred practice when responding to children involved in violence. Only half of the forces responding to the force-level survey rated their response to children *experiencing* violence/harm as being 'well developed' (50%; n=9). Even fewer (39%; n=7) classed their response to children *perpetrating* violence/harm or those known to *both experience and perpetrate* violence/harm as 'well developed.' Police participants in both the stakeholder

consultations and case studies also demonstrated reflective insights on areas for improvement and commitment to progressing these.

Embedding and sustaining a safeguarding-led policing response to children affected by violence requires shifts across systems, structures and everyday practice. The case studies and other examples shared within the study demonstrate that this is possible but not without concerted and sustained efforts and leadership commitment.

Change requires recognition that:

- **Safeguarding-led practice depends on whole-system alignment.** Specialist units demonstrate that child-centred, safeguarding-led and trauma-informed policing can be operationalised. However, scaling this requires coherent pathways, supportive supervision, consistent expectations and a reduction in conflicting performance pressures.
- **First contact is pivotal.** Children's early experiences with police strongly shape trust, engagement and the success of later safeguarding interventions. Ensuring encounters are relational, developmentally appropriate and procedurally fair is fundamental.
- **Policing cannot achieve safeguarding alone.** Effective responses rely on coordinated multi-agency planning, consistent and operationally understood thresholds, reciprocal information-sharing and the operational infrastructure to support this, and parity of respect between police and non-police professionals. Where these exist, children receive earlier and more coherent support.
- **Oversight, inspection, commissioning and national policy must align.** Participants stressed that when these structures reinforce one another – when scrutiny prioritises relational qualities, when Police and Crime Commissioners (or subsequent commissioning bodies) fund youth-focused roles and when the tenets of national guidance are embedded into data and performance systems – forces are much better positioned to reduce disparities, strengthen early intervention pathways and treat safeguarding as core police business rather than an optional enhancement.
- **Equity must be an explicit aim of safeguarding.** Patterns of adultification, racialised and gendered assumptions, and unrecognised neurodivergence are clearly observable in current responses. Addressing these requires accurate data, reflective practice, culturally competent approaches and an acknowledgement of historical and ongoing harms.
- **Prevention and early intervention are achievable when structurally supported.** Case studies demonstrate that when systems invest in prevention – such as school-based officers with clear safeguarding remits, contextual multi-agency teams or early diversion panels – risks and needs are identified sooner, escalation reduces and trust improves.

Chapter 9 of the full report explores the practical changes required across the four domains of police-child interactions, policing structures and cultures, interagency working, and wider system contexts to realise this.

9. Concluding observations

The real test of a safeguarding-led response is whether a child experiences this across every encounter with a force, including in first contacts, which are clearly documented as pivotal in determining the subsequent experiences of the child.

Across all strands of the study, the central message is clear: Children's experience of policing is too often shaped by geography, disjointed pathways, organisational culture and identity, rather than by consistent child-centred safeguarding principles. Yet the study also shows that when police, partners and systems align around children's rights, developmental needs and contexts, safeguarding-led practice is both feasible and impactful.

The challenge ahead is not only to identify what 'best practice' looks like – this study provides that blueprint – but also to create the structural, cultural and relational conditions that make such practices the norm rather than the exception. The findings offer key insights for future YEF guidance and sector-wide improvement, centred on a shared ambition: That every child affected by violence, whether harmed or harming, receives a response that protects, understands and supports them.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

This report presents the approach to, and findings from, Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) funded research into how police safeguard and protect children involved in violence. The study was led by Professor Helen Beckett from the University of Lancashire and Professor Debra Allnock from the University of Bedfordshire, with the support of colleagues at these Universities, the Open University and the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP).

The project ran from September 2025 to March 2026 and included six work strands:

- A desk-based review
- A professional stakeholder consultation (interviews and focus groups)
- A national force-level survey
- Questions for police officers/staff in a survey run by Cordis Bright
- Case studies and practice examples
- A youth consultation

More information on each of these elements can be found in the methodology, outlined in Chapter 2.

1.2 Study rationale and research questions

As explored further in Chapter 3, violence involving children is a significant societal issue, both in terms of prevalence and impact. The YEF's (2024) Children, Violence and Vulnerability report, for example, shows that one in six (16%) 13–17-year-old survey respondents⁴ reported committing an act of violence in the year preceding the survey. One in five (20%) reported having experienced violence in the same timeframe, while two-thirds (67%) feared becoming a victim of violence.

Yet, in spite of such prevalence, responses remain underdeveloped and inconsistent, as observed in the 2024 Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) report, which concluded that *“a failure to consistently identify serious youth violence as a safeguarding issue is leaving too many children at serious risk of harm”* (Ofsted et al., 2024a; Exec Summary).

Among other things, this JTAI report identified:

- Disproportionality in the identification of and response to serious youth violence (SYV)
- Inconsistent police recognition of children's (safeguarding) needs
- Lack of timely and quality police referrals to children's social care and insufficient management oversight of this (Ofsted et al., 2024a).

The YEF commissioned this research study in response to these issues and in recognition of gaps in the existing evidence base around what constitutes 'best practice' in relation to safeguarding and protecting children involved in violence. The findings will inform the YEF's recommendations to the policing sector on reducing violence involving children.

⁴ 10,387 respondents.

The commissioned study had five overarching research questions (RQs), with additional sub-questions within these, as outlined in Box 1.1. Together, these sought to:

- Explore current policing practice around safeguarding children involved in violence, including any inequities within this
- Determine what constitutes a ‘best practice’ response
- Identify barriers to and enablers of ‘best practice’, alongside changes required to progress a safeguarding-led response

Box 1.1: Research questions

RQ1. Best practice. What represents ‘best practice’ in policing in England and Wales when safeguarding and protecting children from involvement in violence?

In addition, specifically, what is ‘best practice’:

- In a stop and search of a child
- In response to a missing child
- When a child is in possession of a weapon?

RQ2. Knowledge. To what extent are frontline officers across England and Wales aware of safeguarding-led approaches to violence involving children? In addition, specifically, what is officers’ understanding of child-centred policing?

RQ3. Barriers and facilitators. What are the barriers and facilitators to ‘best practice’?

RQ4. Inequities. Is there evidence of racial or other disparities in current safeguarding and child protection practices, and if so, how can these disparities be addressed? This should include consideration of safeguarding and protecting:

- Black, Asian and minority ethnic children,⁵ including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children
- Children who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or are neurodivergent
- A child who is a suspect and/or victim
- Boys and girls

RQ5. Policy and practice change. What practice changes are required to improve policing’s safeguarding and protection of children at risk of involvement in violence? What changes in law, regulation, guidance, training, funding and/or inspection can improve policing’s role in safeguarding and protecting children from involvement in violence?

1.3 Study remit and definitions

⁵ We acknowledge that this term is a necessarily imperfect way of describing a highly diverse group of people, perspectives and experiences. Specificity is used wherever possible.

The study had a broad remit and definitions.

- The YEF's definition of 'children involved in violence' was adopted, which included both children (identified as being at risk of) perpetrating violence and those who experience such violence. This umbrella term will be used when describing that broad cohort.

Where the context of a child's engagement with police is pertinent to the point being made – i.e. in the context of suspected/known offending or in the context of suspected/known victimisation – this is specified. This is not to deny that children suspected/known to be causing harm may also be experiencing harm from others; indeed, the research explicitly sought to explore whether this potential dual status is being recognised by police.

- All forms of violence perpetrated by children were in scope, including those perpetrated in online and offline contexts. Such violence is variably described across the existing evidence base and in how participants in this study spoke about it. For accuracy purposes, we report on the terminology used by the original source.
- All aspects of policing were also in scope within the context of policing in England and Wales. Scotland and Northern Ireland were out of scope.
- The study remit included all children under 18 years of age.

As recognised in the broad body of literature on the perpetration and experience of harm, there are significant differences in perceived capacity and responsibility across the different phases of childhood and at different levels of developmental capacity. The law also recognises differing levels of capacity and responsibility. Of particular pertinence to this study is that, although the age of criminal responsibility is set at 10 years, all under-18s are recognised by law as children in need of safeguarding and protection.

For this reason, while we generally use the terminology of young people for older children in practice, for the purposes of this report, we refer to them as children unless otherwise described in the research data.

1.4 Report structure

Chapter 2 outlines the research approach and key ethical considerations associated with its conduct. It also provides an overview of participants across the different stages of the research.

The main body of the report (Chapters 3 to 9) presents the findings of the research, drawing together learning from all aspects of the study to answer each RQ in turn:

- Chapter 3 explores the nature of violence involving children alongside the policy environment and policing structures within which current responses are occurring.
- Chapter 4 examines the extent to which frontline officers are aware of and implement safeguarding-led, child-centred policing practices.
- Chapter 5 explores racial and other disparities in current policing practice.
- Chapter 6 explores identified barriers to implementing a safeguarding-led, child-centred response.
- Chapter 7 presents four case studies and a practice example of initiatives designed to implement a safeguarding-led response to violence involving children.
- Chapter 8 outlines what has emerged from the study as overarching 'best practice' principles for a safeguarding-led policing response.
- Building on this, Chapter 9 identifies a series of required changes that are needed to better embed 'best practice' responses within and across forces.

- Chapter 10 concludes the report with a brief recap of key learning points from the study, reflections on the significance of these and identified areas for further exploration.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

The research adopted a multi-method approach to answering the RQs, triangulating findings from the different qualitative and quantitative datasets.

There were six work strands within the study: A desk-based review, a force-level national survey, questions for police officers/staff in a survey run by Cordis Bright, interviews and focus groups with professional stakeholders, case studies and practice examples, and consultations with youth advisory groups.

Further details on each work strand can be found in the sections below, which also include an overview of the participants engaged in each element. A short section on ethical considerations and reflections on the study's limitations concludes the chapter.

2.2 Desk-based review

The study began with a desk-based review to map existing evidence relevant to the five RQs. This included a specific focus on what might constitute 'best practice' in terms of a safeguarding-led policing response to violence involving children in recognition of the absence of a clear single framework for assessing this.

We commenced with a high-level policy review. This involved a thematic analysis of key national guidance, strategies and practice frameworks across safeguarding, policing, violence and harm to identify recurring concepts relevant to the study. These recurring themes were developed into a draft 15-point practice principles framework, which was tested and refined in the other elements of the desk-based review and the primary research that followed. The revised practice principles framework is presented in Chapter 8 of this report.

The other strands of the desk-based review included a review of:

- Peer-reviewed and grey research literature
- 17 safeguarding practice reviews, comprising a mix of statutory Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (LCSPRs) and thematic or independent learning reviews⁶
- 35 Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) plans
- 29 Inspection reports by His/Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and Ofsted-led JTAs
- Open-source data on violence involving children.

These sources were selected for their relevance to policing and safeguarding children involved in violence, and, together, they provided insights across strategic, operational and case-level practice. The practice principles identified in the policy review were consistently reflected across these other strands but with varying degrees of emphasis. Multi-agency working, for example, was a consistently strong theme across all data sources, whereas anti-discriminatory practice was less consistently addressed.

⁶ For the purposes of this study, *statutory* or *formal* LCSPRs refer to LCSPRs commissioned under the statutory framework set out in *Working Together to Safeguard Children* following the death or serious harm of a child and formally notified to the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. This category excludes thematic reviews, independent learning reviews and reflective reviews, which, while often highly informative, are commissioned under different processes and do not carry the same statutory status.

Given the breadth of material and the wide scope of the study – including all forms of violence involving children, perpetration and/or experience of harm, and any police response to these – a fully comprehensive review was not feasible with the available time and resources. Instead, key themes related to the RQs and draft practice principles framework were extracted, cross-referenced across document types and used to inform the design and focus of subsequent research stages. Given the project's time constraints, Microsoft Copilot was used to assist in extracting clearly defined themes from PCC and inspection reports, with the research team quality-assuring the extraction and interpretation.

2.3 Force-level survey

An online force-level survey⁷ was distributed to all forces in England and Wales via the VKPP (all forces) and the Open University's Centre for Policing Research and Learning's (CPRL's) membership network (20 forces). It was also shared directly with the forces with which the research team had existing links. Following an initially low response rate, the survey information was also posted on LinkedIn, and colleagues in other organisations kindly shared the survey with their connections in forces.

We requested one response per force, noting that this should be completed by personnel with strategic oversight of youth violence in the force or someone with delegated responsibility to complete it on their behalf. Responsibilities for youth violence vary across forces and may sit in different parts of the force, but anticipated respondents included the Head of Public Protection, the Force Lead for Children & Young People, the Head of Crime or a Detective Superintendent or Chief Inspector with responsibility for youth violence. When broadening our dissemination strategy as outlined above, we did so with a request to help us identify the relevant person in the force who should complete the survey, rather than asking for multiple force responses.

Survey responses were received from 20 out of 44 forces, giving a force completion rate of 45.5%. This included two out of four forces in Wales and representation from across all areas of England (based on the police workforce survey's geographical areas). Eight of the forces that replied were in areas with a Violence Reduction Unit (VRU).

Though the intention was that the force-level survey would be completed by someone with strategic oversight of youth violence in the force, the surveys were completed by individuals with a range of roles and from varied departments. Half of the surveys were completed by those in public protection units (PPUs) and vulnerable persons or safeguarding units (n=10). Other responses were completed by those in VRUs (n=2), command units (n=2), prevention (n=2) or serious crime (n=2). In two forces, responses were received from different units (command unit, PPU and prevention). Where possible, answers were combined. In one instance, in which very different answers were provided to a question, this force's answers were omitted from analysis. This should be borne in mind when reading the force-level survey results.

Recognising an absence of collated information about how forces are responding to violence involving children, the survey sought to map:

- the nature of violence involving children known to be occurring within force boundaries
- what data is held about this, and what it can tell us about affected cohorts of children
- how forces are responding to violence involving children (including promising practice initiatives)
- barriers and enablers to implementing a safeguarding-led approach.

⁷ Though primarily completed online, the option to complete it on a call with a member of the research team was also offered, and one force completed it this way.

These thematic areas were explored in relation to the broad definition of children involved in violence used by the YEF, which includes both those who perpetrate and those who experience harm. The survey also included an additional set of questions specifically focused on implementing a safeguarding-led approach to children who harm others (and may also have experiences of being harmed), given desk-based review findings that the safeguarding and protection needs of this cohort may be more frequently overlooked than those identified primarily as experiencing harm.

Survey respondents were advised that findings would be reported anonymously and not identify any individual force. Should they wish to share practices within their force in an identifiable manner, they had the opportunity to do so through the case study and practice example element of the research, outlined in section 2.6 below.

This survey is described as ‘the force-level survey’ when presenting findings.

2.4 Cordis Bright’s evidence-based policing survey

Another YEF project exploring evidence-based policing (EBP) in the field of violence involving children was being conducted at the same time as this project. That project, run by Cordis Bright, included a survey for completion by individual police officers and staff (as opposed to our force-level survey). The project team kindly agreed to include response options relevant to this research under some of their questions (see Box 2.1) and to obtain respondents’ permission to use the findings in this study.

Box 2.1: Questions in the evidence-based policing survey

All statements were included as part of a wider list of response options.

Two statements were included under question 5: *To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please answer these questions based on your own experiences (5-point agree/disagree scale):*

- I understand the safeguarding needs of children involved in violence.
- The police have an important role to play in safeguarding children involved in violence.

Two statements were included under question 6: *Below is a list of violence reduction initiatives. Which of these initiatives does your force deliver to reduce children’s involvement in violence? (tick all that apply):*

- Making a safeguarding referral
- Taking a child-first approach (child first, offence second)

The same options appeared under question 7: *Which of these violence reduction initiatives do you think can reduce children’s involvement in violence? (tick all that apply).*

A final statement was included in question 12: *In the past 12 months, what are the main challenges within your role that have hindered effective practice for reducing children’s involvement in violence? (tick all that apply):*

- Tensions between safeguarding-led and justice-led responses

Cordis Bright's respondent data shows that the survey received 528 responses from across all forces in England and Wales, spanning a range of ranks and roles.⁸

This survey is referred to as the EBP survey when reporting the findings.

2.5 Professional stakeholder consultations

A total of 64 professionals, spanning a range of disciplines (see Table 2.1), took part in online focus groups (n=14) or individual interviews (n=5).

Table 2.1: Professional stakeholder participants

Sector	No. of participants
Voluntary/community sector ⁹	23
Police	22
Ex-policing/Violence Reduction Unit participant	5
National policy	3
Local authority	4
Independent Safeguarding Consultant	4
Education	3
Youth Justice	2
Academic	1
Total	67

Separate focus groups were facilitated for police and non-police participants to try to create a conducive environment for honest reflection. Policing participants came from various specialist teams, including national policy/strategy roles (n=5), VRUs (n=3), other prevention/early intervention teams (n=5), child exploitation units (n=2) and dedicated child or youth roles (n=4). Police participants, categorised as 'policing participant: other' (n=3) for reasons of anonymisation, include participants from Criminal Investigation Departments (CIDs), victim and witness care units and a quality assurance role. Although most focus groups had a broad remit of addressing police responses to violence involving (any) children, four additional groups were run with a particular focus on policing responses to minoritised ethnicities (n=1), children with SEND (n=1) and the victimisation/perpetration overlap (n=2; due to low numbers in the first group). These groups also explored the themes outlined below, but specifically with reference to each group's thematic focus.

Discussions across both focus groups and interviews were semi-structured, exploring a range of themes aligned with the five RQs and the YEF's priority focus areas. These included eliciting participant views on:

- Current policing responses to violence involving children and the degree to which these are perceived to be safeguarding-led
- Any variations in safeguarding-led policing practice, including across different police roles (with a particular focus on frontline practice), different forms of harm, victimisation-led or perpetration-led encounters and different cohorts of youth (specifically exploring racial or other disparities)
- The YEF's three specified areas of interest: Stop and search, possession of a weapon and responses to missing children.

⁸ This included Police Constables (including Specials and Detective Constables; 38%), senior leaders (Inspectors upwards; 19%), Police Sergeants (including Detective Sergeants; 15%), PCSOs (6%), analysts or researchers (non-ranked role; 9%), and other civilian staff or volunteers (non-ranked role; 13%).

⁹ This included frontline youth workers and managers, representatives from specialist organisations supporting children at risk of exploitation or youth violence, Black and minority ethnic community organisations, and community interest groups.

- What constitutes ‘best practice’ in relation to a safeguarding-led response to violence involving children and any examples of this happening in practice
- Barriers and enablers to safeguarding-led policing practice.
- Policy and practice changes required to support an improved response

Focus groups and interviews also provided participants with an opportunity to share any other issues relevant to the topic based on their practice experience.

2.6 Case studies and practice examples

As a key focus of the study was understanding what constitutes ‘best practice’ and how it could be practically applied in police settings, forces were invited to share local practice by participating as case study sites. An open invitation was shared with forces, supplemented by targeted contacts to relevant practice examples identified on the College of Policing Practice Bank.

The invitation to become a case study site was particularly focused on police responses to children known to be, or suspected of, perpetrating violence. Any initiative designed to better safeguard these children was in scope. Initiatives:

- Did not need to be force-wide
- Could be with children/youth, with multi-agency partners or be systems-focused (data, policy, etc.)
- Could be led or supported by various policing roles, including PPUs, neighbourhood policing teams, youth engagement teams or data analysts

The aim of the case study was to explore:

- The nature and focus of the initiative
- The cohort being worked with
- What led to this approach
- Anticipated and/or evidenced benefits of the approach
- Barriers to and enablers for implementing it
- Broader awareness of safeguarding-led practice throughout the force
- Any other pertinent learning forces or their partners may identify.

Recognising the multiple demands on forces during the fieldwork period and the tight timeframes of the research, the original plan to implement a multi-method approach at each fieldwork site was adapted to provide a more flexible, feasible offer for forces to engage with. This included the ability to select which strands of our planned case study approach to use¹⁰ and a lighter-touch additional offer to submit practice examples based on existing documentation and/or a one-off interview.

Four forces took part as case study sites, with a fifth force opting to be a lighter-touch practice example. The specific methods used in each case study site are included in the overview of findings in Chapter 7, but the two main approaches used were (i) a desk-based review of operational guidance and evaluation/research reports where available and (ii) interviews and focus groups with police and non-policing partners. Some forces provided statistical data, but the

¹⁰ Options included a desk-based review (policies/strategies/evaluation or research reports), interviews and focus groups with key professionals and stakeholders (police, statutory partners, third sector partners), the elicitation of children’s views (via survey, interview or focus group if safely supported by a worker), the review of anonymised service data or broader force data on violence involving children, and surveys exploring frontline practice (parallel versions for frontline officers, senior police and non-police stakeholders).

raw data was not seen by the research team. The summaries included in Chapter 7 have been fact-checked by the relevant forces.

2.7 Youth consultations

Although the commissioned research focused on eliciting professional perspectives, a small youth consultation phase was built into the project design. This took place at two key stages and involved:

- Reviewing the draft practice principles emanating from the desk-based review and adding additional considerations that should be borne in mind during fieldwork.
- Reflecting on the findings of the research and their practical implications in scenarios that young people might experience.

The YEF's Youth Advisory Board was involved in both stages of the consultation. The release of a documentary exposing racism and misogyny in the London Met understandably impacted plans for a second group to participate, so only one group took part in the first stage of the consultation. The University of Bedfordshire's Young Researcher Advisory Panel took part in the second phase of youth consultations.

2.8 Research ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Lancashire, the University of Bedfordshire and the Open University.¹¹ Ethical and/or governance approvals were also obtained from police forces, where required and feasible to obtain within the timeframes of the research.¹²

Obtaining procedural ethics, while important, is only a starting point for ethical research practice, and care was taken to ensure that key ethical principles were upheld throughout the research. These included:

- The provision of necessary information in an accessible form to support informed consent. This took different forms for different cohorts of participants and types of engagement, but covered core concepts, such as the nature of involvement, the voluntary nature of engagement, the intended use and storage of data, anonymity and confidentiality, and who to contact with questions or complaints.
- A learning and strengths-based approach to the research, including a commitment to share findings anonymously and without reference to individual forces unless actively agreed otherwise (in the case studies, for example)
- Adhering to trauma-informed principles of practice. This included recognising the intersectional identities and often unknown experiences that participants (including professionals) brought to our meetings with them, building in choice and control wherever possible (for example, through active choice about how interviews and focus groups were recorded) and being cognisant of the impacts on the research team.
- An ethical feedback loop to participants. Professional participants who wish to receive this will be provided with an accessible summary of the findings post-publication of the report. Online feedback sessions took place with the two youth consultation groups.

¹¹ Primary approval for all aspects, except the youth consultations, was obtained from the Business, Arts, Humanities and Social Science Ethics Committee at the University of Lancashire, followed by Chairs Action by the Universities of Bedfordshire and the Open University (for the survey and case study elements that they were involved in). As the University of Bedfordshire was leading the youth consultations, primary ethical approval for those was obtained from their Institute of Applied Social Research Ethics Committee, with Chairs Action following from the University of Lancashire. Further information on the ethical approach adopted is available on request.

¹² The late identification of governance requirements prevented two forces from taking part in the survey, while a review in another force resulted in a decision that they did not have the capacity to complete this.

Ethics in practice was kept under review in project leadership and team meetings.

2.9 Study limitations and interpretation notes

As with all studies, the research has a number of limitations. Such limitations do not negate the contribution of the research but provide important context for the research findings.

The broad scope of the commissioned research – all forms of violence involving children, both those who are known/suspected to perpetrate harm and those known to experience it, and any police response – posed challenges to both the desk-based review and subsequent fieldwork, necessitating breadth over depth. Linked to this, while active consideration was given to the experiences of different cohorts of children, across differing contexts of engagement with police, these experiences have not been explored as thoroughly as we would have wished.

The timeframes of the study also presented challenges for fieldwork design and conduct, requiring the concurrent running of different elements of fieldwork rather than using a sequential approach, where learning from one stage could inform the next. Findings should be considered in light of this.

The concurrent running of different elements over a short fieldwork period also meant a considerable ask of busy police forces, which impacted overall engagement levels. Though requests for participation were circulated widely, including via the VKPP, the Open University's CPRL membership network, other professionals and LinkedIn, a number of police forces understandably informed us they did not have the capacity to participate within the required timeframes. This was particularly observable in relation to the force-level survey element of the research and was compounded by the lack of an identifiable, consistent role to direct it to across all forces and by the considerable time and effort (including on the part of forces themselves) to identify the appropriate respondent.

Although target numbers were achieved in relation to the professional stakeholder consultations, the numbers are too small to claim any degree of representation for either police or non-police participants. Despite this, the consistency of messaging emerging across the data is noteworthy.

A further limitation of the study is the limited involvement of children and young people. Although, as noted in section 2.7, youth advisory groups were involved in reviewing the practice principles framework and considering the implications of the findings, we, as a research team, are very conscious that children and young people's voices are largely absent from this particular study. Without these, we can only conclude that what police and other professionals think constitutes 'best practice' policing when safeguarding and protecting children involved in violence, with only proxy representations of how this might be experienced by children themselves.

2.9.1 Study descriptors

For the purposes of reporting our findings, when we refer to 'best practice', we do so in inverted commas, in recognition of the emerging nature of the evidence base around this (both generally and within this study) and the inclusion of practices that have not been formally evaluated. The consistency of themes arising in the study – from policy, research and practice-wisdom – does, however, justify their inclusion and merit further consideration. These are summarised in the practice principles framework and associated commentary in Chapters 8 and 9, with additional specific examples of what these might look like in practice woven throughout the report.

The findings chapters integrate evidence from across the different strands of the study, so that findings speak directly to each RQ rather than to individual datasets in isolation, though the

source of data is attributed throughout. For ease of reading, the following terms are used when describing (participants in) the different primary research elements of the study:

- The term (professional) participants is used to describe those who took part in the professional consultation (focus groups or interviews); while respondents is used to describe those who completed a survey.
- The term force-level survey is used to describe the survey that sought a force-level response, and the term EBP survey is used to describe the Cordis Bright survey, which elicited responses from individual officers/staff members.
- The four case studies and one practice example are collectively referred to as case studies, except in Chapter 7, where the detail of these is presented.
- The two youth advisory groups are described as youth consultation participants.

Chapter 3: The nature of violence affecting children and the policing landscape

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of the scale and nature of violence involving children in England and Wales to clarify the nature of the issue that police are engaging with. It also provides an overview of the policy context within which police are responding to violence involving children and the variable nature of police response structures, providing important context for the more detailed analysis of police responses that follows in subsequent chapters.

3.2 Scale and nature of violence involving children

3.2.1 Nature of violence involving children

Violence involving children (frequently referred to in the literature as SYV) is a significant societal issue, both in terms of prevalence and impact. It encompasses a broad range of harms, including those of a physical, sexual and emotional nature, occurring across community, domestic, institutional and online spaces.

Recognising the evolving nature and patterns of harm, the force-level survey asked respondents to identify which forms of violence perpetrated by children were current priorities for their force. Figure 3.1 presents forces' responses to this question. The commentary that follows integrates force-level survey data with high-level thematic findings from the desk-based review and the qualitative primary research elements of the study to provide a brief overview of the typifying features of the key types of harm identified in the study.

While presented individually for the purposes of definition and explanation, it is important to note that the forms of violence involving children explored below are frequently overlapping and interconnected. Furthermore, although explored in this study in relation to perpetration by children, virtually all of these forms of harm can also be perpetrated by adults.

Responses to the force-level survey show forces are dealing with a range of different types of harm perpetrated by children, with weapon-enabled violence, 'gang'- or group-based violence, sexual violence and child criminal exploitation¹³ (CCE; including county lines¹⁴) identified as current priority areas¹⁵ for at least four out of five forces.

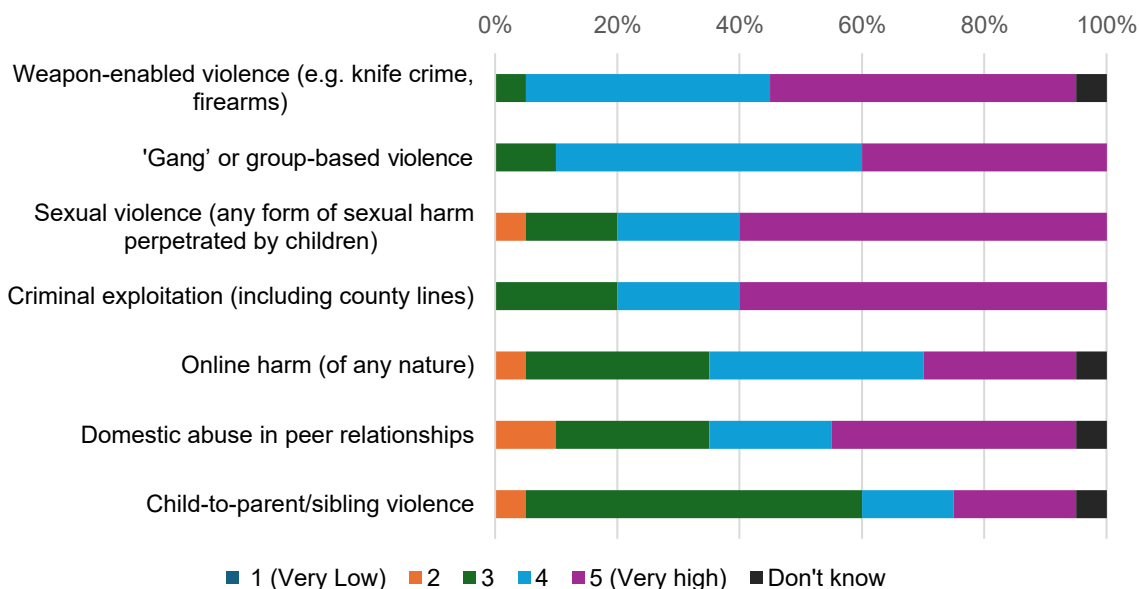
Figure 3.1: Types of harm identified as current priority areas for forces (n=20)¹⁶

¹³ CCE occurs where 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. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. CCE does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology (Home Office, 2023).

¹⁴ County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other forms of "deal line". They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money, and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons (NCLCC and NPCC, n.d)

¹⁵ Respondents were presented with a series of harm types perpetrated by children and asked to rate the extent to which they are a current priority for the force on a 5-point scale (very low to very high). Those rated 4 or 5 are described as priority areas.

¹⁶ The question also included an 'other' option for forces to select if they wanted to identify concerns not captured in the existing categories. Five forces selected this, with additional text noting school-based violence, neighbourhood concerns, violence against women and girls, anti-social behaviour and near-miss homicides.



Weapon-enabled violence

In line with the documented levels of weapon-enabled violence captured in official statistics, this form of violence involving children emerged as a key issue of current concern within this study. The majority of forces that responded to the force-level survey question about priority types of harm (n=20) identified this type of violence as a high (50%; n=10) or very high (40%; n=8) current priority for the force. It was also the most frequently referenced form of harm in responses (n=18) to a follow-up open question about any in-force changes in patterns of violence or harm perpetrated by children in the last two years. This included specific concerns about knife crime (39%, n=7) and broader concerns about weapon-related incidents and repeat weapon possession, particularly in relation to male children. Five forces also noted an overall increase in the severity of violence, with two specifically referencing rising concern about peer-to-peer violence.

LCSPRs provide detailed insights into the nature and impacts of weapon-enabled violence by children (see, for example, Brighton & Hove Safeguarding Children Partnership [SCP], 2025; Croydon SCP, 2023; Islington SCP, 2024; Pan-Dorset SCP, 2023; Staffordshire SCP, 2025). These reviews identify a range of manifestations, including weapon-enabled deaths, robberies involving large blades, group attacks in public spaces and serious injuries inflicted with machetes or swordlike weapons. They also demonstrate how, in many cases, the harm forms part of a wider trajectory of victimisation and perpetration, with children appearing in earlier incidents as victims of assaults or coercion, then as suspects in knife-related offences and then again as victims of more severe attacks.

'Gang' and group-based violence

In line with wider concerns about SYV involving peer networks and collective dynamics, 'gang' and group-based violence emerged as a significant theme within this study. The vast majority of forces (80%; n=18) responding to the force-level survey identified this as a high (50%; n=10) or very high (40%; n=8) current priority. Both police and non-police participants also shared concerns about group-based violence, often linked to relational dynamics and perceived threats, rather than 'gang' membership. These associations were observed to be fluid in nature, with children moving between groups as alliances and priorities changed over time. These dynamics were frequently described as intersecting with wider issues of criminal exploitation, weapon carrying and localised disputes in public spaces.

Analysis of LCSPRs provides further insights into the nature, context and consequences of such violence. Across multiple reviews (see, for example, Birmingham SCP, 2024; Croydon SCP, 2023; South Gloucestershire SCP, 2024), serious harm and fatalities were situated within conflicts between groups of young people, involving group assaults, coordinated or planned violence and incidents arising from escalating disputes between peer networks. These conflicts were often shaped by territorial tensions, peer-group loyalties and cycles of retaliation, sometimes amplified by social media and extending across local authority boundaries.

LCSPRs caution against narrow or static interpretations of 'gang' involvement. While some cases do involve identifiable gang structures, others demonstrate how serious violence occurs within looser but highly influential peer group formations, typified by collective dynamics, social pressures and shared conflicts across neighbourhoods and online spaces. This reinforces the need to understand group-based violence as embedded within broader social ecologies, rather than solely through a 'gang' membership lens.

LCSPR findings also highlight how children's involvement in group-based violence is rarely episodic or isolated. Instead, it forms part of wider trajectories of harm, where children appear alternately as victims, witnesses and suspects over time. Many reviews identify earlier experiences of school exclusion, peer conflict, criminal exploitation and exposure to violence as shaping these pathways, demonstrating how participation in group-based violence is often a response to cumulative and intersecting risks occurring across multiple contexts.

Sexual violence/harmful sexual behaviour

Sexual violence (defined in the force-level survey as any form of sexual harm perpetrated by children) was identified as a high (20%; n=4) or very high (60%; n=12) current priority by eight of ten forces (80%; n=16). Concerns about sexual violence were also identified by four forces in response to the follow-up question about changing patterns of violence being perpetrated by children. Within this, concerns were expressed about child perpetration of child sexual exploitation¹⁷ (CSE); sexual coercion and harassment in school environments; the role of digital platforms in initiating, amplifying and normalising sexual harm; and concerns around the complex vulnerabilities of missing and sexually exploited children. Concerns about these issues were also raised in the qualitative primary research strands of the study, including around gendered assumptions about who perpetrates and experiences harm and minimisation of sexual harm when perpetrated by peers (as explored in Chapter 5).

References to violence or harmful sexual behaviour (HSB)¹⁸ were rare in the reviewed LCSPRs. This may be because they did not feature in the cases reviewed. It may, however, also reflect a documented pattern of compartmentalising forms of harm into discrete thematic categories (in this case, SYV being seen as physical and not sexual) rather than considering co-occurring risks, which the wider evidence base shows is often the case (Dickens et al., 2022; Firmin et al., 2023). The Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Board (SCB) SYV thematic review is a rare exception, explicitly noting online-facilitated CSE through the circulation of sexualised images, illustrating that such harms can be present in cases primarily framed as SYV (Bedford Borough SCB, 2022).

¹⁷ CSE is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs when 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. CSE does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology (Working Together, 2023).

¹⁸ The term HSB describes a continuum of behaviours displayed by children and young people under 18, ranging from those considered 'inappropriate' at a particular age or developmental stage to 'problematic', 'abusive' and 'violent' behaviours (McNeish and Scott, 2023).

Child criminal exploitation, including county lines

CCE (including county lines) was identified as a high (20%; n=4) or very high (60%; n=12) current priority by four out of five forces (80%; n=16) in the force-level survey. Concerns about CCE, specifically county lines, were also identified by three forces in response to the follow-up question about changing patterns of violence being perpetrated by children.

LCSPRs offer insights into the potential patterns at play in CCE, documenting children whose experiences of harm unfolded through repeated missing episodes, peer-driven coercion, territorial pressures and/or online contact with exploiters, often linked to financial or transport-related grooming. Like weapon-enabled violence, CCE can also be seen to be part of a wider trajectory involving both victimisation and perpetration, in which exploitation, coercion and fear repeatedly structure children's involvement in offending. A cyclical movement between 'harmed' and 'harming' roles is evident across a range of reviews, including those of Child Zeta, Child W, Samuel, Mikoto, Samuel and the Croydon thematic review (Brighton & Hove SCP, 2025; Croydon SCP, 2023; Islington SCP, 2024; Pan-Dorset SCP, 2023; Staffordshire SCP, 2025), Child W (Islington SCP, 2024).

While a small number of LCSPRs, such as those of Child Zeta and Mikoto cited above, provide examples where police recognised coercion, debt bondage or exploitation as driving criminalised behaviours, the majority highlight that police did not typically frame behaviours through such a lens (see, for example, Norfolk SCP, 2024; South Gloucestershire Children's Partnership, 2024; Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together, 2023). Behaviours were more typically interpreted as indicators of offending and/or choice, resulting in missed opportunities to recognise manipulation or exploiters' control. For example, several reviews describe children found in cuckooed addresses being treated as suspects prior to being recognised as victims of exploitation (Bedford SCB, 2022; Brighton & Hove SCP, 2025; Staffordshire SCP, 2025). Concerns about an enforcement-led primary framing were also identified by participants in the professional stakeholder consultations, who emphasised the importance of understanding the power differentials at play in CCE, a point also explored in the Collaborative Safeguarding case study outlined in Chapter 7.

Online harms

Online harms (of any nature) were identified as a high (35%; n=7) or very high (25%; n=5) priority by three out of five forces (60%; n=12) in the force-level survey. In addition to harms that occur solely online, the wider evidence base emphasises that online environments can be used to incite, facilitate and/or escalate in-person forms of harm. The Child T LCSPR, for example, highlights how drill-related online activity and peer conflict circulating on social media escalated intimidation and visibility and increased exposure to violence (South Gloucestershire SCP, 2024). Professional participants' accounts also emphasised how online spaces can contribute to vulnerability and risk of harm, raising concerns about inadequate understanding and assessment of these digital spaces in relation to children's experiences of violence.

Adolescent domestic abuse and violence towards family members

Three out of five forces (60%; n=12) identified adolescent domestic abuse (described as domestic abuse in peer relationships in the survey) as a high (20%; n=4) or very high (40%; n=8) current force priority. Though not explicitly identified as a changing pattern of harm in the force-level survey, some participants' accounts in the professional stakeholder consultation demonstrated growing concern about the recognition of and response to this:

“We’ve had cases where girls have been kidnapped by boyfriends and held against their will...they were actually victims of kidnapping and domestic abuse, but they ended up getting criminal records” (National Policy participant).

Child-to-parent and/or sibling violence was less frequently identified as a current priority issue for forces, with just over one-third (35%; n=7) rating this as a high (15%; n=3) or very high current priority (20%; n=4). These were also largely absent in the LCSPRs reviewed (reflecting the sample’s focus on extra-familial harm). Although they were also less frequently discussed in the qualitative primary research strands of the study, a minority of participants did highlight concerns about this form of harm in the stakeholder consultation. This included reference to parental fear of extra-familial violence spilling into the family home and potential links with unmet neurodivergent needs and/or unaddressed trauma (issues which are both repeatedly identified in LCSPRs). Both forms of violence were noted to be predominantly perpetrated by boys, but concerns were expressed about increasing perpetration by females and the potential lower likelihood of identifying this.

Emotional and psychological harms

Though not explored in the quantitative aspects of the study, emotional and psychological harms emerged as strong themes in the qualitative strands of the research. Beyond discussion of primarily psychological forms of harm, such as stalking, significant levels of fear, distress and acute psychological harm (including self-harm) were identified in both the case studies and stakeholder consultations as consequences of exposure to other forms of violence. These themes were also strongly evident in the desk-based review. Multiple LCSPRs, including those for Child E, Mikoto, Child Zeta and the Croydon thematic SYV review, evidence how long-term trauma and cumulative harm shape children’s behaviours, risks and vulnerabilities. They document cycles of violence, retaliation, shame and fear of disclosure, demonstrating the compounding impact of trauma and its wide-reaching impacts on those experiencing and perpetrating harm, as well as their families, peers and wider networks (see, for example, Anonymous Local SCB, 2023; Brighton & Hove SCP, 2025; Croydon SCP, 2023; Staffordshire SCP, 2025).

3.2.2 Prevalence of violence involving children

In terms of what is known about the prevalence of violence involving children, recent statistics show that:

- 35,600 proven offences were committed by children in the year ending March 2024, a 4% increase from the previous year. Although not all of these offences will have involved violence, Youth Justice Board (YJB) statistics show that the largest increase related to sexual offences, which showed a 47% rise compared with the previous year (YJB, 2025b).
- 15,542 proven violent offences, resulting in youth justice system involvement, were committed by 10–17-year-olds in 2023/24 (YEF, 2025b).
- 438 serious incident notifications¹⁹ concerning 546 children were recorded by the YJB in 2023/24. Over half (55%) of all notifications were for grievous bodily harm (GBH), 16% for rape, 13% for murder/manslaughter, 9% for attempted murder and 3% for terrorism offences (YJB, 2025a).
- Almost one in five knife crime offences resulting in caution or conviction (in the year ending March 2025) were related to children (YJB, 2025c).

¹⁹ Youth Justice Services are required to notify the YJB of a serious incident within 24 hours if a child aged between 10 and 17 years is charged with committing one of the following notifiable offences: i) attempted murder, ii) murder/manslaughter, iii) rape, iv) GBH or wounding with or without intent – section 18/20 or v) a terrorism-related offence, or if a child dies while on the YJS caseload or up to 20 calendar days following the end of YJS supervision.

- Police-recorded knife or sharp-instrument offences rose by around 4% in 2023/24 (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2024). For the first time since COVID, both police-recorded knife crime and children's knife-assault hospital admissions increased in the same year, suggesting a genuine worsening across systems rather than a single-source fluctuation (YEF, 2025).
- According to the NCVPP (2025a) national analysis, over half of all police-recorded child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) offences are committed by children. In 2022 data, 52% of CSAE cases involved children aged 10–17 offending against other children, with 14 years being the most common age of perpetration.

Together, these datasets illustrate the fragmented nature of the national monitoring of violence involving children. Each illuminates only one element of the wider picture, with no single source capturing the full continuum of experiences. The contextual dimensions of violence involving children are rarely clearly represented in official counts of harm. Although LCSPRs frequently identify the roles of social media antagonism, image-based abuse, doxxing, drill-related online visibility and peer surveillance in triggering and escalating conflict (see, for example, Croydon SCP, 2023; South Gloucestershire SCP, 2024), these dynamics tend to fall outside official recording categories and high-level statistical accounts. As a result, violence is typically represented as a series of discrete incidents or offences, rather than as the product of cumulative, relational and digitally mediated processes through which risk and harm escalate over time.

Criminal justice statistics also represent only the most severe, chargeable incidents that meet statutory thresholds. The everyday realities of violence and exploitation that children experience, including coercion, threats, intimidation and online antagonism, do not surface in such datasets.

Self-reported exposure to violence statistics give some degree of insight into these wider patterns of exposure to violence. The YEF's (2024) Children, Violence and Vulnerability report, for example, shows that one in six 13–17-year-olds reported committing an act of violence, and one in five reported having experienced violence in the preceding year (YEF, 2024). In the Crime Survey for England and Wales, similar proportions (22.5%) of 10–15-year-olds reported seeing or hearing about violent incidents occurring at least monthly (ONS, 2025), while two-thirds of respondents to the YEF survey reported fearing becoming a victim of violence (YEF, 2024).

3.3 Patterns of harm

A number of clear patterns emerge from the existing evidence base around violence involving children; patterns that are replicated in the findings of the primary research elements of this study. These are summarised below and explored in further depth in subsequent chapters of the report.

3.3.1 Contextually driven multi-faceted harms

Both the desk-based review and primary research show that violence involving children is frequently multifaceted in nature, with children often experiencing multiple forms of overlapping harm (Beckett & Lloyd, 2022; Gunter, 2020; Wroe, 2021). These harms are shaped by the interplay of peer, school, home, neighbourhood and digital environments, which interact dynamically to amplify or mitigate risk (Firmin, 2017; 2018b). LCSPRs, such as that of Croydon SCP (2023), document trajectories involving exclusions or repeated suspensions, movement into alternative provision, time spent in unsafe or under-supervised public spaces and online antagonisms that spill into the street.

Harms - and responses to them – are also shaped by wider structural dynamics, such as fragmented multi-agency systems (Ford et al., 2020) and uneven access to supportive education pathways (Johnston, 2021; YEF, 2022). Together, these factors shape how different children's

experiences of harm are created, experienced, recognised and responded to. Violence involving children is therefore best understood as the cumulative result of an overlapping set of vulnerabilities, experiences, contexts and responses (or lack thereof).

3.3.2 Moving beyond binary distinctions

Both the desk-based review and our primary research also highlight how binary distinctions of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ create artificial categorisations (and subsequent service responses) that do not reflect the reality of most children’s experiences (Beckett & Lloyd, 2022; Brewster et al., 2023; Wroe, 2021). LCSPRs, for example, repeatedly document children who appear in administrative data as both victims and suspects, particularly where criminal exploitation, repeated missing episodes or coerced involvement in drug supply are present (see, for example, Brighton & Hove SCP, 2025; Islington SCP, 2025; Staffordshire SCP, 2025). For these children, threats, reprisals, debt bondage and/or grooming blur the distinction between voluntary involvement and forced participation, making traditional binaries of ‘victim’ and ‘offender’ misleading and obscuring opportunities for earlier safeguarding intervention. This critical intersection of victimhood and offending is explored further in Chapter 5.

3.3.3 Demographics and disproportionality

Exposure to violence often begins in late primary school and embeds in early adolescence. Statistics suggest that exposure to (non-familial forms of) harm increases sharply from 14 years, with 15–17-year-olds consistently over-represented in hospital admissions for assaults involving a sharp object (NHS England, 2025). Ministry of Justice data also shows that 15–17-year-olds account for the majority of youth knife possession and related offences. YJB serious incident data similarly indicates that the most serious offences cluster in this age range (YJB, 2025a).

Boys are over-represented across all perpetration-focused datasets, accounting for 96% of YJB serious incident notifications, for example (YJB, 2025a).

Minoritised ethnicities are also over-represented, with almost half (48%) of all YJB serious incident notifications for children from Minoritised ethnicities, despite this cohort representing just over a quarter (27%) of the relevant age group population. Just under one-fifth (17%) of the notifications were for children from Black backgrounds, with another 17% for children from Mixed heritage backgrounds (YJB, 2025a). Over one-quarter (29%) of knife offences for the year ending March 2025 were recorded against Black children, despite only representing 6% of the general population in the 2021 census data (YJB, 2025c).

As explored further in Chapter 5, there are myriad reasons for this, including racialised assumptions and credibility judgements (Wroe, 2021) and higher rates of stop and search (YJB, 2025c). Linked to this, but also of note more generally around the use of stop and search powers, is the fact that *“more than 99% of children convicted of knife offences are for possession alone rather than using it for threatening purposes or for knife-enabled serious violence”* (YJB, 2025c:5).

3.4 Policy context

Efforts to prevent and respond to violence involving children in England and Wales sit within a shifting and multi-layered national policy landscape. Over the past decade, national policy has increasingly framed the issue (in the language of SYV) not only as a criminal justice problem but also as a public health and safeguarding concern (see, for example, Home Office, 2018). This reflects a wider recognition that children’s experiences of violence – whether as those who experience or perpetrate harm or both – emerge from complex, overlapping vulnerabilities.

3.4.1 National policy on serious youth violence

The *Serious Violence Strategy* (Home Office, 2018) marked a significant shift in national direction, promoting early intervention, a public health framing of violence and partnership working across local systems. It positioned children's vulnerability, peer networks and inequalities as core drivers of harm and underpinned the government's establishment of VRUs to coordinate cross-sector prevention at the local level. Complementing this, the *Serious Violence Duty* (Home Office, 2022), implemented nationally from 2023, places legal responsibilities on specified authorities, including the police, local authorities, health and probation services, to work together to reduce serious violence. This duty formally embeds the expectation that responses to violence involving children must be collaborative, preventative and grounded in local needs assessments.

Alongside government policy, a range of national strategies and guidance documents reinforce the need for child-centred, trauma-informed and strengths-based practice, emphasising how safeguarding and welfare should be prioritised over punitive responses. Key examples include: *Freedom from Violence and Abuse: A Cross-Government Strategy to Build a Safer Society for Women and Girls* (Home Office, 2025); *A Whole-System Multi-Agency Approach to Serious Violence Prevention: A Resource for Local Systems Leaders* (Public Health England, 2019); the *Multi-Agency Child Exploitation and Extra Familial Harm Practice Principles* (Research in Practice et al., 2026); *Child First* (YJB, 2022); *MASH Guiding Principles* (VKPP and NPCC, 2025a) and *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (Department for Education [DfE], 2025).

3.4.2 National policy on the police's role within child safeguarding

Policing's statutory role in safeguarding children is grounded in the Children Act 2004, which designates the police as a key safeguarding partner (Children Act, 2004). National guidance such as *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (DfE, 2026) sets out expectations for joint decision-making, information-sharing and coordinated responses to children identified as at risk.

In parallel, national policing bodies have strengthened internal strategic direction. The National Police Chiefs' Council's (NPCC's) *Children and Young People Strategy 2024-2027*, for example, sets out a child-first, trauma-informed and inclusive approach that emphasises procedural justice, meaningful participation, reduction of disproportionality and collaborative whole-system working (NPCC, 2024). This strategic direction is further operationalised through the *Children and Young Persons Policing Charter 2025* (NPCC, 2025), which translates these ambitions into a set of practical commitments and pledges designed to embed child-centred policing consistently across forces, focusing on building trust, amplifying children's voices and promoting futures that minimise harm and maximise safety.

The VKPP *National Vulnerability and Public Protection Strategy* further positions vulnerability and safeguarding as core policing functions, emphasising prevention, partnership and contextual understanding of harm (VKPP, 2025).

3.4.3 Inspection evidence on policing responses to violence involving children

Despite this increasing attention, inspections continue to show that strategic expectations have not yet translated into consistent operational practice. Recent national inspections highlight significant variation in how police forces are set up to respond to children affected by serious violence and the inconsistent nature of these responses.

As noted in Chapter 1, the 2024 JTAI on SYV found inconsistent and insufficient police recognition of children's safeguarding needs within the context of SYV and patterns of disproportionality within this. The inspectors reported wide differences in local governance,

information-sharing, referral thresholds and processes, and the degree to which police are integrated into multi-agency working arrangements, resulting in markedly different experiences for children depending on where they live (Ofsted et al. 2024a).

HMICFRS' (2023) thematic inspection of police responses to SYV identified similar inconsistencies across forces. This included substantial inconsistencies in forces' organisational arrangements, their relationships with VRUs (where present in force), their use of powers and their understanding of racial disproportionality. While some forces were reported to demonstrate strong multi-agency partnerships and a clear public health orientation, others were observed to lack coherent structures, strategic alignment or effective evaluation mechanisms.

These inspections show that even within a national policy context that emphasises partnership, prevention and safeguarding, the operational realities of policing violence involving children remain uneven. Against this backdrop, the YEF's call for a review of policing's role in safeguarding children involved in violence highlights the need to understand if and how national policy intentions translate into practice and why significant variation persists.

3.5 The policing landscape: Structures, governance and organisational approaches

An NCVCPP national review of vulnerability governance (NCVPP 2025b) found wide variation across forces in how clearly vulnerability is owned, how consistently governance processes are followed and how effectively internal structures connect frontline activity with force-level priorities. It also found that forces organise vulnerability in different 'homes' (ranging from safeguarding units to specialist directorates or hub-and-spoke models) and that accountability can sit with different thematic leads, a pattern also clearly observable in relation to children involved in violence.

The complexity and interconnectedness of harms affecting children create a challenging landscape for police forces. Children involved in violence often sit across multiple risk categories simultaneously: As victims, suspects, missing children and/or those at risk of exploitation. Forces differ in where responsibility for different forms of violence involving children sits organisationally; something that was observed by some senior police participants to be more by accident than design:

"Our structures weren't designed. They just grew. CSE came first, then CCE, then missing, then a violence team, then a VRU. None of this was planned as a coherent model, so cases end up bouncing between units depending on where the risk seems to fit that day"
(Police participant: National policy/strategy).

These participants noted how the absence of a national model for how child-related vulnerability should be organised had resulted in responsibility for violence involving children variably spanning public protection, serious crime, neighbourhoods and/or VRU-aligned prevention teams, depending on local histories. These differing units draw on different policing orientations, which influence whether children are triaged into safeguarding-led or enforcement-led pathways:

"Where a case lands determines the lens. If it sits with CID, it becomes an investigation. If it sits with safeguarding, it becomes vulnerability. If it sits with neighbourhoods, it becomes risk and disruption. The same child can be seen three different ways depending on the unit"
(Police participant: National policy/strategy).

Organisational structure, therefore, not only determines workflow but it also fundamentally shapes the interpretive lens through which children's experiences of violence are understood, with gendered and racial disparities observable within this (Beckett & Lloyd, 2022; Wroe, 2021).

Force-level variation in where responsibility for violence involving children lies was also apparent in the force-level survey results. When asked an open question about which departments/units hold lead responsibility for safeguarding in relation to violence involving children, around one third (32%; n=6) of the 19 forces that responded to that question reported a single designated lead unit (usually safeguarding/public protection; in one case, CID). The majority (68%; n=13) identified several overlapping units, including:

- PPU or safeguarding teams
- Specialist exploitation teams (CCE/CSE)
- Missing children teams
- CIDs
- Serious crime directorates
- VRUs.

This variation may, in part, be explained by the broad definition of ‘children involved in violence’ governing the study, spanning children (identified as being at being risk of) perpetrating serious violence and/or those who experience such violence. Four forces, for example, commented on differences according to whether a child was identified as a victim or perpetrator, with examples of children suspected of causing harm being dealt with by the local investigating team, CID or VRUs and specialist CSE or CCE teams managing those identified as victims of harm.

Perceived level of harm or risk was also noted to influence decisions about case responsibility. As one force explained in its survey response:

“Highest risk/harm children will be selected to the specialist team for engagement and management – [the] violence reduction team will manage safeguarding of children perpetrating violence, and the child exploitation team will manage safeguarding of children who are victims of exploitation. Safeguarding for other children will remain the responsibility of the investigating team” (Force-level survey respondent).

Broader evidence around variably configured responses to violence perpetrated by children suggests the broad study definition is only part of the explanation for the variation in response. Across all nine statutory LCSPRs examined, for example, the same pattern appears: Responsibility inside forces for violence involving children is rarely fixed and often moves between different parts of policing. This can result in fragmented and delayed responses, with consequent missed opportunities for early identification of need (see, for example, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Safeguarding Partnership Board, 2025; Islington SCP, 2024; Solihull SCP, 2024; South Gloucestershire SCP, 2024).

While recognising these LCSPRs had a very particular focus on incidents of serious harm or death, their findings indicate that force responses are timelier and more coherent when they have clear internal ownership and structures that connect operations, intelligence and safeguarding, whether through case-level leads²⁰ who can connect engagement, response and investigative efforts and/or integrated response structures.²¹

The findings of the force-level survey also reveal variation in relation to forces’ policy framework around violence involving children. When asked which policies or strategies informed their responses to safeguarding children involved in violence, 12 of the 17 forces that responded identified two or more policies, with one force identifying 13 different policies. The most frequently

²⁰ Reviews noted that in the absence of this, even where partnerships are active, policing can run on parallel tracks rather than a single plan for the child (see, for example, Norfolk SCP, 2024 and Surrey SCP, 2025).

²¹ Noted examples include Dorset’s Police Safeguarding Hub (Pan-Dorset SCP, 2023) and Wolverhampton’s intelligence-led neighbourhood model (Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together, 2023).

cited policies across force responses were a serious violence strategy (n=6) or SYV strategy (n=4), Working Together (n=3) or other child protection guidance or strategy (n=5). Specific policies around issues such as child exploitation, knife crime or reducing offending were generally only cited by one or two forces.

When asked if they had specific force-level policies/procedures for safeguarding children in specified circumstances:

- 18 forces reported having stop-and-search policies/procedures, but less than half (45%; n=9) noted this to be child-specific.
- 18 forces reported having policies/procedures on missing people, but only one in four (25%; n=5) noted this to be specific to children.
- Only eight forces (40%) reported having a policy or procedure on weapon possession by children.

When asked if they had a specific force-level policy around safeguarding children perpetrating violence, only half (53%; n=8) of the 15 forces that responded to the question noted that they did. Only one in three (33%; n=4) of the 12 forces that responded to the question about whether they had a policy governing the victimisation/perpetration overlap for children said that they did, with others noting that such cases would be dealt with under more general safeguarding procedures, such as child exploitation or public protection frameworks. This policy heterogeneity makes practice contingent on local interpretation and officer discretion.

Safeguarding children involved in violence is not a single-agency endeavour, and JTAs show that local multi-agency partnerships also differ markedly in how they define, interpret and respond to SYV. Inspectors observed that “*strategic governance arrangements to address serious youth violence differed across different areas*” (Ofsted et al., 2024; no pagination), with some partnerships routing children through Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH), contextual safeguarding or exploitation panels, while others rely on neighbourhood policing, youth justice or community safety structures as the primary front door. These differences reflect not only police organisational arrangements but also the extent to which local children’s services, education, health and youth offending teams conceptualise violence as a safeguarding concern. The result is multi-agency variation layered on top of force-level variation, producing divergent thresholds, inconsistent recognition of underlying harm and exploitation, and different trajectories for children across different localities.

3.6 Concluding observations

Violence involving children is increasingly recognised as a significant societal issue, both in terms of prevalence and impact. It encompasses a broad range of harms, including those of a physical, sexual and emotional nature, occurring across community, domestic, institutional and online spaces. It is frequently multifaceted in nature, and children may both experience and perpetrate harm. These harms are shaped by the interplay of peer, school, home, neighbourhood and digital environments, which interact dynamically to amplify or mitigate risk, an observation that can also apply to police and multi-agency partners' responses to such harms.

Over the past decade, national policy has increasingly framed the issue not only as a criminal justice problem but also as a public health and safeguarding concern, highlighting the need for child-centred, trauma-informed and procedurally just responses. This reflects a wider recognition that children’s experiences of violence – whether as those who experience or perpetrate harm or both – often emerge from complex, overlapping vulnerabilities, experiences, contexts and responses (or lack thereof).

Despite this recognition, a broad range of evidence (including HMICFRS inspections, JTAs and LCSPRs) reveals significant variation in how forces interpret and realise their safeguarding duties in the context of violence affecting children. This is critical context for the application of the findings of this research. Forces differ in where responsibility for violence involving children sits operationally, and guidance and policies also vary across forces. These policy and operational variations can fundamentally shape the interpretive lens through which children's experiences of violence are understood and responded to (and the relative emphasis on enforcement and safeguarding within this), with gendered and racial disparities observable within this (Beckett & Lloyd, 2022; Wroe, 2021), as explored further in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4. Safeguarding-led and child-centred frontline practice

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the response of frontline officers to violence involving children, focusing specifically on their understanding and application of safeguarding-led and child-centred policing practice (RQ2). It draws on data from the desk-based and primary research elements of the study, including self-reported police reflections and observations from others. The chapter focuses primarily on the police–child interaction but also recognises the influence of the other three interconnected domains explored in Chapter 6: Policing structures and cultures, inter-agency working and wider systems infrastructure. The second part of the chapter considers the YEF’s three specified areas of interest (stop and search, possession of a weapon and missing children) and an additional area of custody and clinically based interactions, which arose as a particular concern in the primary qualitative research.

It is important to note at the outset of this chapter that police themselves recognised the need for improved and more consistent safeguarding-led and child-centred practice when responding to children involved in violence. When asked how well developed their force was in terms of ensuring a consistent response to children involved in violence, only half (50%; n=9) of the 18 respondents who answered this question in the force-level survey classed their response to children *experiencing* violence/harm as being well developed. Even fewer (39%; n=7) classed their response to children *perpetrating* violence/harm or those known to *both experience and perpetrate* violence/harm as well developed (see Table 4.1), indicating a self-recognised need for further development.

Table 4.1: How well developed is your force in relation to ensuring a consistent response to children experiencing or perpetrating violence/harm?

	Early stages of development		Somewhat developed		Well developed	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Children experiencing violence/harm			9	50	9	50
Children perpetrating violence/harm			11	61.1	7	38.9
Children who are known to both experience and perpetrate violence/harm	1	5.6	11	61.1	6	33.3

4.2 Variation in practice

Both the desk-based review and primary research strands indicate substantial variation in frontline officers’ understanding and application of safeguarding-led and child-centred practice, meaning children’s experience of ‘best practice’ varies considerably depending on where they live and which officers or teams respond.

Both police and non-police participants provided multiple examples of variation in safeguarding-led practice across and within forces. While pockets of strong practice were reported, participants portrayed these more as exceptions than the norm. A pronounced divide was observed between specialist safeguarding teams and general frontline units. Specialist teams (such as child exploitation, safeguarding or contextual harm units) were broadly reported as emphasising decriminalisation, contextual understanding and child-focused engagement, whereas frontline

officers were more often observed to revert to offence-led interpretations, particularly when responding to exploited children. Different approaches were, however, also reported across different specialist teams:

“CSE victims get a really child-led, trauma-informed response...our criminal exploitation cohort sits with gangs/guns, and the response is worlds apart” (Local authority participant).

“Depends who you get...what’s the flavour of the month” (Ex-policing/VRU participant).

4.3. Understanding and use of safeguarding mechanisms

Virtually all (97%) of the police officers/staff who responded to the EBP survey agreed (31.4%) or strongly agreed (65.3%) that police have an important role in safeguarding children involved in violence. EBP respondents also reported high confidence in their understanding of the safeguarding needs of children involved in violence, with nine out of 10 respondents agreeing (52%) or strongly agreeing (37%) to the statement that they understand the safeguarding needs of children involved in violence.

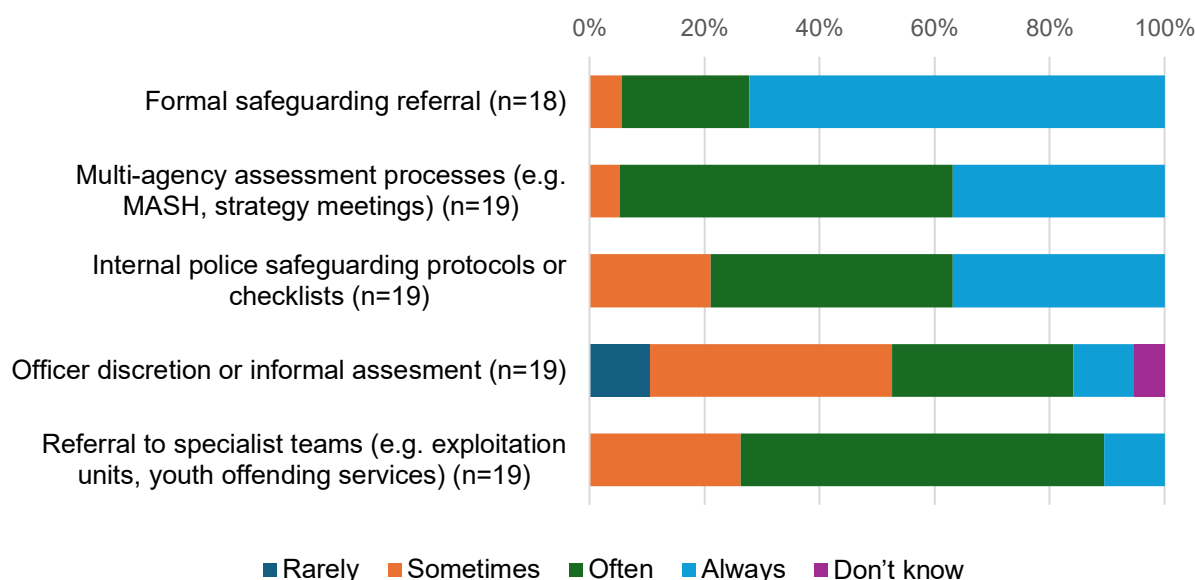
High levels of support for the use of safeguarding referrals were also reported, with four out of five respondents (80%) believing that making a safeguarding referral can reduce children’s involvement in violence, and 90% identifying that this was a mechanism used by their force.

Force-level survey findings also show that formal safeguarding referrals are being used to identify and respond to the safeguarding needs of children who are known/suspected of perpetrating harm. This was the most frequently reported mechanism used to safeguard, with three out of four (72%; n=13) forces noting they always used it and most of the remainder (22%; n=4) noting they often did. As can be seen in Figure 4.1, multi-agency assessment processes, such as MASH or strategy meetings, were less consistently used, with only 37% (n=7) reporting that they always used these, and 58% (n=11) noting they did so often.

Where survey respondents noted the use of safeguarding referrals and/or formalised multi-agency structures, they generally did so in positive terms, noting how it improved their response. As one force reported:

“[Police force name] is at its best when we treat children who are suspected/known to be causing harm as both a safeguarding concern and a violence risk, and we use multi-agency systems to intervene early, proportionately and with clear accountability. We are increasingly using multi-agency governance and problem-solving structures to maintain a shared understanding of threats, ensure children linked to violence are visible to the right services and drive collective accountability. We are also improving how quickly we move from an incident to support by using established safeguarding pathways for exploitation-linked violence, so we respond to the drivers behind behaviour (such as exploitation, missing episodes and peer-on-peer harm) rather than treating violence in isolation. This is strengthened by better use of data and hotspot insight to target safeguarding activity at the right places, times and cohorts and by a growing trauma-informed approach that supports engagement and reduces escalation. Overall, the positive practice is being enabled by clearer governance, stronger partnership working, improved analytical capacity and shared data, and a consistent focus on early intervention alongside appropriate enforcement where necessary” (Force-level survey respondent).

Figure 4.1: Mechanisms used to identify and respond to the safeguarding needs of children known/suspected of perpetrating harm



4.4 Understanding of child-centred principles

EBP survey findings demonstrate strong conceptual support for child-centred policing, with three-quarters (75%) of the police officers/staff who responded stating that they believed a child-first approach could reduce children's involvement in violence. However, a rank gradient emerged within the statements of support, with Police and Community Support Officers (PCSOs)/Police Constables (PCs) (those children have more encounters with) less likely than senior ranks to agree with this statement.²²

Interestingly, despite these relatively high levels of conceptual support for such an approach, only 58% of respondents noted that their force took a child-first approach to reducing children's involvement in violence. These figures suggest a potential disparity between conceptual support for and the practical implementation of child-centred policing approaches and/or a lack of awareness of the implementation of such approaches in forces. Similar patterns have been reported in other research, such as the VKPP's *Victims' voices and experiences in response and investigation* study (Denyer et al. 2023), which found police officers reported broad endorsement of child-centred and trauma-informed principles but had significantly lower confidence in their consistent application during frontline encounters, which were acknowledged to be shaped more by risk management and control.

Gaps in child-centred policing were also identified in the force-level survey, which demonstrated variable organisational infrastructure for delivering child-centred practice. Only three out of five forces (60%; n=12), for example, reported having a dedicated in-force role that championed a safeguarding-led response to children involved in violence, despite an increasing commitment to such an approach at the national level over the last few years.

When asked what the key challenges were to enacting a safeguarding-led response to children involved in violence, almost half (47%; n=9) of the forces that responded to the force-level survey highlighted a lack of trauma-informed or child-centred practice. This messaging was replicated in the professional stakeholder consultations, with both policing and non-policing participants frequently stating that many non-specialist frontline officers lacked a clear conceptual understanding of child-centred policing principles, particularly how exploitation, trauma and contextual harm should shape first contact and subsequent decision-making.

²² 61% of PCSOs and 63% of PCs, compared to 90% of those in senior ranks of inspector and above. Analysis excluded non-ranked roles and was statistically significant: $\chi^2(3, N=414) = 26.479, p < .001$.

Though recognising this was not universally applicable, participants described non-specialist frontline officers moving quickly to disposal decisions or investigative tasks without exploring a child's account or underlying need, leaving the child feeling unheard and reducing opportunities to identify risk or harm. This response was linked to an absence of professional curiosity (not considering risk beyond the presenting incident), an inadequate understanding of safeguarding duties, a perceived lack of recognition of the importance of children's views and/or an entrenched tendency to interpret children's behaviour through a criminal rather than a welfare lens.

4.5 'Enforcement first' vs safeguarding-led approaches

Both policing and non-policing participants described concerns that safeguarding considerations were routinely secondary to enforcement, particularly for children suspected of causing harm:

"It's more around prosecution, and safeguarding is an afterthought" (Voluntary and community sector [VCS] participant).

This is particularly pertinent given the accompanying observations that assumptions of harm underpinned many first-response engagements, including in contexts where the child had been exploited or trafficked, only shifting to a safeguarding orientation when additional evidence made recognition of the child's vulnerability unavoidable:

"Look at someone who's been human-trafficked... They get arrested for intent to supply... then someone says, 'Actually... this is human trafficking'. 'Oh yeah, we hadn't thought of that'" (VCS participant).

"You see a teenage boy out; he's got drugs on him, and he's in the company of an older man. And it would be quite often the case that I'd say, 'Well, has an [National Referral Mechanism] (NRM) been explored? Has modern-day slavery been explored?' Usually the answer is no... the thing is that for a lot of police still, it is a case of, 'That's an easy charge'" (Policing VRU participant).

Participants also referenced appropriate adult and interpreter safeguards being inconsistently applied, an over-reliance on verbal disclosure (as opposed to use of third-party accounts or chronologies of harm) and/or a default to criminal rather than civil thresholds for safeguarding interventions – each of which can miss contextual risk:

"Police want 'the sentence' – they don't invest time in looking for other evidence" (Safeguarding consultant).

Approaches which focus only on evidential thresholds for criminal prosecution are at odds with a safeguarding-led response, which emphasises the police's role in the identification of wider harms and needs. A narrow focus on direct and explicit reporting of harm by a child is also at odds with safeguarding-led practice, which proactively draws on multi-source, cumulative information (as demonstrated in the case studies presented in Chapter 7).

Wider research and inspections highlight the role that systemic shortcomings can play in relation to this. Home Office research on increasing numbers of no further action (NFA) outcomes, for example, highlights the impact of workforce churn, reduced investigative experience, high caseloads and capacity limitations, particularly in relation to digital evidence. HMICFRS (2025) notes that these pressures may further incentivise reliance on immediate, overt disclosures rather than on time-intensive, contextual investigation, reinforcing offence-led evidential assessments over safeguarding-led approaches.

Both police and non-police participants recognised the outworking of these issues in practice, highlighting concerns about the contribution of a (re-emergent) numbers-driven performance-management culture to this:

“Because we’ve got a whole series of chief officers who were brought up in the 90s around command and control and performance management, and now the government’s bringing them full circle back [around] again into, kind of, control and performance management” (Ex-policing/VRU participant).

Limited understanding of children’s wider contexts was also observed to compound this pattern. Officers were often seen by participants as prioritising an immediate response to restore order or conducting short-term safety checks without recognising how histories of harm, instability or relational risk should inform decisions:

“What they’re not necessarily going to know...is what have they experienced in that home before? Is that really a place for them to go?” (VCS participant).

Police participants also described difficulties embedding force-wide understandings of child-first and trauma-informed approaches:

“We are still struggling to get [a] force-wide approach to make sure that everybody in the police who works with children, and even those who don’t work with children, understands those [trauma-informed, child-first] principles. So, we are still, from time to time, coming across that barrier where people don’t understand, you know, ‘Oh well they’re behaving like [this], so why should we do that?’” (Police participant: Early intervention).

“[Trying to change officers’] understanding of that trauma and what that young person might be experiencing, but also from their perspective, they are dealing with these young people on a daily basis, and it becomes [that] they have to spend more time and focus on that person. It’s quite difficult for them to sort of see past it...it’s changing that mindset” (Police participant: Child/youth).

Learning from the case studies shows that officers’ experiences prior to entering specialist or co-located teams often reflected such enforcement-first habits, but their safeguarding knowledge and its practical application strengthened markedly when supported by structured supervision, dedicated multi-agency arrangements, clear expectations and targeted training. Under these conditions (and with routine exposure to child-centred practice) officers more readily recognised vulnerability early, interpreted behaviour through a safeguarding lens and approached children as children rather than suspects.

4.6 Communication, engagement and de-escalation skills

Significant gaps were identified by both policing and non-policing participants in some frontline officers’ communication and de-escalation skills, particularly during first contact with children. Initial approaches were often perceived as heavy-handed or intimidating, with officers ‘swarming’ children or entering youth spaces without first speaking to staff, actions that were noted to heighten fear and tension rather than de-escalate the situation:

“Police burst through the doors...made the situation tense” (VCS participant).

Both policing and non-policing participants shared examples of some officers defaulting to high-visibility control tactics, such as rigid physical positioning or a command-and-control tone, intended as a precaution but experienced by children as threatening. Examples of multiple officers

surrounding a child, particularly noted in relation to the experiences of Black boys, were shared as being both unnecessary and intimidating and overwhelming:

“You don't need five officers, but [in] that initial response there, you've lost that relationship with the police right away. Straight away. They're seen as a threat” (VCS participant).

Participants also highlighted poor listening skills and limited empathy on the part of some frontline officers. Children's fear, confusion or neurodivergent communication styles were reported as not always recognised, with some frontline officers described by non-policing participants as *“not really listening”* or responding in ways that heightened distress. Some participants also reported children being discouraged from seeking help due to judgmental or dismissive tones in control rooms or at front desks on follow-up visits to police stations:

“It's not just the uniform, it's control room staff as well. And one of my biggest concerns used to be the amount of kids put off by...judgmental and sharp responses at control room” (Safeguarding consultant).

A further concern, noted by both policing and non-policing participants, related to officers giving limited explanations of rights or next steps, leaving children confused or frightened:

“It wasn't the stop and search that they particularly objected to...it was the way it was done. It wasn't explained properly...why it was happening? What it was about?...And that's the bit that really matters” (VCS participant).

4.7 Legal literacy

Legal literacy, understood as officers' ability to correctly interpret and apply legal duties and safeguards, emerged as an area of concern in the desk-based review. Inspections have highlighted significant gaps in officers' legal knowledge, inconsistent application of statutory duties, misinterpretation of safeguarding thresholds and variable use of procedural safeguards across a range of forces (see, for example, HMICFRS, 2025)

Participants in our stakeholder consultations also described significant gaps in officers' legal literacy, not only in how safeguarding powers are applied but also in officers' understanding of core procedural duties, thresholds and statutory protections for children. These concerns were raised both by non-police participants, who highlighted gaps they routinely observed in police practice, and by officers themselves, who acknowledged areas of uncertainty and inconsistency within their own systems and workforce.

Non-policing participants expressed concerns about some officers defaulting to the criminal burden of proof even when using civil orders or disruption tools, such as Sexual Risk Orders or Slavery and Trafficking Risk Orders, which operate on the balance-of-probabilities standard. Some also described misapplication of civil orders, with child victims rather than adult perpetrators becoming the subject of restrictions, exclusion zones or behavioural controls. Both these observations were linked to missed opportunities for early safeguarding intervention:

“In a strategy meeting [with the police], it was a cohort of young girls [who] were clearly being criminally and sexually exploited. And I said, ‘Look, why are we not looking at civil orders here...It's not a criminal burden of proof...police will say there's not enough evidence’” (VCS participant).

“All the civil stuff goes on the victim...exclusion zones on a victim, while perpetrators target 50–60 children” (Local authority participant).

Some police participants themselves recognised that colleagues sometimes failed to apply safeguarding thresholds correctly, most notably around Section 47²³ child protection duties. They observed how child-to-child violence was too often treated purely as a criminal matter rather than a child protection concern:

“We forget [some incidents] are actually child protection incidents...They should be joint decisions with social care” (Police participant: Other).

Problems with attendance at Section 47 strategy meetings were noted by both policing and non-policing participants. One senior officer described a lack of knowledge of the responsibilities of police in relation to this, both in terms of being able to request a strategy meeting and their duty to cooperate:

“Officers in the vulnerability hub at sergeant level – who were the ones responsible for going to strat [strategy] meetings – when a strat was coming in from social care they were just refusing to attend. And I said, ‘We can’t do that. Legislation states we must attend’. You then document the reason within the strategy why it is necessary for police to attend or be part of the process, and a single agency responsibility may be agreed, but we can’t carte blanche disagree” (Police participant: Child exploitation).

Gaps in officers’ understanding of Equality Act obligations and in the appropriate use of information about SEND during safeguarding or investigative encounters were also raised in the stakeholder consultations. Several examples described officers challenging or dismissing children’s stated needs, including formal diagnoses or Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) information:

“The child...said ‘I have an EHCP. I have autism’. And the police said, ‘No you don’t; you’re lying’” (Education participant).

4.8 Information-sharing

Inspections and LCSPRs regularly highlight poor information handling by police (and partners) and weak multi-agency communication (Ofsted et al., 2024a). Examples include not regularly attending strategy meetings (HMCIFRS, 2016; HMCIFRS 2023c) and not sharing information on a routine or timely basis with partners (Ofsted et al. 2024b). Policing and non-policing participants also highlighted information-sharing challenges and described how poor coordination and unclear professional roles can undermine frontline safeguarding efforts.

In terms of the frontline response, participants noted occasions where there was a lack of coordinated response between police and other partners. They observed how trusted adults, such as carers and residential staff, could be sidelined at moments when their presence could help regulate the child and provide essential contextual knowledge, such as triggers, communication needs or de-escalation strategies. When these adults are excluded, officers lose access to information that can prevent escalation and improve decision-making.

Non-policing participants generally described information flows with the police as one-way. Officers were reported to request intelligence from voluntary and community partners but not routinely share updates in return:

“They wanted our data but wouldn’t share back...quite intimidating” (VCS participant).

²³ Section 47 of the 1989 Children Act specifies the statutory duties of authorities, including the police, when a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm.

Some participants commented on how police held covert intelligence in the context of county-lines activity that was not shared, even when it was essential for risk assessment and safety planning:

“We’re feeding their systems, but it’s covert, so nothing comes back” (VCS participant).

This was observed to reveal a limited understanding of what partners require to effectively safeguard and a failure to apply existing safeguarding guidance on reciprocal information-sharing. Lack of follow-up with families and partners was another persistent concern, with little feedback or closure after safeguarding decisions were made:

“There’s been no closed loop” (VCS participant).

Embedded and trusted local teams (typically officers or small specialist teams consistently working within schools or neighbourhood settings) were observed to facilitate information-sharing and cooperation between partners:

“Child abuse investigation co-locate with Children Services and dual-deploy. Builds working relationship and better multi-agency response” (Force-level survey respondent).

“We do have youth engagement officers and youth engagement teams, and we are told usually by the staff what’s happened or by other kids when we’re in the schools or such and such doing this, or we think such and such has got a knife, and then that’s how that information comes through to us” (Police participant: Early intervention).

Similar examples of positive multi-agency working were found in the case studies, which are explored in Chapter 7 and reported in some of the force-level survey responses:

“[Force name] has a well-developed partnership approach and information-sharing agreements. This has been developed over years of partnership working, with a common goal of tackling violence where it exists and prevention work to get ahead of the issue” (Force-level survey respondent).

“[Force name] commenced a partnership panel re interventions for children who perpetrate violence in the home. This again has a strong multi-agency response and is showing some positive outcomes; there is a strong want from all to continue and expand. It has enabled information to be gathered around what families are actually needing, i.e. not just per-focused; [a] holistic approach with all family members” (Force-level survey respondent).

Challenges in delivering a consistent safeguarding-led response was noted to be particularly challenging for forces whose geographical boundaries meant they had to engage with more than one local authority. Some participants described the practical challenges of navigating variable thresholds, expectations and systems, reflecting how this shaped the extent to which they could recognise or act on safeguarding concerns:

“We’ve got five local authorities doing things differently...when actually some standardisation...and how they can use the statutory provisions to make us work better for people...that’s the only thing that I think will help” (Police participant: Child/youth).

4.9 Specific contexts of practice

This section explores the frontline response in relation to the three specific areas of interest identified by the YEF – stop and search, response to children in possession of a weapon and missing children – as context to the consideration of ‘best practice’ within these settings in

Chapter 9. It also considers custody and clinical interactions which emerged as an additional context of concern in the qualitative analysis.

4.9.1 Stop and search

Concerns about stop-and-search policing practices, including a lack of procedural fairness and patterns of disproportionality, are well documented (Turner & Evans, 2021; Wroe, 2021). So too is the significance of these encounters in forming children's views of policing, demonstrating a clear relationship between unjust experiences and lack of trust in policing (Bradford et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2021), themes that were replicated in the professional stakeholder consultation phase of this study.

Multiple accounts were shared by non-policing professionals of children they worked with being stopped and searched in their communities on the way to and from school and in other public spaces, including repeated instances. While there was an overall sense of children generally being targeted in stop-and-search activities, particular concerns were shared about the ongoing disproportionate use of stop and search on Black children and the use of unnecessary aggression and force within this:

"We had some of our students a couple [of] years ago who weren't at fault whatsoever. But because the witness said that's what they looked like, before they even got to their names, they were handcuffed and put in the back of the van" (VCS participant).

Reflecting on these ongoing patterns of disproportionality, a key message that emerged from professional participants (and one that reflects existing evidence around this) is the importance of increased transparency around stop-and-search practice, both in terms of how they are practically conducted and in terms of decision-making around when and how they are used and whether find rates justify patterns of use:

"Need greater transparency on use of stop and search...How many have resulted in a weapon being found? The percentage is really low...Do the ends justify the means?" (VCS participant).

Concerns about a lack of monitoring were borne out in the findings of the force-level survey. When asked if force data captured demographic patterns around the use of stop and search with children, only one in three (30%; n=6) forces that responded to this question (n=18) in the force-level survey noted that it did. Of these, five captured data on ethnicity, three on age and three on gender.

A few non-policing participants questioned whether the overall practice of stop and search with children was justifiable or beneficial:

"Stop doing it. That's my response. It's disproportionate. In the main, it's not changing anything; it's alienating communities. And when you look at the figures about actually how often it leads to an arrest, stop wasting your resources and maybe start going out and playing football with kids, engaging with them instead of stopping them" (Safeguarding consultant).

Others from both policing and non-policing backgrounds felt that stop and search was a necessary part of policing, but while some policing participants emphasised how practice has improved in recent years, most non-policing participants emphasised an ongoing and urgent need for substantial reform. Interestingly, despite these differing assessments of the current state of practice, there was relatively strong convergence across both policing and non-policing stakeholders on what 'better' would look like (as outlined in Chapter 9). Also common to both sets

of accounts, and the wider evidence base, was a recognition of the potential for things to escalate unnecessarily if not approached well in the first place.

4.9.2 Possession of a weapon

Much of the discussion about possession of a weapon in the stakeholder consultation phase of the research focused on knife crime. Many participants noted increasing concerns around knife possession by under-18s, a pattern also identified in the force-level survey. While not negating the need to address this nor denying the existence of some good practice around this, considerable concerns emerged in the study about the enforcement-led response to children found with knives or other weapons, often observed to be in direct conflict with a safeguarding-led response.

Reviewed inspection reports, for example, show that enforcement-first responses dominate in many forces, resulting in “*opportunities to avoid unnecessarily criminalising children who are coerced to commit crimes being missed.*” (HMCIFRS, 2019, p5). This theme was strongly echoed in participants reflections on this topic, including by both operational and strategic policing participants.

‘Appearing strong’ in response to growing concerns about knife crime and meeting key performance indicators (KPIs) around weapon capture were felt to be the predominant factors influencing responses to weapon possession across many forces, with little perceived regard for understanding the context of possession or attending to accompanying safeguarding needs.

Concerns were also expressed about a lack of synergy across national policy in this field, exacerbating inconsistent practice. An example was given by a youth justice participant around mandatory knife possession disposals (Home office and MoJ, 2026). They observed that while the introduction of deferred prosecutions in the scheme is intended to be beneficial for children, in the 22 forces that lack deferred prosecution schemes, the minimum available outcome becomes a “*youth conditional caution that could have an impact for them, 20 years down the line,*” while children in other forces receive an Outcome 22,²⁴ with the only differentiating feature being force boundaries. They also observed how this failed to take account of the contextual drivers of that knife-carrying, which may – as the existing evidence base shows – be linked to exploitation by, or threat of harm from, adults (YJB, 2025c).

Despite occasional references to the Child Gravity Risk Matrix (NPCC, 2025), there was a clear sense of inconsistent assessments and responses across different officers and different forces. Police participants shared fundamentally different approaches within their different forces, with some prioritising prevention and others working within overtly punitive, enforcement-led frameworks. While reporting a decline in knife offences as a result, the force employing the latter approach did acknowledge that this had led to significant inter-agency professional tensions in relation to its lack of alignment with a child-first, safeguarding-led approach.

This variation in practice speaks to a need for transparent data capture and monitoring, yet force-level survey responses showed limited data capture around demographics and knife possession in most forces. Only one in three (30%; n=6) respondents could state which demographic data was captured for children found in possession of a weapon, and one in five (20%; n=4) explicitly commented on data-collection issues regarding this:

²⁴ Outcome 22 is the Home Office outcome code intended to reflect where a diversionary intervention has been used to result a case that does not meet the public interest test to take any further action. It is an informal outcome that results in an NFA, for use with both adult and youth cases.

“The CSAE problem profile contains no analysis at all relating to weapon possession, weapon-enabled offending, knife crime, firearms or similar issues” (Force-level survey respondent).

Both the desk-based review and primary research conducted as part of the study indicate that children carrying weapons often do so because they are being threatened, controlled and/or fearing for their safety or, indeed for some, wishing to harm themselves rather than others (see, for example, Davis et al., 2023; McVie, 2010).

While recognising the need for preventative work around knife crime, participants emphasised the need for this to be done in an appropriate trauma-informed manner, rather than applying fear-amplifying narratives that can unintentionally drive defensive weapon-carrying among children:

“Well, actually, I'm part of the gang. There's another gang that [wants] to get our gang, and, therefore, if I don't have a knife and they've got a knife, I'm going to come off worse...And policing can be the cause of this as well. We've done this big knife crime operation – here's all the knives that we found, and we stick them out, and we do loads of press cuttings and videos and all the rest of...it, and then that young person [goes], ‘Oh, crikey, look at the size of those knives. Mine's only small. I need to get a bigger one’” (Youth Justice Services [YJS] participant).

Forces reported a range of preventative and early intervention initiatives, either delivered or funded by forces and VRUs, including school-based education, accident and emergency (A&E) navigators, support-based engagements with habitual knife carriers and knife deposit schemes. They also noted the need for these to be part of a wider multi-agency public health approach that moves upstream to tackle inequities and unmet needs before they are encountered in the context of weapon possession.

“The knife isn't the problem. We are missing the whole point if you think the knife is the problem...the weapon thing is a bit of a red herring. It's not really dealing with the causes” (VCS participant).

4.9.3 Missing incidents

Both the desk-based review and primary research identified significant and ongoing concerns around the overall police response when children are reported as missing (Action for Children, 2024; Davis et al., 2023; Beckett et al., 2015; Monaghan et al., 2024; Ofsted et al., 2024a).

That is not to say that individual good practice does not exist but rather that the systemic conditions required to embed this are frequently lacking. This was aptly illustrated in police participants' reflections on colleagues working in specialist missing persons teams in one of the focus groups, where they observed how capacity issues meant this work was often crisis-driven rather than the early intervention role recognised as being ‘best practice’:

“We do have some missing persons coordinators who do some absolutely fantastic work, but they tend to be the children who are already complex and being let down by all of our systems. We should really be getting ahead of the game. We know that's good practice. I don't think any force has really got that right because we're struggling in a difficult world; everyone's having to prioritise. Our entire system is based on ‘Is it an emergency right now?’ at that minute and deal with that...It's really difficult to change it to ‘No, it's not an absolute emergency’...but [responding] could be the thing that stops them from going missing tomorrow” (Police participant: Other).

This crisis-driven approach and associated lost intervention opportunities were replicated in the contributions of non-policing participants, who identified a series of concerns with current police responses to missing incidents. Many of these concerns related to how police conceptualised and responded to children who had been reported missing, including a lack of recognition of the potential vulnerability and needs of a child or what might be behind missing episodes:

“Hearing concerning information, saying they are making lifestyle choices” (VCS participant).

A clear and consistent message emerged across the study as to the need to recognise missing episodes as a safeguarding issue rather than a behaviour to be managed:

“Behaviour is often an expression of unmet need” (YJS participant).

A large body of research documents the risks and harms that children can experience when missing and also the importance of understanding the drivers for missing episodes (Brewster et al. 2023, Ford et al. 2020, Monaghan et al. 2024). These will vary considerably across different children and different contexts. Some missing episodes may be driven by a desire to avoid harm ‘at home’ or go to somewhere a child feels safer/more welcome. Some children may be ‘missing’ under threat or coercion in the context of exploitation, and others may not be where expected but not in any danger. Understanding this is key to providing an appropriate response, as is identifying this early on rather than waiting until repeated or escalated patterns of missing emerge.

Both the desk-based review (Davis et al., 2023, Monaghan et al., 2024) and participants identified that care-experienced or care-experiencing children were disproportionately represented in police responses to missing episodes. Linked to this, some participants identified how over-reporting by care homes operating to rigid operating protocols could work against effective responses when a child is in danger:

“That one evening is actually the evening where they have gone off to another county or somewhere else, and they actually are being exploited, but because we’ve had five missing reports, it’s a bit like the boy who cried wolf” (Police participant: Child/youth).

Examples were shared in the fieldwork of unnecessary escalation and, on occasions, resultant criminalisation that could have been avoided with a more sensitive and trauma-informed approach:

“Where, for example, a cared-for child who runs away from care, you know, they’re running away from care but running to where...they’d rather be because they might feel safer where they want to be. Reported as missing, but then police come, they’re in a heightened state, you know, cortisol through the bloody roof, and they get [there], and it ends up, we end up getting a referral for police assault, and it’s like, look at what, and it’s because the police aren’t sensitive enough to what’s actually going on underneath that” (YJS participant).

Issues around misinterpreting children’s distress or communication difficulties as defiance or disrespect, leading to inappropriate assumptions about resilience or risk (as explored in Chapter 5), were also identified in the context of police responses to missing episodes.

Research (Boulton et al., 2023) demonstrates that return home interviews are often late or incomplete, limiting opportunities to hear the child’s account and to correct earlier assumptions. Although PCC plans (see, for example, Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime [MOPAC], 2025; South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority), 2025) often acknowledge missing children as a priority, the desk-based review found that operational expectations were rarely specified, with

officers lacking clear guidance on thresholds, processes and safeguarding responsibilities in missing situations.

There were mixed messages in the primary research around how responses varied in the context of repeat missing episodes, with some police professionals noting that children in these circumstances were more likely to get a good response due to an increased likelihood of having vulnerabilities and needs appropriately identified at this stage (noting how earlier intervention could have prevented repeat episodes). Others, including a participant in the youth consultation, felt that responses become less child-centred and safeguarding-led with repeated episodes:

“[I] overheard staff being told, ‘What’s the point in looking for them? They keep going missing’. They don’t care. They just see you as troublesome” (Youth consultation participant).

One force reported in their survey that they had seen a decline in the number of children going missing following proactive partnership working, though the more common observation in the research was inadequate interagency collaboration and issues with timely information-sharing. This was noted to be particularly problematic when children were moving/being moved across local authority and force boundaries, with observable reluctance to take responsibility resulting in children falling between the cracks. Positive examples of responses to missing children on the rail network were found in the British Transport Police (BTP) case study, outlined in Chapter 7.

A gap between policy and practice around missing children was observable in the study, as was a lack of evidence-informed responses. For example, though most respondents to the force-level survey (85%; n=17) had policies for children who went missing, only seven (35%) could comment on the demographics of those children.

4.9.4 Custody and clinical-based interactions

Child-safe procedures in custody and clinical settings were identified in the professional stakeholder consultation as an additional area where gaps in safeguarding and child-centred knowledge and application also appear. These gaps were observed to result in responses that compromised children’s dignity, emotional safety and procedural fairness.

Clinical settings

Some non-policing participants raised concerns about evidence-gathering processes in clinical settings, noting that the lack of clear joint operating procedures with hospitals left officers uncertain about what constituted ‘best practice’.

Concerns were expressed about a lack of dignity in certain police processes within acute healthcare settings. One participant shared an example of male officers remaining present during intimate medical procedures for a female child. Several also observed that officers (or medical professionals) did not always know what child-safe restraint looked like or how trauma and neurodivergence affect behaviour. One participant, for example, described a 12-year-old with suspected learning disabilities being *“paraded through A&E in a spit mask and handcuffs”* (VCS participant) after clinicians refused to see her, leading to treatment in a police van.

Participants also described instances in which children seriously injured through violence were treated as suspects, including being restrained and subjected to intensive police questioning while awaiting urgent treatment or surgery:

“The [number] of times we’d have a 15-year-old or 16-year-old cuffed to the bed [by a response officer]...with no knowledge from a policing perspective...heavily questioned before going into surgery” (Safeguarding consultant).

Participants highlighted how these practices, combined with investigative delays and the inherently traumatic nature of investigations, could compound the distress experienced by children.

Custody settings

Concerns about the use of police custody and its impact on children are longstanding (Home Office, 2017; Kemp & Bevan., 2023), particularly when children have additional vulnerabilities and/or are a risk to themselves or others (College of Policing, 2024). Custody environments have been described as harmful for many children, particularly those who are neurodivergent, distressed or traumatised, which are themes replicated in children’s accounts of custody (Allnock et al., 2026a).

Recent publications by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Children in Police Custody (2026) recommend that custody be used only as a last resort and call for a review of the appropriate adult safeguard. Participants in this study also described serious concerns about failures to secure appropriate adults or interpreters, resulting in unlawful or prolonged detention of children, including those with limited English or whose parents could not act as appropriate adults:

“They wouldn’t get an interpreter... [the] child [was] left in the cells for 72 hours because dad couldn’t be AA [appropriate adult] without one” (Local authority participant).

Police participants themselves recognised inconsistent custody safeguarding practices. Some described proactive engagement with VCS providers to ensure support for children in and after custody. Some also described enhanced custody environments, such as those explored in the practice example in Chapter 7:

“They have tablets that they can use in the cell block. The tablets have got educational material on them. They’ve got a video on them, which is basically a walkthrough of the custody process and everything that could happen to them while they’re in that environment” (Policing: VRU participant).

Others, however, described gaps in safeguarding-led practice, including a lack of clarity on the boundary between checking on a child’s welfare and interviewing them, a concern about “crossing the line” in the absence of this and the need for greater procedural clarity around how welfare should be attended to in custody environments:

“It was difficult...without then conducting a secondary interview...We need clarity on when we should engage” (Police participant: Child/youth).

A few professional participants specifically referenced resource constraints in relation to custody experiences. They highlighted how shortages of Police and Criminal Evidence Act beds – driven by national and local commissioning gaps – mean that when no alternative accommodation exists, children can remain in custody by default:

“Local authority hasn’t got anywhere...the child stays in custody” (YJS participant).

Structural pressures – such as investigative imperatives or rigid custody workflows – were felt to sometimes override welfare considerations and turn distressed behaviour into ‘non-compliance’, resulting in further criminalisation. Child-centred initiatives, such as the Cleveland practice example outlined in Chapter 7, show the possibility of more safeguarding and child-centred practice.

4.10 Concluding observations

Overall, the evidence suggests that frontline officers’ safeguarding and child-centred policing knowledge is unevenly embedded, an observation shared by forces themselves in the force-level survey.

While pockets of strong practice (such as those explored in Chapter 7) were recognised and recommended, participants portrayed these more as exceptions than the norm. A pronounced divide was observed between specialist safeguarding or prevention teams (demonstrating strong, safeguarding-led, child-centred practice) and general frontline units, whose practice was more frequently associated with narrow offence-led interpretations and responses that failed to account for contextual drivers of harm. Variable frontline practice was also observed in relation to the specific contexts of stop and search, possession of a weapon, responses to missing episodes and child-safe procedures in clinical and custody settings.

These responses are shaped by officer-level factors, the contexts of interaction, and force-level and wider system factors, such as resource pressures and performance management cultures, as explored further in Chapter 6. They are also shaped by – and manifest in – inequitable policing practices, as explored in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Inequities in safeguarding and child protection responses

5.1 Introduction

Drawing on the findings of all elements of the study, this chapter explores whether there is evidence of racial or other disparities in current policing responses to safeguarding children involved in violence, how any such disparities might be addressed and the identified barriers to this (RQ4). In line with the study brief, we explore responses to Black, Asian and minority ethnic children (including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children) and children with SEND or who are neurodivergent. We also explore any potential gender disparities or disparities linked to whether police are engaging with a child in the context of known/suspected offending or known/suspected victimisation. Recognising children's intersectional identities, we highlight where racial and gender disparities, for example, combine to heighten the inequitable treatment of a child.

Study findings clearly demonstrate inequities in how police respond to different cohorts of children within different contexts of engagement.²⁵ Minoritised ethnicities, particularly Black boys, are over-policed and under-protected because of adultification and other racialised biases. Neurodivergent children's communication needs are often unmet, leading to misinterpretation of their behaviour and a failure to recognise underlying needs. Children who are seen primarily through a suspect lens are especially at risk of punitive responses that fail to recognise vulnerability and need and de-prioritise protection. Where these factors intersect, children may experience overlapping disadvantage or discrimination.

5.2 Victimisation and/or perpetration

Procedural justice, including concepts such as fairness, transparency and respectful treatment, was a recurring theme in both the desk-based review and the stakeholder consultations. The need for responses to children affected by violence to be proportionate and justifiable, when considered through the lens of the best interests of the child, was an accompanying recurring theme (Li et al., 2024; Wolfe et al., 2023; YJB, 2024). Yet these tenets were observed to be inconsistently applied in children's encounters with police in the context of both experiencing and perpetrating harm.

Inequities in practice appear to be patterned by the status assigned to a child at their first point of contact. Both police and non-police participants described a greater likelihood of a safeguarding-led response when children first entered the system as victims of crime or were already known to police in contexts of recognised vulnerability. This was contrasted with markedly different responses when children were initially categorised as suspects or as both victims and suspects.

One notable exception was in cases of HSB. Non-police participants observed that clearer guidance around HSB supported a more welfare-led and contextual response to the child causing harm. In contrast, they observed that when children were involved in any act of physical violence – even when professionals framed the behaviour as a safeguarding concern or an indicator of exploitation – police were more likely to default to a criminal justice initial response.

²⁵ Where findings relate to contexts of interaction or particular cohorts of children, we report this using the most specific descriptors possible; for example, Black boys or Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. We use Black, Asian and other minority ethnic children as a broad umbrella when further detail is unavailable or where necessary for brevity. When data is limited or absent, we explicitly state this and indicate the implications for interpretation and future improvement.

5.2.1 When children are identified as victims

When children are initially categorised by police as victims, participants generally observed that the police paid greater attention to vulnerability and safeguarding needs. However, even within victim pathways, a clear need for improved responses still exists. Although well-documented in the broader literature on victims' experiences of criminal justice processes (Beckett et al., 2015; Children's Commissioner for England, 2024; Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, 2024), several key aspects were highlighted in this study.

Professionals highlighted the impact of adultifying and credibility-reducing language (e.g. sexualised descriptors), which are patterns also observable in the wider literature (Beckett, 2019; Beckett & Lloyd, 2022; Davis, 2022). These practices were seen to reduce the perceived seriousness of children's accounts and delayed or stymied the provision of proportionate protection.

Concerns about the minimisation of children's experiences of harm were particularly observable when relating to sexual harm occurring within the context of peer relationships, with a reported sense that some police took these less seriously than adult-perpetrated harm. As shared in the youth consultation, phrases such as "*horny teenage boy*" were experienced in response to reporting of sexual violence from peers, minimisation patterns that are also observable within the wider literature (Allnock et al., 2022). Non-police participants also described instances of victims being treated disrespectfully by police when reporting crime, particularly in cases of peer-on-peer sexual harm, where their experiences were dismissed or minimised. Some also shared examples of victims ending up with criminal convictions following trauma reactions to an assault:

"We have cases where a young girl, 14, 15, has rang the police herself because she's been assaulted by an adult male, and then she ends up with a charge. She ends up with a charge, assault against [an] emergency worker... The police are called on a welfare issue; she doesn't behave the way they want her to behave, or they've got nothing else on her... There's no drugs, no weapons, no assault" (YJS participant).

Police participants themselves acknowledged that some officers respond dismissively when young people report sexual harm and that minimisation is an issue within policing culture.

Harm perpetrated by a peer is no less significant than harm perpetrated by an adult and should be recognised within safeguarding frameworks as capable of causing substantial and lasting impact (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015). While responses to children who harm others must appropriately reflect their age, development and potential vulnerabilities, this should not come at the expense of recognising and validating the harm experienced by another child. Clear communication is therefore essential to ensure that victims understand that differences in response relate to the age and needs of the child who caused harm, rather than any denial or minimisation of their experience.

The desk-based review also identified that multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) and other risk assessment processes can routinely miss high-harm cases, not only because of inconsistent application but also due to the design of the threshold criteria themselves. Wilson and Mueller-Johnson (2024), for example, found that only 9% of repeat victims of extra-familial exploitation were referred to MACE, while a series of Contextual Safeguarding studies highlight failures to adequately identify and respond to extra-familial harm in a system premised around harm in the home (see, for example, Firmin, 2020). Serious case analyses also highlight persistent weaknesses in risk assessment processes and in the recognition of cumulative harm across agencies (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2024).

5.2.2 When children are identified as suspects

Where children first enter the police system as suspects, participants across sectors reported:

- Fragmented and inconsistent decision-making, with some units adopting a safeguarding-led approach while others pursued arrest or enforcement as a default
- Static point-in-time assessments of risk and harm, which rarely incorporate a child's history of victimisation or exploitation
- Custody-driven pathways, which meant children's needs were assessed primarily through a criminal justice lens rather than a welfare lens

Both the desk-based review and the primary research highlight the significant barriers children face in recognising, articulating and disclosing coercion or exploitation (Beckett, 2019; Szymanski et al., 2021). Consistent with this, both police and non-police participants emphasised that a child's failure to disclose such dynamics at the point of first contact should not be interpreted as evidence that they are absent. Rather, non-disclosure often reflects the complex dynamics of exploitation, including fear, loyalty and/or a lack of awareness of coercion. Given this, participants emphasised the importance of police and statutory agencies actively engaging with professionals beyond their immediate remit, particularly those in the VCS, who may know the child well and be better placed to contextualise behaviour and reduce the risk of inappropriate criminalisation.

Several participants noted that in the absence of this, exploitation experienced by the child designated a suspect was sometimes identified days or weeks after initial contact, by which point enforcement steps against them (arrest, charge, bail conditions) were already underway. Others reflected on rare but important circumstances in which calibrated enforcement became necessary after extensive support had been exhausted, highlighting that accountability and welfare are not mutually exclusive but must be guided by context.

Evidence across inspection findings and LCSPRs also highlights how children experiencing extra-familial harm may be seen as causing rather than experiencing harm. As such, they are significantly less likely to receive sustained safeguarding responses, with cases frequently defaulting to crime control rather than protection.

Reviews, such as those of Brighton & Hove SCP (2025) and Solihull SCP (2024), highlight systemic tendencies to prioritise enforcement and disruption, while contextual risks, exploitation indicators and children's vulnerability remain under-recognised within statutory responses.

The offending-first lens that participants felt typified many police responses to children known or suspected to be perpetrating harm was observed to be in clear tension with both a child-first approach and the well-documented evidence that children engaging in harming others are highly likely to have experienced/be experiencing (often multiple forms of) harm themselves (Alexander & Kerig, 2025):

"I've not met a young person who poses a significant risk...[who] isn't deeply unsafe themselves...It is an objective truth [that harm occurred]. But it's just not the whole picture" (Safeguarding consultant).

"I talk about children affected by violence because I don't think it matters if you're a victim or perpetrator, you're affected by violence because you are a child...The victim-perpetrator divide is absolutely useless. I've never worked with a child [who] the world would label as a perpetrator...and I've worked with children [who] have caused serious harm...and I've yet to see a case history of that child where they haven't been a victim of multiple issues" (Safeguarding consultant).

Non-policing participants highlighted a frequent need to be proactively advocating for the potential harms being experienced by children who police identify as suspects or offenders in order to ensure these are not overlooked:

“Whether it be education, health, police, social services – unless we tell them they don’t seem to recognise or take into account why that person is in that situation” (VCS participant).

They also noted the significant repercussions of a failure by police to recognise concurrent victimisation and perpetration. Examples were shared of exploited children not only having their safeguarding needs unrecognised but also ending up criminalised for experiencing exploitation and all the long-term implications that can follow from that. The desk-based review reinforces these concerns, also adding that even where police identify extra-familial harms, multi-agency pathways can default to NFA or crime-control responses rather than sustained safeguarding (Ford et al., 2020).

It is important to emphasise that calls to consider the harms experienced by children who are themselves causing harm are not an attempt to minimise or deny the impact of the harm they have inflicted nor to dilute the need for accountability. Rather, they reflect the need for responses that are grounded in a holistic understanding of the child’s circumstances, including the adversities, influences and forms of victimisation they may be experiencing, so that interventions are both proportionate and effective in reducing the likelihood of future harm.

Considering the documented concerns about current responses to children who both perpetrate and experience harm and the complexities of responding to this within a criminal justice framework, it is noteworthy that only one in five forces (20%) that completed the force-level survey reported having a specific policy on this, with only half (50%; n=10) noting that they routinely monitor information about the victimisation/perpetration overlap.

5.3 Black, Asian and minority ethnic children

Concerns about inequities in policing responses to Black, Asian and minority ethnic children are well documented in the existing research evidence base (College of Policing, 2024–2025; Davis, 2022, 2025; Davis & Marsh, 2020; Independent Office for Police Conduct, 2024; Meheux & Miller, 2025; Transforming Society, 2025). Multiple LCSPRs also evidence adultification and racialised responses, particularly towards Black boys (Brighton & Hove SCP, 2025; Islington SCP, 2024; Staffordshire SCP, 2025).

Both the desk-based review and qualitative strands of this study identified over-policing and under-protection of Black children driven by racialised assumptions, adultification and gaps in cultural understanding, both within policing and broader system responses. Some police participants explicitly named this themselves:

“It would be completely remiss of us not to talk about adultification and unconscious bias and things like that. It does happen. You know, we can’t...deny it. The evidence is there” (Police participant: National policy/strategy).

Non-policing participants described how Black boys were routinely stopped, searched and managed as *“problems to be controlled”*, even where clear indicators of exploitation were present. Participants noted that police initiatives targeted at reducing weapon-related harm intensify racial disproportionality because they disproportionately concentrate surveillance and enforcement on Black boys and the neighbourhoods they inhabit. Disproportionate criminalisation of Black children, particularly Black boys, was also reported, alongside oversight or minimisation of signs of

exploitation. Participants also described contexts in which officers misread slang or cultural norms as signs of disrespect, escalating the intensity of encounters and obscuring the recognition of vulnerability.

Non-policing participants reported racialised framing of incidents or encounters, such as groups of Black boys injured in violence labelled ‘gang-involved’ or referral paperwork text flagging a White child for *“hanging around with Black youths”* (VCS participant). They also described Black boys as being routinely viewed as older and more ‘streetwise,’ prompting faster arrest escalation and lesser recognition of vulnerability:

“I’ve seen...disproportionate heavy-handedness when dealing with things like knife crime...the Black and Brown communities that I’ve represented and worked with, you know, it’s been really, really challenging” (Local authority participant).

Research shows that early labels and police-generated risk lists can increase surveillance and enforcement, disproportionately drawing children from minoritised ethnicities into intensive monitoring. These studies also highlight how unexplained or biased police attention erodes trust and contributes to the internalisation of risky identities (Coomber et al., 2025; Wroe, 2021).

Adultification and racial disproportionality across subsequent decision-making are also recognised in a series of LCSPRs. The Islington SCP (2024), for example, reports on racially disproportionate stop and searches approached through a criminalisation lens. LCSPRs also highlight how offence-led responses contribute to adultification and procedural injustice, particularly for racially minoritised boys (see, for example, Islington SCP, 2024; Norfolk SCP, 2024; South Gloucestershire Children’s Partnership, 2024).

Adultification was also reflected on in relation to the experiences of girls. VCS participants described Black girls who had been exploited being portrayed as having chosen these relationships or drawing others into harm, portrayals which obscure recognition of their victimisation and weaken protective responses. Research and inspection reports similarly highlight the under-referral of Black and Mixed Heritage girls to safeguarding and specialist exploitation pathways despite clear indicators of risk (Davis et al., 2023; Davis, 2022; 2025; HMIP, 2025; Johnston, 2021; HMICFRS, 2023b). They demonstrate how the application of adult-like attributions, a tendency to frame Black girls as complicit in their abuse and the associated use of responsibilising language such as lifestyle choice obscures experiences of harm and contributes to premature criminal justice routing (Beckett & Lloyd, 2022; Children’s Commissioner for England, 2024).

Though less frequently referenced, racialised frames were also identified for Asian children, with stereotypes of “law-abiding” Asian children observed to obscure risk, especially for girls, and racialised grooming narratives resulting in heightened suspicion of some South Asian boys, thereby shaping thresholds and responses.

Research such as that by Firmin (2018b; 2020), and Wroe (2021) shows how early narratives, such as those formed at the point of first police or agency contact, often shape pathways long after the initial incident. These narratives, frequently constructed from limited or biased information, can be seen to follow the child through case progression, becoming embedded in case notes, risk assessments and multi-agency panel discussions, thereby entrenching initial racist framings and narrowing protective options (Crawford & L’Hoiry, 2017; Firmin, 2020; Wroe & Lloyd, 2020; Wroe & Manister, 2024).

These patterns reflect documented features of wider systemic racism within policing and safeguarding systems, where structural processes, organisational routines and discretionary

decision-making disproportionately disadvantage Black and Mixed Heritage children (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2025).

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children

Evidence from the desk-based review and professional stakeholder consultations suggests that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children face distinctive and persistent inequities in safeguarding by police, though this is also an area where national and local data remain particularly limited. The available evidence points to several interconnected challenges (Corrigan & Sharley, 2026; Cemlyn et al., 2019; Friends, Families & Travellers, 2023):

- There is little published evidence on police responses to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children involved in violence.
- Several participants described long-standing mistrust between Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families and the police rooted in experiences of discrimination:

“I have always said that...the last sort of acceptable form of racism is the racism towards gypsies and travellers. And that's because most people don't know any. For gypsies and travellers...the first thing is that you wouldn't approach the police. They're not on your agenda” (Safeguarding consultant).

- Some police participants described perceptions that in some Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, children may assume substantial responsibilities from a young age. Such perceptions can be misread as indicators that these children are less vulnerable, consequently prohibiting recognition of risk and harm.
- Participants also observed that multi-agency collaboration can be uneven or fragmented, with children who move between local authority areas being treated as new cases, thereby losing important contextual information. This finding, although not always attributed to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children specifically, aligns with wider national evidence showing that mobility and mistrust often leave Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families insufficiently held within safeguarding systems (Corrigan & Sharley, 2026; Cemlyn et al., 2009).

Although much of the discourse around the experiences of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children focused on the shortcomings of current police responses, one police participant shared an example of a programme their force funded to try to address this. This programme of wrap-around support for children and their parents was observed to reduce school exclusions and improve family engagement with local services. Such initiatives demonstrate the value of culturally informed, relationship-based approaches tailored to the specific needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families.

Overall, the evidence suggests that while data around Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children is limited, the patterns identified around police engagement mirror well-established structural inequities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities more broadly, inequalities that require targeted redress.

5.4 Neurodivergent children and those with special educational needs and disabilities

SEND and neurodivergence emerged as major under-recognised drivers of vulnerability across professional stakeholder discussions, shaping children's experiences of both policing and wider statutory support. Participants consistently described systemic inequities in how needs are

identified, interpreted and responded to, inequities that could result in unnecessary criminalisation and missed opportunities for early intervention.

SEND-sensitive practices within policing were reported as being highly uneven. Some specialist and relationship-based teams within forces, such as safeguarding units or VRU-linked practitioners, were described as having well-developed trauma and neurodiversity-informed approaches. In contrast, participants noted that frontline officers responding to late-night incidents, missing episodes and custody situations were frequently lacking the training, supervision or time needed to adapt practice to neurodivergent or highly distressed children. Some also noted elements of cultural resistance and scepticism within policing (for example, “everyone has [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)] now”), which could dilute or delay reasonable adjustments even when needs are known.

Participants described three key ways in which SEND and neurodivergence were misunderstood within police encounters. First of these was officers interpreting behaviours linked to SEND or neurodivergence (such as difficulty with eye contact, slowed processing, atypical expressive language and sensory overload or shutdown) as non-compliance, evasiveness or disrespect:

“A potential arrest or questioning or line of inquiry that involves a police officer or a police member of staff and a neurodivergent young person, it's very unfortunate that they almost very neatly clash. The physicality, the power dynamics, the inferred level of respect [are] often required. The eye contact for one of a bit of a sort of stereotypical cliché thing because you're being avoidant if you're not giving eye contact” (Safeguarding consultant).

“[Considering] how that young person might present in terms of additional needs, you know whether they're not going to make eye contact, whether actually when they're disclosing something that's really traumatic. They may look like they're laughing, not taking it seriously, all of those things” (VCS participant).

These misunderstandings were observed to be most acute in high-pressure contexts, such as stop and search or custody suites, where sensory stimuli can heighten distress and dysregulation. Participants described cases where such escalation resulted in restraint, charging and/or children being labelled as violent despite the behaviour stemming from neurological or trauma-related causes rather than harmful intent.

Second, participants highlighted how similarities in how trauma and neurodivergence can manifest – hypervigilance, shutdowns, agitation or avoidance, for example – can make it difficult for officers to distinguish between them:

“What presents as neurodivergence is very, very close to trauma...and it's very difficult to strip those out” (VCS participant).

Third, they observed how masking, noted particularly with reference to girls (meaning children appear fine or presenting with what officers perceive as an expected emotional response), could result in under-recognition of vulnerability:

“It may appear...that they've got no additional needs because they're so good at masking...but actually their needs are really significant, and that just gets lost” (Education participant).

Participants also described pervasive communication barriers between police officers and neurodivergent or SEND-affected children. Non-police participants reported that officers often used technical or legalistic language, failing to adjust their communication to a child's

developmental level. Some shared that it was common for children to seek basic explanations from them, such as “Why am I here?” or “What happens next?”, having not understood these from their engagements with the police.

Several participants shared examples of children with speech, language and communication needs being questioned without appropriate adjustments in place. This included inconsistent use of interpreters for families with limited English proficiency and the exclusion of trusted adults. Some participants described being denied entry to custody suites or interviews and/or not being consulted, despite holding essential information about a child’s communication or sensory needs, with unfamiliar ‘appropriate adults’ assigned instead. These participants felt that their exclusion directly contributed to avoidable escalation. One voluntary sector participant, for example, shared an example of a neurodivergent child who was left in custody long enough to self-harm because their needs were not recognised or responded to.

Participants reported a high prevalence of undiagnosed or late-identified children with SEND being criminally exploited. One voluntary sector participant cited their local service’s data, which shows that 36–48% of children referred for criminal exploitation had suspected SEND. Traits such as literal thinking, suggestibility, a strong desire for belonging and taking others at face value were seen to heighten susceptibility to grooming and criminal exploitation. As one participant explained, the choices facing children are often far more constrained than adults assumed:

“The choice isn’t really between good and safe friends or bad and unsafe friends...it can be between bad and unsafe friends and no friends at all” (VCS participant).

Participants described children being targeted for tasks such as carrying drugs or weapons, with their neurodivergent characteristics making them easier to coerce and less able to recognise escalating risk. Some participants described a rise in online HSB, including among neurodivergent children, highlighting how social isolation, difficulties recognising coercion and increased exposure to digital environments can heighten vulnerability to manipulation in relation to this.

These dynamics should be understood not as isolated individual incidents but as part of broader patterns of exclusion, unmet need and exploitation that shaped pathways into police contact. One such pattern identified by participants related to school exclusions. Behaviours associated with SEND (such as impulsivity, overwhelm, bolting, sensory distress or misreading social cues) were reported as often being interpreted as misconduct issues within education settings rather than as indicators of unmet need. Consequent exclusions or persistent absences, sometimes associated with missing episodes, were noted to increase the likelihood of children coming to police attention in contexts of harm or moments of crisis.

Participants also highlighted the national issue of long waits for autism/ADHD assessments (Children’s Commissioner for England, 2024) and the resultant pattern of children reaching police contact, custody or court without a diagnosis, limiting recognition of vulnerability and constraining diversion options.

The transition to adulthood was also described by participants as a particularly critical point, with neurodivergent children ‘falling between’ children’s and adult services. They highlighted how these children’s developmental profiles rarely align with age-based changes in criminal justice thresholds and service eligibility, undermining continuity of child-centred support.

These findings resonate with wider evidence highlighting gaps in police understanding of neurodiversity and the need for adapted, developmentally appropriate practice. Robin-D’Cruz, (2023), for example, documents significant challenges in police engagement with neurodivergent children, including inconsistent recognition of need, communication barriers and heightened risk of criminalisation. Similar issues are also identified by children and young people themselves when

reflecting on police encounters (Allnock et al., 2026a), while – in response to recognition of these issues – the University of East London’s (2025) *Policing with Compassion* guide sets out neurodiversity-informed principles for improving police and multi-agency interactions, emphasising relational approaches, communication adjustments and reducing escalation.

Some examples of proactive police responses to these issues were identified within this study. One police participant, who described diagnostic uncertainty as a key barrier to offering the right support, shared how they were trialling funding of assessments in their force:

“Through the Violence Reduction Partnership, we are just in the process of a trial of paying for certain young people to have assessments for autism, ADHD because we recognise that waiting lists in our region are so long” (Policing: VRU participant).

Other participants shared examples of forces that had begun implementing sensory-aware custody adaptations, supported by occupational therapist input, or were trialling tools such as the Autism Alert Card²⁶ to support communication with neurodivergent children. Others had introduced targeted neurodiversity training, including for hotspot patrol teams with high contact with children. Participants felt that such developments could reduce escalation and improve engagement, demonstrating that inequities are not inevitable when tailored approaches are embedded.

5.5 Gendered disparities

Gendered disparities in safeguarding and policing were primarily identified in relation to harm type and to assumptions about who is positioned as a suspect or victim of harm. Across stakeholder discussions, participants described consistent patterns in which boys were more readily viewed as instigators of aggression or exploitation, while girls were more easily categorised as victims, or, conversely, their victimisation was discounted when it did not fit expected gendered narratives:

“Girls’ involvement in exploitation is so easy for people to dismiss. If she’s angry or acting out, it gets seen as attitude...not harm. And boys almost never get seen as victims, even when the signs are obvious” (VCS participant).

These assumptions were seen to directly shape thresholds for concern, the pathways children were referred into and the extent to which their vulnerability was formally recognised. Participants described referrals as heavily gendered by harm type, with some reporting that around 85% of CCE referrals were boys and 85% of CSE referrals were girls. They cautioned that this distribution does not reflect the complexity of girls’ experiences of CCE or boys’ experiences of CSE.

These insights are consistent with wider evidence showing that gender strongly influences how vulnerability is interpreted and how behaviour is read, shaping protection and enforcement responses. Research highlights that such assumptions can obscure girls’ experiences of certain types of harm (such as criminal exploitation) and reinforce tendencies to view boys as inherently aggressive, aligning with broader patterns of adultification identified in the literature (Beckett & Lloyd, 2022; Rice et al., 2025; Williams, 2018).

Gendered assumptions were also observed to shape police responses to violence in children’s intimate and peer relationships. Stalking between children, an issue noted to be on the increase, was cited as a key example of this. Participants shared that cases of girls stalking boys were not always treated as sufficiently risky, while attempts to secure protections for girls against male perpetrators were sometimes met with hesitancy when boys had no prior criminal record.

²⁶ See more information on these and other similar initiatives: [Alert Card Schemes | National Police Autism Association](#)

Non-policing participants described cases where girls' resistance or defensive violence in abusive relationships was recorded by police as primary offending, limiting access to protective multi-agency processes.

Non-policing participants also identified distinctive risks for trans and gender nonconforming children. They reported concerns that some offenders exploited a perception that police may be less likely to stop and search gender expansive or trans adolescents, increasing opportunities for coercion or exploitation:

"Those children would have been deliberately targeted to carry packages, to carry weapons and things, because there's a perception the police are less likely to stop and search them...because the police will be anxious about...searching somebody who's trans" (VCS participant).

This form of targeting reflects how offender strategies adapt to perceived gaps or sensitivities within policing practice. These risks were felt to fall outside existing safeguarding pathways, highlighting the need for explicit inclusion of gender-diverse children within local profiles, training and multi-agency planning.

5.6 Intersectionality and compounded inequities

Both the desk-based review and the study's primary elements demonstrate the need for an intersectional lens in understanding children's experiences of inequities in policing (and, more broadly, beyond policing). Biases and assumptions around different aspects of a child's identity interplay to shape how they are seen, how their behaviour is interpreted and how systems respond to them. These intersecting dynamics can be seen across initial police contact, (multi-agency) decision-making processes, response pathways and outcomes, resulting in the sharpest harms for children whose identities place them at multiple points of disadvantage.

Participants identified several examples of intersectional discrimination. Black boys were felt to face the sharpest intersection of racialised threat perceptions, adultification and criminalisation. Their fear responses, manifestations of trauma or distress, or even their clothing or general demeanour were frequently interpreted as indicators of aggression or malintent, resulting in behavioural management and enforcement-led responses, with limited (if any) attention to their safeguarding needs. Such punitive and escalatory responses were observed to be exacerbated by the misinterpretation of neurodivergent communication needs, such as processing delays or sensory overload, which were often interpreted as acts of deliberate defiance.

Black and Mixed Heritage girls were observed to be viewed (and discriminated against) through a dual lens of adultification and sexualisation, which resulted in experiences of exploitation or harmful sexual encounters being overlooked or minimised, through narratives of 'choice' or assumed behavioural or relational dynamics. This minimisation of harm and overlooking of vulnerability could be compounded for girls with autism or ADHD, whose masking could be interpreted as indicators of minimal distress or the absence of harm.

5.7 Data and inequity

Across the desk-based review and primary research elements, a core systemic issue shaping inequitable safeguarding outcomes was the absence, inconsistency or fragmentation of key demographic and vulnerability data.

Participants consistently reported that ethnicity and SEND/neurodivergence data were frequently missing, incomplete or inaccurately recorded in police case files, custody systems, intelligence databases and multi-agency notes; patterns were also identified in wider critiques of policing data (HMICFRS, 2023). This picture is reflected in the force-level survey findings, which showed that 80% (n=16) of forces routinely monitor data on ethnicity, and only one quarter (n=5) do so in relation to SEND/neurodivergence (see Figure 6.2). These gaps have three major implications that cut across all the inequity themes in this chapter:

Reduced visibility of inequities: Missing or inconsistent demographic and needs data obscures patterns of disproportionality and misrecognition. Where ethnicity, SEND or gender identity are absent from records, inequities remain hidden and therefore unchallenged. This is especially consequential for children at the intersection of multiple identities, whose compounded vulnerabilities become statistically invisible.

Weakened safeguarding and operational decision-making: Without reliable information on ethnicity, SEND or communication needs, frontline officers often enter encounters without essential context, increasing the likelihood of misinterpretation and escalation. Multi-agency partners also receive incomplete information, reinforcing narrow or biased understandings of risk and vulnerability.

Limited ability to monitor, diagnose and improve practice: Force-level survey responses acknowledged that although some disproportionality was visible (for example, in stop and search), the absence of robust linked datasets limited their ability to diagnose underlying drivers or evaluate the impact of improvement efforts. As one respondent noted:

“The primary challenge is the IT [information technology] infrastructure...is limited, meaning interrogation of data is difficult and reliant on analysts...in some cases, the under-recording of ethnicity can lead to a dataset that cannot be entirely relied upon for its accuracy” (Force survey participant).

This constraint was compounded by inconsistent recording practices across police and wider partner teams and systems, including response, custody, public protection and youth justice, which further fragment the overall data picture. Together, these limitations make it difficult to track outcomes for minoritised groups, including children from minoritised ethnicities, those with SEND/neurodivergence and those at the victim–suspect overlap, or to determine whether targeted initiatives were having the intended effect.

5.8 How can these disparities be addressed?

The evidence across this study shows that inequities in safeguarding and policing are not inevitable; they stem from identifiable practices, thresholds and assumptions and can therefore be changed. Addressing these disparities requires a shift from reactive, enforcement-led responses to consistent, child-centred, developmentally appropriate and context-informed practice. The mechanisms that produced the inequities described in earlier sections of this chapter point directly to the levers for improvement.

The actions outlined below would represent a meaningful shift toward more equitable, proportionate and child-centred safeguarding practice by directly addressing the differential treatment and outcomes experienced by minoritised ethnic children, neurodivergent children and those engaged as suspects rather than victims. These levers should be read in conjunction with the practice principles outlined in Chapter 8.

Box 5.1: Addressing disparities

Reframing first contact and initial categorisation

- Applying child-first decision-making consistently, including for children initially identified as suspects, to reduce differential treatment
- Ensuring early vulnerability screening, drawing on contextual, developmental and trauma indicators, to prevent the under-identification of need in marginalised groups
- Avoiding treating a lack of disclosure as evidence that coercion is absent, particularly for children whose experiences of harm, communication needs and/or mistrust of services may affect their propensity to share what has happened to them

Challenging adultification, stereotyping and credibility biases

- Embedding anti-adultification and anti-racist training for all frontline officers and call-handlers
- Requiring the explicit recording of age and developmental stage, rather than appearance or assumed maturity
- Introducing routine professional curiosity prompts in forms and triage processes that require officers to consider vulnerability before culpability

Improving recognition of and response to neurodivergence and trauma

- Training officers to differentiate fear, overload and shutdown from non-compliance
- Implementing developmentally and sensory-adapted practices in stop and search, custody and interviews
- Ensuring trusted adults (teachers, youth workers, SEND specialists) are invited into police interactions wherever possible
- Systematically recording communication, sensory and developmental needs at every point of contact

Balancing accountability and welfare

- Adopting context-informed approaches that recognise violence as often linked to coercion, fear or exploitation
- Pairing enforcement with welfare planning, ensuring that protective action does not overshadow a child's victimisation or unmet need

Recognising concurrent perpetration and victimisation

- Issuing force-wide guidance requiring dual-status assessment for any child appearing as both suspect and (suspected) victim (and providing appropriate infrastructure for recording this)
- Using trusted VCS partners to contextualise complex cases

Addressing siloed responses

- Building integrated pathways where risk and harm are assessed holistically and not limited to the parameters of any one police unit (CSE or youth violence, for example)
- Requiring cross-unit reviews of all children appearing in both CCE and CSE datasets
- Ensuring cases involving multiple harm types are jointly owned across relevant teams

Data quality, linkage and visibility

- Introducing mandatory recording of self-defined ethnicity, SEND status, known communication needs and interpreter requirements
- Linking data across response, custody, public protection and youth justice to show full trajectories
- Monitoring disproportionality across all harm types, including stop and search, weapon possession, missing episodes and custody outcomes

5.9 Concluding observations

This chapter demonstrates clear and consistent evidence of racial, gendered, disability-related and other structural disparities in current safeguarding and child protection responses to children involved in violence. These inequities are not isolated or incidental; they arise through identifiable mechanisms that operate at multiple stages of children's engagement with police and statutory services.

Across all aspects of the study, the same dynamics recur: Children are seen through the lens of race, gender and/or neurotypical behavioural expectations; their communication and developmental needs are missed; early narratives shape later decisions; documentation embeds bias; and fragmented pathways mean some children and some forms of harm are invisible while others are over-policed.

Crucially, these patterns show that inequities are system-produced, not child-produced. They reflect how systems interpret identity, behaviour and context rather than the characteristics of children themselves. Cross-cutting data weaknesses reproduce and entrench these inequities. When key characteristics remain unrecorded or siloed, children most affected by bias become missing from the data, limiting accountability and constraining system-wide learning. Addressing data quality and completeness is, therefore, foundational to reducing inequities in safeguarding and policing practice.

The measures outlined above provide a starting point in signalling what a different safeguarding landscape would look like: one in which:

- Children's behaviour is interpreted in context
- Race, gender, neurodivergence and other biographical or socio-ecological factors are understood as contextual factors that shape experiences of risk rather than being characteristics that make a child or their behaviours risky
- Multi-agency pathways are connected rather than fragmented
- Vulnerability is recognised wherever it sits, including in children who harm others

Implementing these changes would begin to address the inequities documented throughout this chapter and would move policing and safeguarding partners closer to a child-centred, proportionate and equitable model of practice.

Chapter 6: Barriers to ‘best practice’

6.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the first part of RQ3: *What are the barriers and facilitators to ‘best practice’ safeguarding and protection within policing?* Drawing on findings from across all elements of the study, we examine how barriers operate across four key interrelated domains: Individual police–child interactions, policing structures and cultures, inter-agency working and wider systems infrastructure. Facilitators to ‘best practice’ are integrated into the exploration of what ‘best practice’ looks like and how this can be consistently embedded, which is presented in Chapters 8 and 9 of the report.

Figure 6.1: Barrier domains



6.2 Individual police–child interactions

As explored below, the first set of barriers identified as inhibiting the exercise of ‘best practice’ safeguarding responses were those that operated at the level of individual police–child interactions. These fell into three main categories: Police knowledge, skills and attitudes; the nature and context of interactions; and the legacy of the loss of trust in policing.

6.2.1 Police knowledge, skills and attitude

As outlined in Chapter 4, study findings show considerable variation in the skills and behaviours of officers engaging with children, with the expertise observed in specialist roles frequently absent among first-response officers. While recognising that not all officers can be specialists in child-centred policing, both policing and non-policing participants reported observed discomfort and uncertainty among many first-response officers about engaging with children. Similar themes have been identified in other research, including that which captures children’s own accounts of feeling misunderstood, unheard and/or poorly engaged with by police (Allnock et al., 2022; Allnock et al., 2026a; Beckett et al., 2015).

This absence of soft relationship skills was observed to be at odds with the engagement practices required for children to feel safe to share what is going on in their lives, thereby constraining the identification of safeguarding needs. This lack of skill was identified as being linked to a range of factors, including a lack of experience in engaging with children, a lack of training in child- and youth-centred working practices, and a lack of understanding regarding the presentation of and response to trauma.

As highlighted in Chapter 5, misinterpretation of neurodivergent communication can also impact capacity to recognise a child's safeguarding needs. Officers unfamiliar with a child's communication profile were reported to sometimes misread shutdown, overwhelm or dysregulation as defiance or non-compliance, leading to escalated control. Fear of saying the wrong thing was also observed to lead some officers to cut interactions short or avoid deeper engagement, even when this was required in the situation (for example, when eliciting a victim's account of harm).

Some participants, including police, observed that for some officers, the absence of child-centred engagement sometimes went beyond a lack of skills or experience to a lack of respect for (older) children and a reluctance to engage with them. As one policing participant working in a specialist child/youth role noted:

"Most officers roll their eyes... They don't want to deal with kids" (Policing: Child/youth).

While stark, this account may also reflect wider organisational and practice challenges identified in VKPP research, which highlights variation in officers' relational skills and emphasises the need for more consistent, respectful and empathetic engagement with victims. While recognising confidence and capability issues at the individual level, that study also suggests that what is experienced as disengagement or dismissal may, in some cases, also be shaped by uncertainty, competing demands and limited confidence in responding to vulnerability, particularly in frontline contexts (Denyer et al., 2023).

A narrow focus on presenting behaviours and an absence of professional curiosity were also observed to act as barriers to safeguarding-led practice; themes also repeatedly identified in other research, inspections and LCSPRs. The importance of how a child experiences first responses, in terms of opening up or closing down opportunities to identify and respond to need, is also well documented in the existing evidence base, as is the importance of adequately preparing officers for these emotionally complex, developmentally sensitive encounters (Beckett et al., 2015; Clayton et al., 2024; College of Policing, 2025d; Whitehead, 2026; Wright, 2026).

6.2.2 Contexts of engagement

Both police and non-police participants identified how the unpredictable, crisis-based, fast-paced and cognitively demanding nature of many frontline engagements impacted the police's ability to adopt a safeguarding-led approach:

"They've just got so much to think about" (YJS participant).

Officers were observed to have to make rapid judgments in environments characterised by limited information, competing operational demands and elevated arousal; conditions that often resulted in swift, physical safety-oriented decisions rather than relational or vulnerability-driven engagements. While officers may understand the importance of safeguarding-led and trauma-informed approaches, urgency, self-protection and cognitive overload can limit their ability to put these into practice in frontline encounters:

"I think sometimes, when they get sent to those types of incidents, because there's so much pressure on them to get to the next job... when they get to a child and a young person, they're less interested in what they have to say, the voice of the child" (VCS participant).

6.2.3 Police–community relationships

Deep-rooted mistrust – particularly among minoritised communities and families with negative prior experiences of policing – was observed to significantly inhibit early safeguarding engagement. This is something recognised by police themselves, with two out of five forces (42%; n=8) that responded to the force-level survey identifying mistrust of the police as one of the top five challenges in progressing a safeguarding-led response. Non-policing participants also noted how families may avoid reporting concerns or sharing early indicators of exploitation or violence because they expect to be dismissed, stereotyped or criminalised. As one participant paraphrasing some of the families they work with said:

“We don’t go to the police...we sort it ourselves” (Education participant).

Participants linked this mistrust to racialised stop and search, the adultification of Black children, insensitive communication and escalatory responses, practices which can also result in failure to identify children’s needs. These experiences create community-level distrust, not just individual distrust. As a result, emerging risks can remain within the community, becoming visible to statutory agencies only when situations deteriorate into crisis. Without sustained trust building through respectful communication, trauma-informed practice and partnership with community organisations, children at risk remain less visible to safeguarding pathways.

6.3 Policing structures and cultures

Organisational conditions strongly shape how officers understand safeguarding, what they prioritise and which behaviours they default to during encounters with children. As explored below, study findings show that workforce structures, performance incentives, training gaps, cultural norms and supervision systems can collectively reinforce offence-led practice and reduce safeguarding capability.

6.3.1 Workforce composition

Several workforce composition issues were identified as being barriers to a consistent safeguarding-led policing response to children involved in violence. First of these was the loss of non-crisis-based engagement roles, such as school officers and community policing officers, across many forces. Where present, as in the Surrey Police case study outlined in Chapter 7, these roles were observed to play a significant role in relationship building and fear reduction, consequently opening up opportunities to identify needs and respond to harms.

Similar implications were observed regarding staff turnover within specialist teams. Police participants, including those in the case studies, identified several linked factors contributing to this, most notably a perceived lack of recognition of the specialism and expertise of these roles, which was felt to manifest not only in how they were viewed in wider force ecosystems but also in an absence of career progression routes, meaning good staff (and the expertise, relationships and knowledge they held) were unnecessarily lost.

An inexperienced workforce was also cited as a key barrier to safeguarding-led practice, particularly by those with oversight policing roles and more experienced (ex)officers who took part in the stakeholder consultations. These participants reflected how many officers, particularly those in frontline response roles, were relatively recent recruits to policing, lacking experience in engaging with children and dealing with complexity:

“A lot of our newer officers, they’re young...their life experience and what they’re exposed to is quite small” (Police participant: Early intervention/prevention).

The effects of this were felt to be compounded by the loss of more experienced colleagues who could model professional curiosity, developmental interpretation and confident decision-making in complex or challenging situations. High turnover and limited mentoring capacity were observed to result in early-career officers often becoming the experienced reference point for others, creating variability in how vulnerability is understood and how complex cases are handled.

6.3.2 Inadequate supervisory and support structures

Both policing and non-policing participants identified a lack of reflective supervision in policing, with consequent implications for safeguarding-led practice. Supervisory time was observed to be focused on tasking, throughput and performance, leaving little or no protected space for reflective learning, emotional processing or developmental support. Supervision was also reported as being absent for some police. A social work participant in a focus group, for example, recounted a police officer telling them, in response to a discussion about reflective supervision:

“We have none of that...We don’t actually even have any supervision” (Local authority participant).

Both policing and non-policing participants also noted that supervision often occurs only when something goes wrong, with limited opportunities to explore uncertainty, emotional impact or professional judgement. Research literature and inspection evidence align with this picture, linking the absence of reflective structures to poorer decision-making, emotional strain and reliance on intuition rather than on supported professional practice (Langhoff et al., 2024).

A key aspect of a trauma-informed approach is recognising the trauma that police themselves may bring into and/or experience in the role and the potential for resultant re-traumatisation or vicarious trauma. Police officers shared examples of experiencing significant violence when on duty, witnessing suicides and multiple forms of abuse; noting the significant impacts these experiences could have on their wellbeing and consequent ability to act in safeguarding-led trauma-informed ways.

Some examples were shared about reflective spaces or quasi-clinical supervision being used to good effect, but this was not the norm. This aligns with wider research findings on policing in contexts of harm, including those from Operation Soteria,²⁷ for example. There was clear support for the rolling out of such practices, by both policing and non-policing participants, not only for police’s personal wellbeing but also in relation to their ability to hold tension and difficulty without unnecessary escalation resulting from unprocessed trauma.

6.3.3 Response structures and safeguarding remits

As outlined in Chapter 3, considerable variation exists in how forces respond to violence involving children, including where responsibility for this lies and what policies and procedures govern responses. This not only determines workflow but also fundamentally shapes the interpretive lens through which children’s experiences of violence are understood, with gendered and racial disparities observable within this, as well as harm-type variations (as documented in Chapter 5).

Strategic policing participants particularly highlighted how a lack of an integrated response structure undermined the ability to provide a consistent safeguarding-led response to all types of children and all types of harm. These variations were compounded by the absence of a clear safeguarding lead role in some forces, with only 60% (n=12) of respondents to the force-level survey identifying such a role.

²⁷ Operation Soteria is an umbrella programme delivering the National Operating Model for Rape and Serious Sexual Offence investigations across forces in England and Wales.

Participants described this as an “*internal postcode lottery*”, in which the response a child receives varies significantly depending on which individual or unit attends, the training they have had, and both force and unit-based priorities and outcome measures. Case study accounts and national inspection evidence mirrored this pattern, highlighting uneven capabilities across response, neighbourhoods and specialist teams (Ofsted et al., 2024a). Fragmented pathways make it harder for officers to observe consistent good practice or access expert support, reinforcing variation and limiting organisational learning.

6.3.4 Force leadership

In the stakeholder consultation phase of the study, reflections were shared on how significantly the leadership of a force could shift its agenda; undermining or facilitating safeguarding-led practice. Some police and VRU participants in the professional stakeholder consultation, for example, reported a marked shift away from prioritising preventative diversionary practice towards enforcement-led responses following a change in Chief Constable, with the opposite also being observed to be true.

6.3.5 Prioritisation of enforcement over safeguarding

Broader concerns about the prioritisation of enforcement over safeguarding emerged from both the desk-based review and primary research elements of the study. Both policing and non-policing participants across both the stakeholder consultation and case studies described policing cultures that privilege enforcement and measurable outputs - arrests, response times, crime outcomes - over relational safeguarding or safeguarding-based outcomes, which may be harder to capture. Safeguarding was often felt to be treated as an “afterthought,” with performance regimes incentivising arrest and productivity rather than curiosity or contextual interpretation:

“It’s all about performance, unfortunately” (Ex-policing/VRU participant).

Responses to a question in the force-level survey about what would help with challenges to safeguarding children known/suspected of perpetrating violence contained similar themes:

“There is a real lack of recognition of the importance of the NRM for children suspected of drug dealing,...especially in the company of adults. There are cultural barriers, where police are keen to seek judicial outcomes rather than safeguard the child and view them as exploited victims” (Force-level survey respondent).

“[A] lack of understanding about custody processes and alternatives to arrest and the safeguarding and support available outside of custody. Trauma-informed practice is well understood in specialist teams but not across the wider force” (Force-level survey respondent).

Professional stakeholders and case study participants noted that this was influenced by national and local directives to “crack down on violent crime” (Metropolitan Police Service, 2025:14), driving the prioritisation of enforcement and offence-led measures of success. They also observed that it was affected by perceived tensions between safeguarding and justice considerations.

Survey findings reinforce this message. One in three respondents (33%) to the EBP survey question about challenges hindering effective practice in reducing children’s involvement in

violence selected “*tensions between safeguarding-led and justice-led priorities*” as a key challenge.²⁸

Though asked specifically in response to safeguarding children known/suspected of perpetrating harm (see Table 6.1), two out of five forces (42%; n=8) that responded to the force-level survey selected “*tensions between safeguarding and criminal justice considerations*” as one of the top five challenges to safeguarding this cohort, with just over one-third (37%; n=7) also identifying legal or procedural limitations as a key challenge.

Table 6.1: Key challenges in safeguarding children who are known/suspected of perpetrating harm (force-level survey)

	No. of forces	% of forces
Resource constraints (e.g. staffing, time, funding)	13	68.4
Fragmented multi-agency coordination	11	57.9
Inconsistent or insufficient training across the workforce	10	52.6
Lack of trauma-informed or child-centred practice	9	47.4
Mistrust of the police	8	42.1
Tensions between safeguarding and criminal justice considerations	8	42.1
Legal or procedural limitations (e.g. thresholds, custody arrangements)	7	36.8
Poor data quality or a fragmented intelligence system	6	31.6
Lack of professional curiosity	6	31.6
Inadequate policy guidance or strategic direction	3	15.8
Other: Not seeing children as children – only seeing them as offenders	1	5.3

Police practice, such as that demonstrated in the BTP case study in Chapter 7, clearly demonstrates that safeguarding and enforcement can “*exist side by side, rather than in opposition*”, including where children are known to be or suspected of causing harm to others. It also demonstrates, however, the challenge of embedding this understanding on a force-wide basis.

6.3.6 Broader policing cultures

Even in forces with specialist models, such as those outlined in the case studies, wider cultural change was identified as an ongoing challenge and a key barrier to embedding safeguarding-led practice. Efforts to shift culture were viewed as fragile and heavily dependent on individual advocates of alternative safeguarding-led working practices rather than on organisational commitments or expectations.

Reflecting on practice, such as that outlined in Chapter 5, non-policing participants and some police participants also, described how organisational cultures that fail to challenge racism, discriminatory language or adultification allow these patterns to continue informally within case discussions and everyday communications. These implicit norms shape what feels professionally acceptable, what is challenged and how officers interpret children’s behaviour, reinforcing enforcement-led responses, even when policy frameworks emphasise safeguarding-led, child-centred practice.

²⁸ Presented as one of a suite of response options regarding “*challenges within your role that have hindered effective practice for reducing children’s involvement in violence*”, with respondents advised to select all that apply.

More broadly, both police and non-police participants highlighted cultural norms within policing that reward confidence, control and decisiveness while regarding emotional openness, collaboration or 'softer' relational skills as signs of weakness or inefficiency. Yet these skills – alongside those of professional curiosity and openness to constructive challenge – were repeatedly identified in the professional stakeholder consultations and case studies as being key to identifying safeguarding needs. This messaging is also strongly emphasised in the existing evidence base (Research in Practice et al., 2026; Yeo et al., 2024). Although also applicable in the context of children being engaged with as victims of harm, the absence of these skills was noted to be particularly apparent when children are being engaged with in the context of known or suspected offending.

6.3.7 Insufficient training

Reflecting on the insufficient demonstration of safeguarding-led practice, particularly in first-response encounters, both police and non-police participants identified a lack of adequate training and continuing professional development (CPD) as key barriers to safeguarding-led practice. Participants reported that many officers feel underprepared and lack confidence in engaging with complex safeguarding scenarios, contributing to avoidance or defaulting to offence-led framing. Many tied this to lack of training:

“I don't think they're equipped at all, to be honest with you. I think there's no specialist training in relation to dealing with children and young people” (VCS participant).

As illustrated in Table 6.1, half (53%; n=10) of forces that responded to the force-level survey also identified “*inconsistent or insufficient training across the workforce*” as one of their top five challenges to safeguarding children involved in violence. Training was also the most frequently cited solution (n=8) in the follow-up open-text question about what would help address the challenges they had identified. However, as illustrated in Table 6.2, this was variably implemented, with training for frontline officers delivered less frequently than for specialist teams, an interesting finding in light of the demonstrated significance of and documented concerns about first encounters.

LCSPRs and inspection reports also repeatedly note the need for training, including in multi-agency contexts. The stakeholder consultations and case studies also highlighted the potential benefits of cross-agency training, particularly in developing a shared understanding of safeguarding roles and responsibilities and common principles of working (such as trauma-informed, child-centred practice). As Table 6.2 shows, multi-agency training was only implemented on an ongoing basis in half of the forces that responded to the force-level survey.

Table 6.2: In-force initiatives that have taken place to support officers to understand and implement their safeguarding duties in relation to children suspected/known to be perpetrating violence (n=19)

	% of valid responses			
	Ongoing	Ad hoc/ one off	Not taken place	Don't know
Training of specialist teams	73.7	15.8	0	10.5
Training of frontline officers / broader force	47.4	42.1	5.3	5.3
Multi-agency training	52.6	31.6		15.8
Internal awareness-raising campaign	61.1	22.2	5.6	11.1
Guidance on making safeguarding referrals	84.2	15.8	0	0
Access to specialist in-force advice	68.4	26.3	0	5.3
Access to external safeguarding specialist	42.1	42.1	5.3	10.5

6.3.8 Police data systems

Inadequate data infrastructure, capture and usage was a consistent theme across all elements of the research. Though most forces responding to the force-level survey reported capturing data on violence involving children, this varied considerably by type of data (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3), and two out of five (40%) respondents noted that information systems need improvement to address data gaps in responding to this issue.

Particularly notable data absences exist around the victimisation/perpetration overlap, SEND/neurodivergence and racial disproportionality, as well as demographic information about stop and search and possession of a weapon (as outlined in Chapters 4 and 5). The absence of such data was repeatedly identified as hindering understanding of the specific nature and patterns of violence involving children, as well as patterns of disproportionality, and weaknesses and gaps in policing responses to these.

As outlined in Chapter 7, case study participants expressed particular concern about the ability to capture the impact of safeguarding-led initiatives in existing data systems that prioritise 'hard data' over 'soft' outcomes. This evidence was noted to be particularly critical in a climate of decreasing resources and enforcement-led measures of success.

Figure 6.2: Types of data routinely monitored by forces in relation to violence involving children

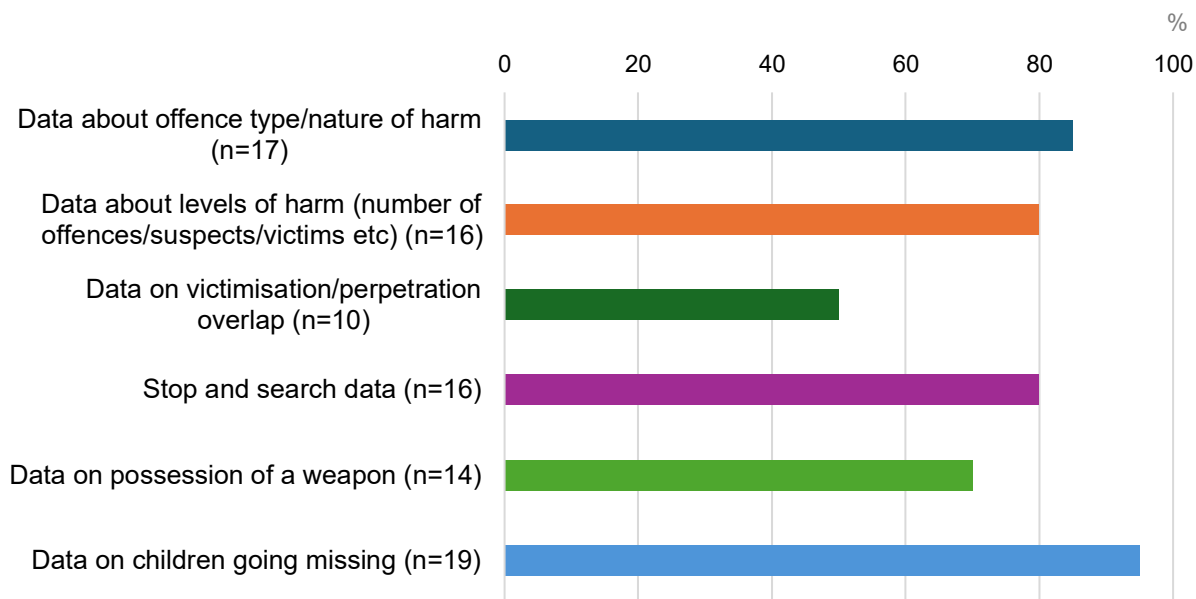
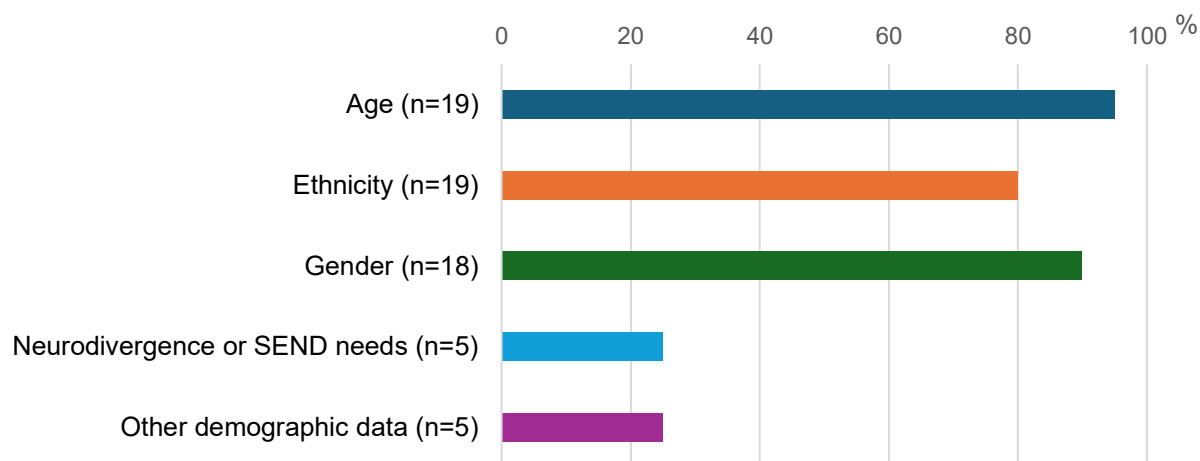


Figure 6.3: Demographic data routinely monitored by forces on the scale and nature of violence by children



6.4 Interagency working

Barriers to safeguarding-led policing arise not from policing alone but also from the wider safeguarding environment (how agencies share information, assess risks and coordinate response plans), which can limit capacity for early protection and intervention, even when individual officers act with good intent.

While strong interagency working relationships were identified as a facilitator of safeguarding-led practice, by some police in the stakeholder consultations and in some of the force-level survey responses, interagency working was more often identified as a barrier to timely and effective safeguarding-led responses to children involved in violence.

Fragmented multi-agency coordination was the second most frequently selected challenge to safeguarding children who are known/suspected of perpetrating harm in the force-level service, with over half of forces (58%; n=11) identifying this as a challenge.

Both police and non-police professionals described an information landscape that is fragmented, inconsistent and often unfit for safeguarding. Core partners (social care, MASH, VRUs, education and police) were observed to often work in parallel rather than through a coordinated system:

“It becomes a banging back and forth...when it’s actually a critical intervention moment”
(Police participant: Other).

VCS participants raised concerns that information exchanges with police were predominantly one-way, with them routinely being asked to provide intelligence to police but rarely receiving feedback or updates in return. These types of practices were recognised by some police participants, but some police participants also identified a lack of information-sharing with them:

“We had an issue with our local council, so [county1] and [county 2], and they didn’t share information, and we had an issue with a kid with county lines and [city area]. Council had loads of intel on that child, but we hadn’t been made aware, and we couldn’t access it, and they didn’t share” (Police participant: Child/youth).

While recognising the need for care in the sharing of sensitive information, this lack of information-sharing was noted to result in incomplete information at critical decision points, an inability to see repeated incidents as part of an escalating trajectory of harm and lost opportunities for timely safeguarding interventions.

Linked to this, participants (particularly those from the VCS) noted how non-statutory partners (those who know the child’s communication needs, triggers and everyday context) were often excluded from strategy discussions and multi-agency forums. Participants who reported this linked it to a failure to recognise the important role they could play and/or a wider lack of value placed on the work of non-statutory services. Their absence was observed to reduce the quality and accuracy of decision-making, as assessments lacked the relational and contextual insight necessary to understand a child’s behaviour or risk profile.

Both police and non-police participants described wide variation across local authorities within the same force catchment area in terms of thresholds, escalation routes, safeguarding structures and early help pathways. The same behaviour or level of risk was observed to trigger very different responses depending on geography:

“Every local authority does it differently...there’s always a missing link” (VCS participant).

National policing policy insights echo this, noting that SYV, child exploitation and safeguarding responsibilities are configured differently in different areas of England and Wales, with strategic bodies (such as VRUs, community safety partnerships and safeguarding boards) often prioritising different agendas. These structural inconsistencies mean children receive uneven safeguarding offers shaped by local system design rather than by need.

A lack of synergy across different agency systems was also identified as inhibiting a holistic safeguarding-led response. Key challenges identified in relation to this included:

- Information stored in disconnected systems, meaning crucial knowledge (for example, around trauma history, SEND needs, exploitation indicators) is inaccessible to those who need it
- Loss of information at transition points, such as school moves, force boundaries, cross-local authority transfers or custody entry/exit
- Inability to detect cumulative harm, as missing episodes, mental-health crises and peer violence appear incident by incident rather than as part of an escalating trajectory

- Procedural adaptations by practitioners (under-referring, over-referring, duplicating processes) because they cannot rely on information systems to support shared understanding

These design features mean the system responds primarily to incidents, rather than having a holistic understanding of a child and their needs, limiting timely safeguarding-based intervention and increasing reliance on enforcement.

6.5 Wider systems and infrastructure-level barriers

System-level barriers arise from the structural, policy, resourcing and regulatory conditions that shape what police and other safeguarding partners can realistically deliver. These upstream constraints influence operational decisions, limit early intervention and, at times, channel children into punitive rather than protective pathways.

6.5.1 Resource shortages

In the force-level survey, resource constraints were the most frequently selected barrier to safeguarding children who are known/suspected of perpetrating harm, with 68% (n=13) of forces identifying this in their top five challenges. It was also a dominant theme in the professional stakeholder consultation, raised by both police and non-police participants. Limited staffing capacity within forces and rising demand were observed to leave police operating in crisis response mode, with little capacity for relational work or proactive risk and need identification. While specialist units, such as those described in the case studies, reported greater capacity for proactive safeguarding of children involved in violence, this was also not without resource constraints.

Resource constraints in partner statutory agencies, combined with a lack of investment in youth provision and voluntary and community services, were observed to further reduce safeguarding capacity, with delays in engaging external partners and fewer onward referral options available when need is identified:

“We can’t do anything like we did previously...the money’s just not there” (VCS participant).

6.5.2 High thresholds and crisis-based interventions

Both police and non-police participants described a system that predominantly mobilises after serious harm has occurred. Early referrals – based on emerging concerning behaviour, peer associations or mental health indicators – were often not acted upon until an arrest, injury or missing episode triggered statutory involvement. It was the recognition of these missed opportunities that prompted the set-up of many of the case study initiatives outlined in Chapter 7, which were designed to capture children who fell between the gaps (BTP) and make previously invisible children visible (Northamptonshire and Greater Manchester Police [GMP]).

Professional participants from across a range of sectors described thresholds – especially within children’s social care – as being too high, too narrowly defined and overly incident focused. Police participants reported identifying vulnerability but feeling powerless to escalate due to statutory support thresholds not being met. Early indicators of exploitation or contextual risk were observed to often fail to trigger statutory involvement until serious harm occurred. These themes were also identified in LCSPRs and inspection reports. As one participant reflected:

“I know this child is being exploited...then a week later, they’re arrested or stabbed” (VCS participant).

Some police policy/strategy participants emphasised that SYV frequently sits outside mainstream safeguarding pathways and is triaged through VRUs or criminal justice processes instead of MASH. They observed how this structural split creates gaps where children “fall through thresholds” because cumulative harm is not consistently recognised as grounds for protective action.

6.5.3 Legal and policy frameworks

Strategic participants from both policing and non-policing backgrounds highlighted how legal and policy frameworks, even where well-intended, could serve as barriers to safeguarding-led policing practice. The example outlined in Chapter 4 of mandatory knife possession disposals resulting in differing outcomes for children in different forces was cited as a key example of this.

Strategic police participants also identified how delays in case progression could result in offences committed as children being heard in adult courts once a young person turns 18, despite guidance from the Magistrates’ Association (2024) and Sentencing Council (2017) emphasising the importance of taking account of a person’s age, maturity and circumstances at the time of the offence.

Broader concerns were also expressed about lack of consistency in policy direction, both over time and between different government departments:

“We [have] created quite a plotted landscape, and so we don’t know what recommendations we have to do. Until we have consistency of approach and consistency of what good looks like, I think that’s going to be a real challenge...[we need to] find a way to hold people to account but also still be truly child-centred” (Police participant: National policy/strategy).

6.5.4 Geographic inequity

Commissioning arrangements, service capacity and access to specialist support were observed to vary substantially between areas, creating what some participants termed an *“injustice by geography”*. A child may receive comprehensive multi-agency support in one locality, while a comparable child elsewhere receives only minimal or reactive intervention:

“In one town the speech and language therapist informed the [police] assessment; in another, we didn’t have that at all” (YJS participant).

Local variation in safeguarding teams, neurodevelopmental support, child and adolescent mental health services, and input from clinical roles and exploitation specialists shapes diversion pathways and the depth of assessment. Police participants noted that in some districts, they could call on youth workers or early help immediately, whereas in others, there were waiting lists, unclear referral routes or no provision at all. This uneven landscape produces inequitable outcomes, not because children differ but because the system around them does.

6.6 Concluding observations

Study findings show that barriers to best -practice safeguarding do not sit at a single point of failure but accumulate across four interconnected levels. At the child–police interaction point, a lack of relational policing is observable. This was linked to a series of knowledge and skills gaps and the fast-paced, crisis-driven nature of many encounters, which can limit officers’ ability to adopt and maintain a safeguarding-led response.

Organisationally, enforcement-led cultures, inadequate training, limited reflective supervision, a young and inexperienced workforce, and fragmented internal structures create highly variable safeguarding capabilities across forces and teams. Interagency challenges, such as fragmented information sharing, inconsistent pathways and crisis-triggered interventions, further constrain safeguarding-led practice, as do wider system issues relating to resource constraints and an absence of a coherent legal, policy and practice framework.

Chapter 7: Case Studies and practice example

7.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 2, five forces were involved in the case study and practice example element of the research. Surrey, GMP, Northamptonshire and BTP took part as case study sites, while Cleveland submitted a practice example.

Between them, these case studies and practice examples span several key areas of policing identified as priority issues in the other elements of the research: Prevention and early intervention work (Surrey, GMP and Northamptonshire), on-the-ground engagements (BTP) and experiences of custody (Cleveland). They embody many of the key aspects of 'best practice' identified in Chapter 8, showing, in practice, how many of the challenges and barriers identified in Chapter 6 can be overcome. The four case studies and the practice example are each explored in turn below, with common learning from across them summarised in the chapter conclusion.

7.2 Surrey police Youth Engagement Offer

7.2.1 Methodology

The Surrey case study involved a review of operational documentation about the Youth Engagement Offer provided by Surrey police, alongside interviews and focus groups with the strategic lead (n=1), youth engagement officers (n=4) and strategic leads from the multi-agency partnership (n=4). Despite the inclusion of diverse perspectives, the primary research found strong consensus on the initiative's approach and impact.

7.2.2 The approach and the difference being made

The Youth Engagement Offer is a partnership-driven initiative designed to take a whole-systems, safeguarding, trauma-informed and strengths-based approach to supporting children in the county. It is overseen by the Surrey Health Schools partnership, comprising the police, fire and rescue, and the county council. The initiative includes both universal and targeted provision, which are designed to work together to provide a holistic, preventive and early-intervention offer for children identified as being at particular risk of getting drawn into violence or other forms of offending.

The Youth Engagement Offer is delivered by 22 police youth engagement officers (YEOs), who sit within neighbourhood policing teams. The YEOs who participated in the case study estimated that, on average, 30-40% of their time was spent on universal work, with the remainder on one-to-one work with children.

Though with different focuses and modes of operation, both the universal and targeted aspects share a common underpinning: strengths-based, trauma-informed, restorative, inclusive, evidence-informed **and grounded in whole-systems partnership working**.

A key perceived impact of the approach identified by both police and non-police participants in the case study was changing engagements with, and, consequently, perceptions and experiences of, police by children. The universal offer, which includes educative inputs to year groups in schools (designed by age group, with adapted resources for children with SEND) and **time spent in schools in the absence of a crisis**, was observed to play a key role in increasing familiarity with, and decreasing barriers to engagement with, police:

“The playground walks are phenomenal. It just shows that you’re a human being...that’s key to moving that relationship” (YEO).

“We still deal with the enforcement, etcetera, but we can go in when things aren’t in crisis and offer support and another way of working and show, kind of, look, we’re not just here to arrest you” (YEO).

All participant groups noted the importance of **ensuring educative inputs were actively trauma-informed in both content and delivery** and purposively avoiding alarmist or fear-based approaches:

“It’s not going into gritty, nasty detail which children and young people don’t need to know...It’s having sensitivity about what to share, being sensitive about who is in the room” (Strategic police rep).

Where particular risks or concerns are identified about a child, either through these school-based engagements or through wider police intelligence or partner referrals, YEOs have the ability to engage in more targeted work with children, including through the use of Youth Engagement Warnings (YEWs)), which were introduced in the force in October 2025, where they deem these to be appropriate.

YEWs are voluntary, non-legally binding warnings. They are educational in nature and aimed at raising awareness and preventing escalation. Their potential application is **discussed in a meeting with the child and their family and only proceed with their consent**. They are designed to be **preventative rather than punitive, aiming to steer children away from harmful and towards positive choices through “awareness raising, accountability and access to support”**.

Anonymised police data provided in the case study showed 25 YEWs were issued from October 2025 to January 2026 for a range of issues: Most often bladed articles (n=8), youth-created indecent images (n=15), violence (aggression/conflict; n=3), hate incidents (n=2) and underage sexual contact (n=2). The **focus of work is tailored to the nature of the concern, but it is underpinned by restorative, strengths-based practice**, which often builds on foundational relational work delivered in the universal strand of the work:

“It really helps break down those barriers, and the uniform becomes less of a barrier, and they see the person behind it, which is really beneficial for us trying to have a meaningful conversation with the young person because the barriers are already down” (YEO).

As explored below, while there are challenges in demonstrating resultant outcomes from YEWs, all partners engaged in the case study felt the approach represented an ultimately more productive means of engaging with children whose behaviour was seen to be cause for concern. Key to this was the ability to **hold both accountability and potential for change in tandem, recognising that one mistake does not need to result in a negative offending trajectory**:

“We’re very clear about who we are. We never hide the fact that we’re police officers. We never hide the fact that if they commit an offence we will deal with it...But it doesn’t mean we’re out to get them. It doesn’t mean we’re the antagonist...or [that] it [has to be] an adversarial relationship. It’s, yeah, you’ve messed up. There’s going to be an outcome. We’ll put that to the side. Let’s see what we can do to help you move forward” (YEO).

“The approach is to avoid scare tactics and to focus instead on identifying and doing more of what those children and young people already do well...showing children that they can

make mistakes and still recover and do things differently and that the police can help them” (Non-policing partner).

7.2.3 Enablers, barriers and associated learning

One of the key enablers identified in the case study is that YEOs are dedicated posts, with (generally) protected time for the role's duties and exemptions from certain police duties, such as night shifts, to facilitate this. The dedicated roles are also supported by a **focused training and CPD package**. This includes training on understanding childhood and youth, practical engagement with children and young people, acceptable language, and trauma-informed practice, though participants observed that the training needed to be accompanied by the right personnel in post.

Interestingly, in a national context of waning investment in preventative policing, Surrey has **doubled the number of YEOs since the early 2020s**, following a thorough review of their role and contribution, not only in relation to the policing offer but also the wider partnership landscape. This **holistic partnership approach, the leadership shown by key individuals within it and cross-agency senior-level support were** identified as critical to the success of the offer, as was an openness to working together for the benefit of children. Schools, for example, were observed to be very receptive to familiarisation visits and educational input, while the ability to involve partners in the YEW support offer facilitated a more holistic and responsive approach.

Observable at both the strategic and operational levels, shared ownership, language and a common vision were seen as key to the success of the approach, as was a **wider system commitment to trauma-informed, strengths-based, restorative practices**.

“Trauma can be a ‘buzzword’ in many circles at the moment – they (YEOs) go beyond that” (Non-policing partner)

That is not to say that embedding the Youth Engagement Offer is without challenge, with participants noting a need to ‘hold the line’ at times in the face of pressure to ‘do otherwise’. Concerns were also expressed about the lack of appreciation and/or misunderstanding of the role within wider police ecosystems, which were felt to lack recognition of its importance and the skills required to do it.

Part of the lack of appreciation of the importance of this work was felt to be linked to difficulties in evidencing impact and outcomes. Though participants could share multiple examples of positive qualitative feedback – from parents, schools and other partners – they felt that such feedback wasn’t generally valued within a policing context that prioritises ‘hard data’ on arrests or stop-and-searches. While acknowledging the difficulty of proving causation in relation to preventative work, plans are being made to expand data capture and use, and to track longer-term outcomes from the work.

7.3 Greater Manchester Police Prevention through Prosecution, Intervention, Education and Diversion Programme

7.3.1 Methodology

The GMP case study involved a review of programme documentation provided by GMP, as well as interviews and focus groups with the programme coordinator and officers delivering the programme across different areas of Greater Manchester. Local partners’ perspectives were not directly captured in this particular case study, but the findings of unpublished 2021/22 early

programme evaluations and the 2023 JTAI (HMICFRS, 2023b) of the multi-agency response to SYV in Manchester were considered. An interview was also conducted with a Home Office representative regarding their investment in piloting the model nationally.

7.3.2 The approach and the difference being made

The Prevention through Prosecution, Intervention, Education and Diversion (PPIED) programme was first piloted in 2019 and rolled out force-wide in 2020. It was introduced in response to a realisation that almost three-quarters (70%) of investigations in which children were named as suspects were closed without any record of these children receiving support or intervention. Rather than lose sight of these ‘invisible children’ and thus miss opportunities for early support, intervention and diversion, PPIED seeks to actively identify them and provide a tailored support package linked to the needs of the child and their family, with the aim of reducing harm and preventing reoffending.

Aligned with **child-centred and trauma-informed** principles of practice, PPIED operates on the principle that children identified as suspects should be **treated as children first and suspects second**. Referral is usually triggered when a child is named as a suspect in two or more offences within 12 months, although some flexibility exists around this when deemed beneficial and capacity allows. PPIED is designed to be an early intervention pre-disposal diversion process, and, as such, a child does not need to have been charged, issued with an out-of-court disposal or convicted to be referred. **Being identified as a suspect in a crime is regarded within GMP’s PPIED approach as an indicator that a child may benefit from multi-agency support and require an intervention** (Youth Justice Resource Hub, 2025).

Working on the basis of *“the right help, at the right time”*, multi-agency panels, comprising both statutory and VCS partners (such as police, children’s services, youth justice, health, education and VCS organisations), explicitly move the focus beyond offending behaviour to **consider the wider needs of referred children and their families. Subject to their consent, all children discussed at a panel receive some form of intervention tailored to their individual needs and circumstances**, with cases reviewed after 12 weeks to ensure progress.

An in-depth internal data analysis exercise is underway to better capture the impact of the approach, but the force reports that emerging evidence suggests PPIED is supporting the earlier identification of need and reducing reoffending rates (in-force figures; not yet published). Participants linked decreased offending to **“getting them early” and being able to offer a more consistent and timely intervention via the multi-agency forum** to needs that might otherwise not have been known, let alone responded to.

This early identification of and response to unmet need was identified as a key strength of the model in an early evaluation, which noted that PPIED **makes previously invisible children more visible to services, enabling referrals that would not otherwise have been made**. The evaluation reported that partners viewed PPIED’s **regular meetings and early-stage information-sharing** as the most effective parts of the model, noting how these **helped reduce siloed working and supported more coherent, proportionate decision-making across agencies** (GMP, 2025).

These observations were echoed by police who shared their views as part of this case study, adding how **structured assessment criteria reduced the potential for subjective decision-making** and how **having other agencies and organisations around the table helped “get things moving” in a timely manner**, meaning *“families [weren’t] left without support.”* This support was observed to include a wide-ranging offer for children, as well as **support for parents**, who were *“often crying out for help”*.

7.3.3 Enablers, barriers and associated learning

Collaborative multi-agency working and trusted relationships with partners were observed to be keys to the success of PPIED, supporting agencies in working more cohesively together and in offering a more holistic and timely service to children and their families. Police participants recognised the **critical role that non-policing partners, including those from voluntary and community organisations, played in supporting children's engagement** in the initiative. This was noted to be true both at the point of initial consent (with higher engagement rates observed when non-policing partners made the approach) and in terms of being able to draw on a range of services to offer an appropriately tailored, supportive intervention.

Although commending the progress made in multi-agency working, participants identified several areas for further improvement. These included an enhanced support offer around neurodivergence and mental health, improved data-sharing between partners, better consistency across districts and the co-location and better resourcing of key personnel.

Linked to this last point, a key vulnerability identified by those involved in delivering PPIED was its reliance on individual rather than systemic commitment. Participants observed the pivotal role of the police coordinator, highlighting the need for more centralised support for the role and the importance of contingency planning to sustain the developmental and oversight work held by that role.

Officers also observed how their PPIED role was an *“add-on”* to other substantive roles, noting *“it is a role in itself [that] should have specific officers that drive it”*. Increased dedicated capacity could help address low levels of awareness of PPIED in the wider force and support the further embedding of the child-first, trauma-informed principles, which were noted not to be consistently demonstrated across frontline practice.

The other key challenge identified by participants related to data capture and the demonstration of impact, an issue also identified in the initiative's evaluation. The absence of dedicated data systems and the over-reliance on manual data administration have resulted in significant historical data gaps.

Significant efforts have been made to redress this, including the introduction of a dedicated reporting function and more systematic **tracking and reporting against KPIs**. While these developments are expected to create a more coherent and consistent dataset that can help demonstrate impact and monitor key issues, such as disproportionality, ongoing concerns remain about demonstrating (longer-term) impact in a way that influences resourcing and prioritisation decisions.

Reflections shared in the case study demonstrate both an awareness of PPIED's own learning journey and an **openness to sharing their 'mistakes' to help others avoid them**. Reflecting on the challenges emerging from a *“rushed rollout”* in the early days and five years of subsequent practice across a range of local contexts, key lessons shared by case study participants included:

- The **importance of phasing implementation properly**, taking time to secure buy-in, train staff and establish shared expectations and working practices
- The **value of dedicated roles, co-location, central coordination and senior leadership support**
- The importance of **recognising the roles and contributions of partners**, including VCS providers, who are often excluded from multi-agency forums
- **Balancing consistency and flexibility**: Structured eligibility criteria and thresholds help reduce bias and provide procedural fairness, while local nuance ensures children with emerging or contextual risks are not overlooked.

- **Thinking ‘evaluation and impact’ from the outset** and ensuring appropriate data systems and usage that support this and help evidence the impact the initiative is having
- Recognising that embedding child-centred, welfare-led, rather than punitive-led responses, requires **culture change, as well as process change**. This relies on strong messaging from leadership about the value of prevention and early intervention and an accompanying resource commitment to meaningfully realise this.

These are important messages to bear in mind as the model is now more broadly piloted through the Home Office’s Young Futures Prevention Partnerships (YFPP).²⁹

7.4 Northamptonshire police Youth Violence Intervention Unit

7.4.1 Methodology

The Northamptonshire Youth Violence Intervention Unit (YVIU) case study³⁰ involved a review of documentation provided by Northamptonshire police, including an overview of documentation on the initiative and collated quotes from children and parents about their experiences of the YVIU. Interviews were also conducted with the strategic lead of the YVIU (n=1), non-police partners (n=4) and staff delivering the YVIU (n=3).

7.4.2 The approach and the difference being made

The YVIU was established in early 2024, with a broad remit of reducing violence and exploitation of children through a child-centred, multi-stranded, multi-agency approach. It replaced the previous Community Initiative to Reduce Violence, which began in 2019 (College of Policing, 2021). The work is delivered by specialist staff, including police officers, youth workers and early intervention Adverse Child Experience workers seconded from the Northamptonshire Office of the PCC.

The YVIU seeks to reduce violence and exploitation of children through three main strands of work:

- **Awareness raising and early intervention:** This is realised through delivering education sessions in schools on topics such as exploitation and knife crime, training teachers and hospital staff to recognise signs of these harms, and a programme of working with siblings of children in prisons.
- **Engagement and support:** These are **tailored support programmes for children (and their families)** identified to be at particular risk of involvement in violence.
- **Disruption:** This is police-led work **using enforcement techniques, where required, but within a trauma-informed and safeguarding-led framework** that recognises those causing harm to others are often experiencing harm themselves: *“Whenever there’s an*

²⁹ YFPPs are local multi-agency panels designed to identify children and young people (typically aged 10–17) who are at risk of being drawn into crime, violence or exploitation and to connect them with coordinated, preventative support at an early stage. They are not enforcement panels and are intended to operate before criminal justice thresholds are reached, focusing on prevention rather than punishment. They are in the pilot stage. A Home Office–commissioned evaluation is currently taking place.

³⁰ The Northamptonshire case study differed from the others in exploring two different aspects of the force response to violence involving children, following interest in participation from those leading both initiatives. The two initiatives are the YVIU and the Youth Risk Panel (YRP). Though synergies exist in the overarching aims of the initiatives around supporting more child-centred, safeguarding-led practice, and the YVIU now attend the YRP, the two initiatives are explored individually here, given their differing remits, implementation trajectories and intended audiences.

element of enforcement, it's always with the caveat of, 'The support is here when you want it'" (YVIU representative).

Participants in the case study highlighted the significance of this trauma-informed, safeguarding-led response across all elements of YVIU's work, demonstrating a commitment to early intervention, a contextual understanding of children's behaviours and experiences, and a diversionary, holistic, **and restorative-based response wherever possible**. As a non-policing partner explained:

"Safeguarding is always at the forefront. We're not looking at these children as offenders...The focus is on keeping them safe and meeting their needs, not enforcement...We're thinking about what's happening around them, not just what they've done...The idea is that it's early intervention really, before things escalate to a point where they're in the criminal justice system"

The YVIU works around a range of issues, including 'gang' association, possession of a weapon, violence, drugs and alcohol, criminal exploitation and HSB. To date, it has primarily worked with adolescent males, but in response to a recognised need to more proactively engage with females (who may face similar risks but present differently), **a girls pathway has recently been launched (January 2026) to provide a gender-appropriate response to their experiences**. Participants reflected that the cohort being worked with was diverse in terms of race, class and affluence, though work is underway to explore potential patterns of **over-representation**.

The YVIU is a multi-agency initiative involving police, social care, youth justice, education, youth services and voluntary sector partners, bringing together a range of skills and expertise to support a holistic assessment of need and a holistic response to it. **Weekly multi-agency meetings sit at the centre of delivery, supporting information-sharing, shared assessment and decision-making across agencies and monitoring of interventions and the difference they are making.**

Improved partnership working and a more shared understanding of the need for, and the practical implementation of, child-centred and safeguarding-led responses were among the key impacts noted in relation to the YVIU. That is not to say that differences in perspectives or thresholds did not arise, but participants observed that these were resolved with greater ease and collegiality than in the past:

"There's much better understanding now of vulnerability and safeguarding...Information-sharing feels more purposeful and child-focused" (Non-policing partner).

"We've got closer working relationships. We challenge decisions collectively" (Non-policing partner).

"Things don't get stuck in systems as much because people pick up the phone" (Non-policing partner).

Participants also identified clear benefits for children and their families. They reflected on how the proactive nature of the initiative meant **children were being identified and supported "who previously [wouldn't] have had any service involvement until conviction", thereby avoiding unnecessary escalation and criminalisation**. They also noted the holistic nature of the support that could be provided, helping to **tackle root causes of vulnerability** through access to specialist support around drugs and alcohol, for example.

A common theme in participants' observations was how the **relational approach – based on the right person for the right task, two-way communication, support rather than judgement and**

approachableness rather than intimidation (plain-clothes policing, for example) – promoted sustained engagement:

“They’re more willing to engage because it doesn’t feel like policing...We’re seeing young people stay engaged [with the YVIU] for longer than they would have previously...Families feel supported as well, not judged” (Non-policing partner).

Illustrative feedback from children and parents/carers, shared as part of the case study, echoed the importance of this relational working. They noted the importance of not feeling judged, support being tailored to their needs, engagement being characterised by **calm and clear communication**, and the **approachability and responsiveness of YVIU staff**:

“It was nice to have someone to talk to, and [name of YVIU officer] also listened to what I had to say” (Child).

“She was always there, offering comfort and support. She never judged and always had a positive outlook that helped me see things in a different light” (Parent).

Linked to this relational approach, improved youth–police relationships were also identified as a key benefit of the YVIU approach. Non-police participants observed that *“they’ve got some really good officers who dispel the myths about police”*, and *“it humanises the police for young people”*. Though primarily noted in relation to YVIU officers, a couple of participants observed that, drawing on the enhanced trauma-informed training they have received, these officers were **supporting colleagues outside the unit to engage with children more meaningfully and safely, with a more explicit safeguarding lens**.

Plans to **embed trauma-informed training for all student officers in the force** were also noted, with the intention of further disseminating this approach and further strengthening a force-wide focus on safeguarding, which was noted to be not yet fully embedded.

Although no formal evaluation has yet been conducted, figures provided by the force report decreases in offending behaviour of approximately 50% within the engagement cohort (over 80% for possession of a weapon), which the force notes is higher than the 33% generally expected following focused deterrence.

7.4.3 Enablers, barriers and associated learning

A number of key tenets of the work were identified by both internal staff and external partners as central to the reported difference being made by the YVIU. These included:

- **Having peer support within the team, partnership, and senior leadership support**
- Recognising and addressing **root causes and contextual considerations, not just presenting behaviours**
- Prioritising **diversion over criminalisation** in both referrals to support services and out-of-court disposals

“Trying to divert where we can and being proportionate in our decision-making; it would just be good if the government classed an Outcome 22 as a positive outcome for under 18s” (YVIU lead).

- Having the **right person for the task** from a range of backgrounds
- **Implementing relational working informed by trauma-informed principles**, as explored above

- **Ensuring consistency in personnel**, with the aim of having the same officer see a young person every time
- **Working with parents and families**, in a non-judgemental way, to strengthen protective factors around the child
- **Having the flexibility to innovate** and ‘think outside the box’

“Flexibility is key; we’re not bound by rigid processes” (YVIU partner).

An example was shared of how voluntary tagging³¹ could help children resist pressure from exploiters:

“It’s a voluntary service, but you can monitor wherever they are at any time. And that’s almost their way, like a get-out-of-jail card. [They can say to the exploiter, ‘So obviously I still want to do what I’m doing for you, but I can’t do it now because I’ve got this on me, and they knew where I am, so I’m more of a risk to you’. So we almost give them a little bit of power back” (YVIU representative).

That is not to say that delivery and embedding of the YVIU approach is without challenge. In addition to the challenges outlined above around different perspectives, thresholds and slow culture change in the wider force, participants identified capacity issues, challenges navigating bureaucracy and changing service priorities across multiple agencies.

Recognising the potential for vicarious trauma resulting from the nature of the work, participants also noted a need to build on the reflective practice culture that was being embedded and further develop the support offer for staff. YVIU participants also identified discomfort with the initiative's name, with plans to move to a less stigmatising name that more closely aligns with the alternative approach embedded in the work.

7.5 Northamptonshire Youth Risk Panel

7.5.1. Methodology

The Northamptonshire Youth Risk Panel (YRP) case study involved a review of documentation provided by Northamptonshire police, including an overview and procedural documentation on the initiative. Interviews were also conducted with the YRP strategic lead (n=1) and non-police partners (n=2).

7.5.2 The approach and the difference being made

The YRP was set up in June 2025 to create a separate process for children (under 18) who might otherwise be referred to the Potentially Dangerous Persons (PDP) Panel.³² Its introduction was grounded in a belief that children should not be labelled as PDPs or managed via systems designed to manage adult sexual or violent offenders; nor should intervention be dependent on behaviours escalating to the point of being ‘dangerous’.

The YRP is multi-agency in nature. Membership comprises police colleagues from other units, youth justice colleagues and representatives from children’s trusts, including young people’s services, early help and child in need/child protection teams. Other stakeholders may also attend. This approach is designed to utilise partners’ insights and resources to provide an intervention

³¹ A ‘buddi tag’ scheme was also identified by Kent police.

³² PDP considers cases where a person’s behaviour shows that they may commit offences, as defined in the Management of Sexual Offenders and Violent Offenders Multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA).

tailored to the needs of the child/young person and their family, thereby preventing unnecessary criminalisation of children in line with a safeguarding-led, child-centred approach. It particularly aims to *“provide a mechanism for responding to children who are either a risk or at risk, where there is no current case ownership”* (Terms of reference document).

The panel meets once a month, with agendas purposefully sent in advance to allow members to gather any required information and come prepared to discuss the best way forward for a child. If the panel discussion results in a child being ‘adopted’, an eight-week work plan is implemented. This can be delivered by any agency on the panel but is overseen by Management of Sexual Offenders and Violent Offenders personnel.

While the newness of the approach limits what can be said about the perceived difference it is making, the very creation of the panel demonstrates an important recognition of the need to differentiate responses for children from those for adults. This need for a distinct child-centred response was felt to represent an important development from what has gone before, with the YRP described as:

“[Being] more preventative because they really are honing [in] on treating the child as a child” (YRP lead).

“Asking the right questions...It's not coming from a ‘this child is dangerous’ [perspective]. ‘We need to control it’. It is very much coming from a ‘let’s prevent’ [approach]” (YRP non-policing partner).

Though figures provided by the force show that only one of the 12 (young males) referred to the panel has been adopted thus far, participants observed that this does not mean that support has not been provided to others. Part of the design of the panel is that support is not dependent on being adopted, and others have received support as a result of referral to, and discussion at, the panel:

“We want more referrals because even if they're not really, like I say, suitable for adoption, it's good to hear because normally somebody comes up with something that hasn't been thought of before” (YRP lead).

Though many of those referred to date are already known to social care, the requirement to make a safeguarding referral prior to referral to the panel is intended to support a more consistent focus on safeguarding as the panel's work embeds. Participants also noted that the inter-agency insights shared at the panel have already contributed to a more holistic understanding of a child's needs, providing access to information that might not otherwise have been shared and different ways of thinking. Partners, for example, observed how the detailed referrals made by police (containing information that might not otherwise have been shared) helped support a contextual understanding of the child's experiences, while police reflected on how the different perspectives shared at the meeting gave them an alternative interpretive lens for a child's experiences and needs:

“It's mutually beneficial because we're giving them information, and they're giving us [information]...so there's quite good give and take in that sense” (YRP non-policing partner).

“We're a police force, but we're not specialised in children, whereas social services and, you know, YOS [youth justice], their whole businesses are modelled around children. So just having that additional knowledge is so key in this kind of intervention and prevention” (YRP lead).

7.5.3 Enablers, barriers and associated learning

In addition to the multi-agency nature of the panel, which was seen to be a clear enabler of improved practice by both police and non-policing partners, participants identified the importance of adequate **time to prepare for panel meetings**:

“So, we’ll get the referrals beforehand. Which means we’ve got a chance to research, you know, and just think that through. I think we all come with a bit of well, I think this because I’ve looked at it and this would be my hypothesis, and I think that’s just helpful, you know, to think that through” (YRP non-policing partner).

Good chairing of meetings was also identified as key to success, both in allowing sufficient time to discuss cases and in ensuring clear, agreed actions with identified individuals tasked with delivery and follow-up, as was **senior-level support** for the introduction of these new ways of working.

A couple of challenges have been identified in the early stages of the initiative. These include reluctance among some parents to engage with the approach and the absence of broader partners, such as education or child and adolescent mental health services. Participants highlighted a desire to involve health and education colleagues going forward, particularly given the high proportions of children referred to the panel (albeit from small numbers overall) with SEND. The need for further awareness-raising with other police colleagues, including clarity as to how the YRP fits within the broader force response to violence involving children (including through YVIU), was also felt to be a key priority as the panel further embeds and develops, as was monitoring of referral patterns, post-adoption review processes and outcomes.

7.6 British Transport Police County Line’s Task Force and Collaborative Safeguarding

7.6.1 Methodology

The BTP case study involved a review of BTP documentation (internal guidance and external presentations), alongside interviews and focus groups with BTP personnel (n=7) and multi-agency partners (n=9; including representatives from social care, drug and alcohol services, and voluntary sector projects). Despite the inclusion of a variety of perspectives, the primary research identified a high degree of consensus regarding the approach and impact of the Collaborative Safeguarding.

7.6.2 The approach and the difference being made

BTP is a national police force responsible for policing the railway networks across England, Wales and Scotland. In 2019, the Home Office funded BTP to establish a County Lines Task Force to identify and disrupt county line activity, including the criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults by criminal gangs on the railway network. The Task Force was initially focused on disrupting county lines activity, but the high levels of exploitation and vulnerability encountered in early operations demonstrated the need to move beyond a disruption and enforcement-based approach. The Collaborative Safeguarding approach, has evolved (and continues to evolve) as a proactive response to this.

The BTP Collaborative Safeguarding approach seeks to disrupt harm, identify vulnerability and need, and ensure children (and families) receive an appropriate response in a timely manner. It is structured around six core pillars that emphasise the importance of a **contextualised, reflective,**

child-centred, trauma-informed approach delivered collaboratively on the ground with local partners and communities. The six pillars are: Multi-agency development, awareness and engagement, prevention and diversion, live-time safeguarding checks, training and learning, youth engagement, and participation.

The delivery of this approach is supported by an operating model that includes operational teams, an investigative-focused unit, digital forensics, analytics support and a dedicated safeguarding support unit.

A key function of the BTP County Lines Task Force is to run targeted operations in partnership with local forces and other local partners. The operationalisation of the Collaborative Safeguarding approach in these settings – and the functions and activities that support this – were the primary focus of the case study. Though the specifics vary according to the nature of the operation and locality, key features of these operations, identified by both BTP personnel and local partners, include:

- **Actively involving local statutory and/or voluntary sector partners**, either working alongside BTP officers during an operation or available remotely to provide support or advice during this time
- Engaging local partners in pre-operation planning and maintaining a post-operation response via Safeguarding Actions Groups.
- **Reframing encounters with children as opportunities to safeguard and support rather than criminalise**
- **Being alert to multiple forms of vulnerability or harm** despite a primary focus on county lines
- **Implementing live-time safeguarding checks** and connecting children (and families) with relevant support to facilitate a timely response to identified need
- Using intelligence gleaned through operations to support the **pursuit and prosecution of those exploiting children.**

Participants (from BTP and external partners) identified several key differences arising from the BTP-led Collaborative Safeguarding approach. First of these was a marked shift in how children are treated during county lines operations, with the primary lens shifting from criminalisation to the identification of and response to vulnerability and harm. This was observed to be supported by a more trauma-informed, child-first approach by BTP officers, the **presence of local partners on the ground and a willingness to have the best-placed individual (co)lead the engagement, acknowledging that this will not always be police.** Core to this approach is a recognition of the important contributions partners can make and the expertise they bring to the situation:

“Having those professionals there while the checks are being done makes a massive difference...It reduces the trauma for the young person and builds trust” (BTP representative).

“It really helps having the right professional for the right level of risk – youth workers for lower-level concerns and senior social workers when risks are higher” (BTP representative).

Given the negative associations children may have with police, the presence of **non-statutory partners was also seen as critical to building the trust and sense of safety needed for meaningful engagement**, as illustrated in the quote above. This, in turn, was seen to create conditions in which vulnerabilities and harms that may previously have gone unarticulated or unnoticed could be identified, either during an operation or later, as a result of the trust and relationship established at the time.

A more coordinated and timely response to identified vulnerabilities and needs was also identified as a welcome outcome, resulting from real-time **safeguarding checks conducted while the child remains in a safe space and fast-tracked referrals**. A **holistic approach to need** was also welcomed, with examples cited of children and families being linked in with support not only relating to potential exploitation but also wider support needs, such as housing or drug and alcohol services.

BTP personnel who participated in the case study noted a fundamental shift in understanding of the relationship between safeguarding and enforcement, with **“safeguarding and legal processes understood to exist side by side rather than in opposition”**, and an increased ability to recognise vulnerability, even when occurring alongside risk posed to others. They also reported how **trauma-awareness training and training on adultification bias and racism were** reframing their understanding of children and reshaping the way they approached them, something they were trying to model when engaging with local forces.

Though the need to further embed this to ensure a consistent trauma-informed response and address ongoing racial disparity was acknowledged by both BTP and external partners, there was strong consensus that most engagements with children, including around stop and search, were markedly different from in the past. Engagements were described as being more centred on the needs of children and appropriate responses to individual children rather than on reactions to presentation or behaviour or on intent to criminalise. Police participants also reported increased **awareness of how ‘intrusive’ and ‘traumatic’ such encounters, particularly when involving strip searching, could be for a child**.

BTP personnel also observed that information elicited during engagements and real-time safeguarding checks helped not only in responding to children's needs but also in identifying adults who were causing harm. The BTP County Lines Development Unit (a specialist investigative team focused on progressing cases involving modern slavery and CCE) was observed to enhance BTP's ability to investigate modern slavery and CCE by providing specialist capacity to build stronger evidential links to perpetrators. Efforts to **reduce the evidential burden on children** through the pursuit of victimless prosecutions were also identified as a priority. This **dual focus – protecting the child while pursuing exploiters** – was widely viewed as a strength of the approach by case study participants, including through the use of modern slavery legislation and mechanisms.

Internal force statistics, for example, show 253 NRM referrals or updated referrals and 66 charges under the Modern Slavery Act secured against adults identified as exploiting/trafficking children (the highest for a force outside of London Metropolitan Police) since the Task Force began. Though not separated by under/over 18, force statistics also show 1,021 referrals to statutory safeguarding partners over this period and an average of 220 internal safeguarding referrals per year since 2020, compared to 26 in the first year of the scheme. The challenge of demonstrating the wider impact of these referrals and the overall impact of the work in ‘hard data’ was recognised.

Participants also observed how the practical implementation of Collaborative Safeguarding in operations has meaningfully strengthened multi-agency working in the relevant locales. Partners described how **joint deployments help ‘humanise’ one another’s roles and build trust**, particularly when agencies are side by side, making decisions for children who need rapid safeguarding responses. Several participants noted that convening all partners the day before an operation was important for clarifying everyone's roles and aligning expectations around a safeguarding-led response and how it would practically operate, making operations on the day run more smoothly.

Although participants noted some variation in the degree to which these more engaged and collaborative multi-agency working practices were sustained beyond the lifetime of operations in different locales, there was an overall perception that operations left a positive legacy in this regard. Participants also observed that, in a context of children falling through the gaps when moving/being moved across local authority and police force boundaries, the County Lines Task Force made an important contribution by providing **a cross-boundary response**.

7.6.3 Barriers, enablers and associated learning

Though participants reported that much has been achieved to date, the County Lines Task Force recognises that it is still on a journey of learning and practice improvement, which needs to continue to evolve. An ongoing challenge is demonstrating the impact of its work. Although the evidence of impact was clearly articulated in the qualitative contributions of participants in the case study, quantitatively evidencing that impact remains a challenge. Though this is a common challenge across many of the case studies in this project, BTP faces additional complexities due to limitations in data systems and difficulties in sharing information across national and local organisational datasets.

While participants felt that Collaborative Safeguarding represented a radical shift in ‘in-the-moment’ policing practice (away from suspicion-led towards needs-driven interactions), they also recognised that wider system change and the cultural shift required to support that takes time. This was evident in relation to BTP itself and the wider partnership landscape, with greater consistency in child-centred, safeguarding-led responses identified as a priority for future development. This was articulated as the need for greater consistency across all officers and encounters, both BTP and local forces, and for a more consistent safeguarding response from statutory partners irrespective of a child's age. Applicable across all statutory partners was the importance of planning for escalated risk post-intervention and the importance of (monitoring) follow-through after the safeguarding referral.

Mutually respectful and collaborative partnerships were seen as a key enabler of Collaborative Safeguarding. It was, however, clear from participants’ contributions that cultivating these took significant time and relational investment, with multiple barriers to be overcome, not least of which were existing mistrust of police and a national body seeking to operate in multiple local contexts, spanning a range of local authorities and local police forces, each with their own strengths and weaknesses.

External partners’ contributions suggested that BTP’s awareness of its own need to improve practice and its openness to learning from others were key to navigating these complexities. Examples were shared of the task force **co-developing work with partners and deferring to their lead in engaging children when in the field**. Efforts have also been made to elicit **children’s views on their experiences**, with external partners noting *“the fact that BTP commissioned research to understand how young people see them really impressed partners. It showed a genuine willingness to learn and adapt”*.

Internal learning and accountability mechanisms were also identified in the case study, including **reviews of body-worn video footage and reflective practice conversations** supported by **access to trauma-focused support for officers** when they need to talk through challenging experiences.

BTP staff recognised the importance of senior-level buy-in and support to advance this alternative approach. There was recognition that ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking had taken place in **bringing external safeguarding expertise into the team and in** locating this specialism so centrally in the Task Force’s model of operation. Both BTP staff and external partners highlighted the leadership shown by the safeguarding team, who have driven both the articulation and implementation of the

Collaborative Safeguarding approach, and the importance of the support they provide. The safeguarding team were seen to play a vital role both in supporting and advising the rest of the task force and in using their expertise to directly engage with local partners to ensure appropriate and swift responses to identified safeguarding concerns. This **co-location of social work expertise within a police-led team** and the respect afforded to the expertise they bring, was felt by both internal and external participants to be a core enabler of more child-centred and safeguarding-led responses to exploitation. Although developed within the distinct remit and role of BTP, the journey of Collaborative Safeguarding offers relevant lessons for wider policing responses. This observation is supported by requests from other forces seeking to learn from the BTP approach.

7.7 Cleveland Police /Violence Reduction Partnership Custody Navigators and Child-Centred Custody Suites

7.7.1 Methodology

As this is a practice example rather than a case study, it provides a descriptive overview of the initiative based on documentation provided by those leading it and a conversation with them. This documentation did, however, include the 2025 evaluation of the Custody Navigators scheme, the findings of which are integrated into the overview below. The Custody Navigators initiative was also cited as a good practice example in the APPG on Children in Police Custody's 2025 report *Making Children's Rights a Reality in Police Custody*.

7.7.2 The approach and the difference being made

Children's experiences of being detained in police custody can be highly traumatic (APPG, 2025). The Custody Navigators and Child-Centred Custody Suites introduced in Cleveland reflect a recognition of this and a proactive attempt to provide a more child-centred, trauma-informed experience of custody and post-custody processes.

The Custody Navigators programme was launched in 2022, with the aim of providing **trauma-informed support** for children and young people aged 10–24 who are at risk of serious violence and enter the criminal justice system through police custody.

A team of four navigators, who bring **expertise in working with children and young people**, are based at Middlesbrough police station's youth-focused custody suite. They provide assistance during the custody process, including by **ensuring custody teams are aware of individual children's needs and circumstances**. Through follow-up calls and visits in the week following release, they also **link children in with follow-up support in the community to help address the underlying reasons for becoming involved in serious violence**. The support is tailored to the needs of individual children and can include support with issues as varied as substance misuse, housing, education and employment. The navigators can also provide eight to 10 community-based sessions to children and young people to provide **a sense of continuity and ongoing support**, and they attend multi-agency meetings where their cases are discussed.

The other key aspect of the alternative approach being implemented in Cleveland is the introduction of a **Child-Centred Custody Suite**;³³ the first of its kind in the UK. The suite is designed to minimise children's exposure to adult offenders, including through separate entry and booking areas. It also seeks to offer a less intimidating and traumatic experience through

³³ For more info see: [Youth Focused Custody Suite virtual tour](#)

considered design, with artwork by young people on the walls, a separate interview room, a breakout room and a small exercise yard.

The initiative is jointly delivered with youth justice partners, who (with funding from the VRU) employ the Navigators and were key in the introduction of the Child-Centred Custody Suites.

Evaluation data shows promising results from the Custody Navigator Initiative, with headline findings including a return on investment of £2.03 for every £1 spent and a significantly reduced likelihood of reoffending (0.53 times as likely) among those who received Custody Navigator support beyond their initial attendance in custody. This effect is noted to be particularly marked among first-time entrants to custody (Hutt et al., 2025).

7.7.3 Enablers, barriers and associated learning

The navigators and Child-Centred Custody suites are viewed as integral to each other's success, with the active presence of Custody Navigators embodying the trauma-informed child-centred ethos of the building design. Custody Navigators were also reported to provide **trauma-informed training to other custody staff**, helping to embed the core principles of the approach across all engagements a child might have.

The **youth-focused skills and experiences** that Custody Navigators brought to the role were identified as key to success, as were committed partnership working (particularly between police and youth justice) and **senior-level support** for the model.

In terms of areas for future development, three key things emerged: (i) sharing learning with other forces, (ii) the necessity of securing sustained funding, and, linked to this, (iii) the importance of ongoing evaluation to demonstrate the wider impact of the work beyond reductions in reoffending rates; observed to include better outcomes for the child and benefits for partner agencies.

7.8 Concluding observations

Though the conclusions being drawn are based on time-limited case studies and a practice example, rather than full evaluations, the common features emerging from the case studies and practice example – regarding ways of working, enablers and barriers – are striking, as are the parallels to the practice principles framework outlined in Chapter 8.

Whilst all see themselves as a 'work in progress', what they have achieved to date demonstrates that, despite the challenges, a more safeguarding-led policing response to violence involving children is possible to implement, in a range of contexts and engagement -settings.

They also demonstrate the benefits that can follow from such an approach: for children and their families, as well as for police and non-policing partners, when the right enablers are in place, as outlined in Box 7.1.

Box 7.1: Case study enablers of safeguarding-led policing

- Recognising barriers to engagement (fear, mistrust, discrimination, etc.) and investing in developing non-crisis-based engagements
- Establishing strong multi-agency partnerships (including the VCS), ensuring the right person for the right task and establishing purposeful information-sharing to support this

- Recognising potential needs and vulnerabilities in those who present as causing harm to others – who or what is behind the presenting behaviours, what can we do to support the child and how can we hold adults who may be exploiting them to account
- Ensuring proportionate decision-making – prioritising diversion over criminalisation and focusing on potential for change alongside accountability
- Embedding relational working informed by trauma-informed, strengths-based and rights-based principles and supported by consistency of personnel
- Working with parents and families in a non-judgemental way to strengthen protective factors around the child
- Building in flexibility to respond to the needs of different children and families and be responsive to developing contextual understanding of risks, harms and needs
- Having dedicated staff with the right skillset, training and support and a recognition of the importance of these specialist roles.
- Ensuring strong leadership and senior-level support, both around the initiative itself and around embedding culture change in the wider force
- Utilising KPIs that recognise the importance of diversionary and early intervention work that cannot always be captured in 'hard data', and adapting data collation systems to support the capture of these different measures
- Having an ongoing openness to learning from partners, but also from children, young people and their families.

Chapter 8: ‘Best practice’

8.1 Introduction

One of the core aims of the research was to identify what represents ‘best practice’ policing when safeguarding children involved in violence. Drawing together evidence from all phases of the study, this chapter outlines a ten-point practice principles framework for progressing a ‘best practice’ response in this field, including the key tenets of their implementation (presented in bolded text). Chapter 9 explores how this might be practically achieved, considering both what ‘better’ policing engagements in this field might look like and the changes required to support the embedding of such approaches.

The themes contained in the practice principles framework were initially developed during the desk-based review stage of the study, drawing on the triangulated findings from a policy mapping exercise, a scoping review of the research literature, and thematic reviews of LCSPRs, Inspections and PCC reports. The draft framework was further refined and developed in light of a review by the YEF Youth Advisory Board and the findings of the other primary research phases of the study.³⁴

Figure 8.1: Ten principles of ‘best practice’

Child-centred	Contextual & holistic
Prevention & early intervention	Trauma-informed
Collaborative partnership working	Proactive anti-discriminatory practice
Transparency & accountability	Procedurally just & proportionate
Evidence-informed	Whole-systems change

Though the operationalisation of the principles will vary according to the specific context or interaction (see Chapter 9), there was remarkable consistency across both the secondary and primary data sources as to the key principles that should underpin a ‘best practice’ safeguarding-led policing response.

³⁴ Though now having 10 principles rather than 15, all issues identified in the first draft framework are still included in the reorganised structure.

These apply irrespective of the nature of violence, the differing contexts of police–child encounters or the characteristics or offending histories of the child being engaged with. This includes the specific contexts of interest to the YEF in this study – stop and search, possession of a weapon and responses to children going missing – although specific additional considerations about their application in these contexts are outlined where pertinent.

Although considered here in relation to children involved in violence, the practice principles also hold relevance to broader police encounters with children, which are clearly shown to influence how subsequent individual interactions are experienced (see, for example, Allnock et al., 2026a). Although developed independently from them, the practice principles strongly align with the reflections shared by children and young people in Allnock et al.’s (2026) YEF-funded study of what child-centred policing means to them. They also closely align with the child-centred policing definition and approach outlined in the NPCC *Child-Centred Policing Strategy 2024–2027* (Box 8.1).

Box 8.1 NPCC child-centred policing strategy text

Child-centred policing:

- Is seen as legitimate, as it is lawful, effective and fairly applied in line with our values, the Code of Ethics and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Reduces trauma for children and young people when all practice and contact is culturally competent, empowering, collaborative, provides choice, is trustworthy and brings safety.

This is realised through three portfolio pillars:

- **YourTrust** delivers excellent child-centred policing that protects and reduces harm to build trust and confidence.
- **YourVoice** ensures the voices of children and young people are heard throughout all of policing.
- **YourFuture** ensures children and young people fulfil their potential in life by preventing victimisation, diverting offenders and supporting careers.

Though explored individually here, the principles are both interconnected and mutually reinforcing and, as such, need to be implemented as a whole across both strategic and operational practice. Chapter 9 considers the changes required to advance such an approach.

8.2 Safeguarding-led policing ‘best practice’ principles

8.2.1. Child-centred

National policy and guidance consistently emphasise the need for responses to children to be distinctly different from those of adults, a theme strongly echoed in the findings of this study. This applies to all children, irrespective of how close to 18 years of age they are, how they present or whether their contact relates to experiences of known victimisation and/or perpetration.

The term child-centred is used here to denote that all under-18s are due the rights associated with childhood in response to the documented failure to consistently apply this in relation to older children (see, for example, Beckett & Lloyd, 2022), but with recognition that the language of youth-centred may be more appropriate in practice with older children.

A child-centred approach **keeps the best interests of the child (Article 3, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC]) at the heart of all interactions and decision-making**. This is key to safeguarding and protecting children, as explicitly recognised in *Working Together*, which notes that a “*child-centred approach is fundamental to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of every child*” (DfE, 2026:13) and “*decisions should be made in the child’s best interests, rooted in child development, age-appropriate, sensitive to the impact of adversity and trauma and informed by evidence*” (op. cit.:64).

A child-centred approach embodies the **Child-first approach** outlined by the YJB (2022), which highlights the need to **see the whole child, understand the contexts of their life (including any structural barriers they face) and adopt a strengths-based, restorative approach to any offending behaviour**.

A child-centred approach also **recognises children’s right to have a say about matters that affect them and have these views taken into consideration in line with evolving capacity** (Article 12, UNCRC). This relates both to matters about their own care and experiences and opportunities to influence wider systemic changes, as recognised in the NPCC Child-Centred Policing Strategy:

“We will involve children and young people in decisions that impact them. We know how important this is at an individual level but [it] extends to issues that directly affect children and young people more generally. Policing must show it has not simply listened, but has heard and responded by either taking tangible action or explaining why it has not” (NPCC, 2024:7/8).

Lundy (2007) identifies four key components of meaningful participation:

- **Voice:** Children must be facilitated to express their views in a way that works for them.
- **Space:** Children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views.
- **Audience:** Their views must be listened to by someone who can make change.
- **Influence:** Their views must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Meaningfully realising these requires **explicit attention to the different needs and experiences of different children**, a point also articulated by children themselves (see, for example, Allnock et al., 2026a). This includes those whose voices have been subjugated as a result of racism or other discriminatory practices or a lack of understanding of divergent communication needs, all of which have been identified as barriers to a safeguarding-led response in this study.

Though ‘child-centred’ refers to those aged under 18, in line with the legal definition of a child, a child-centred approach also **recognises that a young person’s vulnerabilities and needs do not suddenly change on their 18th birthday, emphasising the importance of an ongoing supportive response**, as articulated in the Child-Centred Policing Strategy (NPCC, 2024) and the transitional safeguarding approach (Cocker et al., 2022). This is particularly important **as children transition into adult criminal justice systems**, with lower thresholds and higher tariffs.

8.2.2 Trauma-informed

In the context of violence involving children, while perhaps more often considered in relation to those being engaged with as victims of harm, trauma-informed practice is equally important for those being engaged with around known or suspected perpetration of harm. Though a phrase that is often tokenistically used (Smith & Monteux, 2023), a trauma-informed approach supports a safeguarding-led response in **recognising the potential presence of trauma in a child’s life**

(whether that be individual, community and/or structural trauma) and understanding their presentation and needs in light of this.

There was a clear message throughout all elements of this study that most children who are seen to pose (risk of) harm to others will also have experienced some form of harm themselves, whether now or in the past. While not proposing that this in any way minimises the harm experienced by others because of their actions, acknowledging and responding to this in a restorative, trauma-informed manner must be a key part of a safeguarding-led response to such actions. Yet this was observed to be, at best, inconsistently applied in current practice.

Language is also important in this regard, and consideration needs to be given to how the application of labels can imply a degree of agency that is not always there and can (inadvertently) influence responses. As a previously cited safeguarding consultant observed, if we are to truly take a child-centred and safeguarding-led approach, we would reframe any child, irrespective of whether they are viewed as a ‘perpetrator’ or ‘victim’, as a child affected by violence.

A trauma-informed approach also provides an important framework for trauma-sensitive practice that **actively seeks to avoid re-traumatisation and rebuild a sense of safety by embedding trauma-reducing principles.** These principles – safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural considerations (Office for Health Improvements and Disparities, 2022) – were observed to be inconsistently implemented in how police engage with children involved in violence. Good practice was, however, also identified, as outlined in the case studies reported on in Chapter 7.

A trauma-informed approach also highlights the need for **attending to the potential for secondary or vicarious trauma among police themselves.**³⁵ This was identified as a frequently overlooked yet critical aspect of supporting safeguarding-led practice in the study. Participants identified that providing vicarious trauma support for police officers and staff was important not only for their own wellbeing but also to enable them to engage with children in calm and measured ways that de-escalate rather than escalate the traumatic nature of the engagement.

8.2.3 A contextual and holistic approach

Implementing trauma-informed and child-centred practice depends on the application of a contextual approach to understanding both experiences and perpetration of harm. Too often, children’s experiences are seen in isolation from the wider contexts of their lives, but a holistic and contextual understanding of and response to this must be a key aspect of a safeguarding-led response.

As articulated within one such approach (Contextual Safeguarding; Firmin, 2020), this includes **consideration of the different spheres of children’s lives and the relative influence of these, both in terms of pro-social supports available within these contexts and the risks or pressures that may facilitate harm.** Such a response not only enables a more tailored response to an individual child but also supports the identification of wider patterns of risk or harm that can inform necessary preventative and early intervention efforts, though care must be taken to avoid reproducing patterns of inequity in relation to this (Wroe, 2021).

A key aspect of realising a contextual and holistic response to children involved in violence is **moving away from static, often deficit-based, single-issue risk assessment frameworks to strengths-based dynamic frameworks that more accurately capture the changing contexts and levels of risk, harm and opportunity** (Beckett & Lloyd, 2022). Such assessments cannot be

³⁵ Caused by exposure to someone else’s trauma (College of Policing, 2018)

completed quickly by a single professional but require considered multi-agency input and direct liaison with a child/young person and their family. Though this is time- and resource-intensive, in the absence of such an approach, responses will be based on partial understandings of risks, needs and harms, resulting in short-term, behavioural-focused responses and missed opportunities for intervention.

8.2.4 Prevention and early intervention

One of the strongest themes emerging across all elements of the study is that a safeguarding-led response to violence involving children must **prioritise prevention and early intervention, working from the dual premises of avoiding harm in the first place and intervening early to divert and restore where harm is seen to be emerging or occurring**. Yet, both the desk-based review and primary research demonstrate operational inconsistencies in prevention and early intervention, including in relation to who receives it, who delivers it and how its impact is captured and assessed (Boulton et al., 2019; Densley et al., 2017; Halford & Davies, 2021; Setty et al., 2025).

A strong focus on prevention and early intervention aligns with a **public health approach** to violence reduction, as advocated by many participants and demonstrated in the case studies in Chapter 7:

“If we were truly committed to safeguarding, we would invest resources in prevention...Case reviews show [children] weren’t missed. They were seen, but they weren’t acted upon by the system, and that can’t be right” (Ex-policing/VRU participant).

A range of examples of prevention and intervention work delivered or funded by police or VRUs were shared in the research, including:

- Education initiatives delivered by police in schools (although concerns were expressed about the fear-based underpinning of some educative messaging and its lack of alignment with a trauma-informed approach)
- Mentoring schemes for children who are identified as being at risk of perpetrating harm, provided by VCS partners
- Officers spending time on secondment with youth work providers:

“Uniformed officers and other officers...would do secondments for three to four months and come and work on secondment alongside someone like a youth worker running one of these programmes. And they would meet these young people, and they would mentor them and support them. And, without any doubt, I remember those conversations with them, how much they took away from it and how much they learnt about children and young people and how differently they saw them” (VCS participant).

A key message that emerged within discussions on prevention and early intervention was the **importance of children being able to engage with police outside of ‘crisis’ contexts, and the importance of community-based engagement in supporting this:**

“Proactive policing, like getting to know the community, walking around, talking to everyday people in everyday spaces, not just when crime happens...Bridging that trust gap” (VCS participant).

8.2.5 Collaborative partnership working

All aspects of the study clearly identify that a safeguarding-led response to children affected by violence can only be achieved when **police work collaboratively with other partners to achieve a common goal**. Though formally mandated for statutory partners (DfE, 2026), it is **critical that this also includes those in the community and voluntary sector** (VKPP et al., 2025). These non-statutory partners are often best placed to provide the necessary context for children's experiences, and, in the context of broken trust or fear, they can play an important intermediary role between children and police or other statutory services.

As VKPP and NPCC (2025) outline, **collaborative partnership working needs to be realised both at the procedural and operational levels, with appropriate systems in place to support information-sharing and joint working protocols**.

Unless evidence exists that demonstrates otherwise, **parents and carers should also be seen as key partners** in protecting and safeguarding their children, with efforts made to proactively address any familial support needs, as well as those of the individual child (Research in Practice et al., 2026).

Professional stakeholders working in (co-located) multi-agency teams strongly articulated how the multi-agency nature of the team helped them deliver a more streamlined and cohesive response to children involved in violence. This included easier information-sharing, a common vision for change and a lower chance of children 'falling through the cracks'.

Examples were also shared, by both police and non-police participants, of how close working with other professionals (from youth justice or voluntary sector organisations, for example) helped support the culture shift needed to realise safeguarding-led aspirations through on-the-job learning and by seeing an alternative approach modelled.

8.2.6 Proactive anti-discriminatory practice

Both the desk-based review and primary fieldwork elements of the study identified clear racial and other disparities in policing practice, as explored in Chapter 5 (see, for example, the College of Policing, 2022; Police Race Action Plan or PCC plans, such as those of London [MOPAC, 2025], West Yorkshire, [West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2024], Sussex [Sussex PCC, 2024] or Lancashire [Lancashire PCC, 2024]). Despite this recognition, and commitments to anti-racist practice and inclusive policing across a range of strategies, ongoing inequities and discriminatory practices continue to be observed, indicating the need to move from symbolic commitments to radically different practice.

Recognition of this disproportionality in policing practice, and the eroding of trust that follows from this, has to be a key starting point for safeguarding and protecting all children involved in violence. As the YEF Youth Advisory Board observed in their review of the initial draft of practice principles, while these are fine in principle, meaningfully implementing them requires recognition that we are not starting from a place of neutrality. They, and many professional participants (including some from policing backgrounds), emphasised **the importance of acknowledging, and making reparation for, harms caused and proactively demonstrating a commitment to anti-discriminatory practice going forward**.

This includes **training around and active monitoring of anti-racist and inclusive neurodivergent practices and the recognition of the need for an intersectional approach**. This needs to be accompanied by swift and strong action when practice falls short of expected standards, comprehensive and nuanced data collection, and transparent reporting on practice against agreed standards, as explored further in the next principle.

8.2.7 Transparency and accountability

Often spoken about in relation to children known to be or suspected of causing harm to others, a clear theme emerged in the research for the need for **increased accountability by the police and increased transparency around the process for and outcomes of this**. This ranged from accountability for individual practice and sanctions where this has fallen short to the importance of systemic accountability for harms caused, including through institutional racism.

While moves such as the **introduction of body-worn cameras and dip-sampling of captured footage** were seen as welcome progress in this regard, there was a clear sense that greater efforts could be made to embed accountability and transparency and report on this in a way that could help restore confidence in policing. The absence of this was noted to be a key barrier to progressing a safeguarding-led response to children involved in violence. Key suggestions as to how this could be more consistently embedded included:

- **Collecting more consistent and detailed data about who police engage with, why they do so and what outcomes result** – for example around stop and search or possession of a weapon
- **Enhancing public oversight of policing practice, specifically including children within this**
- **Actively seeking feedback from children** on how they experience police engagements and how these might be improved
- **Creating clearer access routes to and promotion of complaints mechanisms** combined with **clear messaging around children's rights in contexts of policing encounters**

8.2.8 Procedurally just and proportionate

Procedural justice – fairness, transparency and respectful treatment – was a recurring theme in both the desk-based review (NPCC, 2024) and the stakeholder consultations, as was the need for responses to children affected by violence to be proportionate and justifiable **when considered through the lens of the best interests of the child**. Yet these tenets were observed to be inconsistently applied in children's encounters with police in the context of both experiencing and perpetrating harm.

As highlighted throughout this report, concerns were also expressed about a lack of proportionality in responding to certain cohorts of youth and/or certain types of crime and about the absence of a clear rationale for the different decisions made. **Due process requires clear documentation of the rationale for diversionary or charging decisions and the factors considered when assessing the proportionality of the response, for example, through the use of the Child Risk Gravity Matrix. It also requires the ability to share this rationale in an easily understandable form, to defend or amend decisions if challenged and to ensure that children and those supporting them are aware of routes for challenge or complaint.**

Particular efforts must be made to explain to those who experience harm from a peer that the response being pursued is linked to the child's age and is not indicative of denial or minimisation of the harm they have experienced.

8.2.9 Evidence-informed

All aspects of the study emphasised the need **for evidence-informed policing practice**, yet few reported its consistent and meaningful implementation. Both national and force-level policies and procedures need to be embedded in an up-to-date evidence base around 'what works'. The study

also identified an appetite for and benefits of creating opportunities for officers and forces to learn from each other (and from non-policing partners).

Responses to the force-level survey and the contributions of police participants in the qualitative phases of the research indicate that police themselves recognise key **gaps in data capture and usage and the need to address these both in terms of monitoring existing police practice and in terms of capturing the impact of diversionary initiatives or innovative partnerships**, such as those reported on in the case studies.

The desk-based review also highlights an urgent need for more evidence-informed practice, including around the need to **address significant gaps in demographic data capture, inconsistent recording practices (for example, around use of police flags), system barriers to multi-agency case tracking and insufficient analytical capacity within forces and multi-agency partnerships** (see, for example, Bullock et al., 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2024).

8.2.10 Whole-systems change

A consistent message emerging from all aspects of the study is that meaningfully implementing a safeguarding-led response to children involved in violence requires whole-systems change. It is not that ‘good practice’ or passionate, committed individuals do not exist, but that ‘best practice’ is not consistently embedded within or across forces. To repeat an oft-cited observation, **the response a child receives should not be determined by the individual officer they engage with or the force area within which they reside.**

Both the primary and secondary research strands of this study clearly demonstrate that, even where safeguarding-led pockets of ‘best practice’ exist within forces (as in the case studies, for example), this does not equate to **wider culture change across the force.**

The real test of a safeguarding-led response is whether a child experiences this across every encounter with a force, including in first contacts, which are clearly documented to be pivotal in determining the subsequent experiences of the child (Association of Directors of Children’s Services, 2025; Shrimpton et al., 2025). Chapter 9 explores a series of means through which this might be practically progressed.

8.3 Concluding observations

As noted in the introduction, the practice principles outlined in this chapter represent the collective wisdom gathered from across all elements of the study. They align and intersect with other guidance documents³⁶ that have informed their development; considered with reference to the specific context of violence involving children and the primary research conducted around this across the study.

It is of note that although many of the premises and practices outlined within them are not new, with some notable exceptions (such as the case studies outlined in Chapter 7), they are viewed to still be more aspirational than operational. This highlights the need for concerted action to translate professional rhetoric into real changes in children’s lives; as explored further in Chapter 9.

³⁶ Such as NCLCC and NPCC (no date), YJB for England and Wales (2022), Research in Practice et al. (2026), NPCC (2024), VKPP and NPCC (2025).

Chapter 9: Progressing change

9.1 Introduction

Both the desk-based review and primary research demonstrate that despite broad recognition of the need for a safeguarding-led and child-centred response to children affected by violence and the strategic endorsement of this approach in various guises, operational delivery remains inconsistent. Building on previous chapters and informed by the 10-point practice principles framework, this chapter considers what a ‘best practice’ response looks like across the four interconnected domains of police–child interactions, policing structures and cultures, interagency working and wider system contexts and the changes required to help implement this.

Figure 9.1 Key components of a ‘best practice’ response



The chapter draws on triangulated learning from both the primary and secondary strands of the research to consider:

- What practice changes are required to improve policing’s safeguarding and protection of children at risk of involvement in violence?

- What changes in law, regulation, training, funding and/or inspection can improve policing's role in safeguarding and protecting children from involvement in violence?

Like the elements of the practice principles framework, these changes do not exist in isolation and should not be viewed that way. Similarly, nor do they exist in isolation from the wider contexts of policing and broader safeguarding structures. The operationalisation of these changes will inevitably be influenced by the announced forthcoming reforms to policing, including proposals for a national policing service and proposed changes to VRUs and PCCs, but the core components apply irrespective of the specific contexts of implementation.

9.2 Police–child interactions

Good practice in individual police–child interactions depends on an officer's capacity to see and respond to the child and not just the incident. A child-first, dual-status orientation requires officers to hold vulnerability and harm in mind simultaneously, guiding decisions towards protection, contextual understanding and proportionality. Core behaviours identified in the study that should be embedded in all child–police interactions to support a safeguarding-led approach are outlined in Box 9.1. These closely align with the practices children and young people have identified as key to child-centred policing more broadly (Allnock et al., 2026a), as summarised in the 2026 Child-centred Policing Principles in Practice resource (Allnock et al., 2026b)

Box 9.1: Core policing behaviours for interactions with children

Communication and listening

- Slow the encounter down rather than rushing decisions or speech.
- Use a calm tone of voice.
- Avoid abrupt commands or raised voices.
- Assume that neurodiverse communication needs are possible unless clearly ruled out.
- Use plain, concrete, everyday language; avoid vague descriptions, metaphors, jargon or 'police talk'.
- For neurodivergent children, where possible, use visual prompts (showing a search card, for example) and seek advice from those who know a child's communication preferences.
- Translate legal or complex information into developmentally appropriate terms.
- Name what is happening to reduce fear and ambiguity and increase understanding (I'm here because; I'm going to...after that I will...).
- Acknowledge feelings such as fear or uncertainty.
- Listen actively: Pause, avoid interrupting and reflect back what the child has said.
- Check understanding (this could be by inviting the child to explain back in their own words).
- Allow extra processing time, especially when the child is distressed, overwhelmed or neurodivergent.
- Be human, warm and authentic, not overly formal or procedural.
- Use simple rapport-building gestures (greetings and everyday conversation).

De-escalatory physical presence

- Dress in the least imposing way feasible for a situation.
- Adopt an open stance, relaxed posture and non-looming presence.
- Make yourself physically smaller/less intimidating where appropriate.

- Maintain respectful distance; avoid crowding or escalation triggers.
- Minimise the number of officers making the initial approach (keep others in the background if needed).
- In planned engagements, have a non-policing partner make the initial approach when appropriate.

Professional curiosity

- Avoid adultification; do not make assumptions about maturity, culpability or intent.
- Be alert to any other biases or assumptions (in yourself or colleagues) that might affect what you hear or how you act – or how a child experiences you.
- Recognise the various ways in which trauma can manifest in behaviour (distress, withdrawal, anger, etc.).
- Be alert to SEND-related shutdown or overload and adjust your pace and expectations.
- Exercise professional curiosity rather than taking behaviour at face value.
- Ask open questions to explore what is behind behaviour (“What’s going on for you today?”).

Accountability

- Use body-worn videos to improve accountability, but explain their use to reduce fears of punishment or surveillance.
- Provide children with information about their rights, and how to make complaints.
- Have trusted adults present, wherever possible. This will also help reduce anxiety for the child.
- Keep full and accurate records of encounters, including a specific section on how any safeguarding (or broader) needs of the child were identified and responded to.

Additional, context-specific considerations were also identified for custody and stop-and-search settings, as outlined below. These should be implemented in addition to the broadly applicable actions outlined above.

In custody settings:

- Recognise that custody environments may feel hostile or unsafe from the child’s perspective.
- Provide a clear, step-by-step walkthrough of the custody process.
- Create moments of predictability and calm within an otherwise chaotic environment.
- Check for immediate welfare needs: Food, warmth, water, toilet access or sensory needs.
- Ensure access to a trusted adult; explain the role of the appropriate adult clearly.
- Facilitate access to neurodiversity resources, such as sensory tools or calm spaces, where available.

In stop-and-search settings:

- Ensure you have a justifiable reason for the stop and search.
- Begin with a clear, respectful explanation of the grounds for the search.
- Explain what each part of the search will involve before doing it.
- Offer reassurance about rights and how long the process will take.
- Acknowledge that repeated searches feel unfair, particularly for racialised groups.

- Use one lead speaker to minimise sensory overload and confusion.
- Minimise public visibility of the search wherever safely possible.

9.3 Policing structures and cultures

A series of changes to policing structures and cultures were identified as being required to support individual police in implementing a safeguarding-led approach for children they engage with.

9.3.1 Strategic leadership and organisational commitment

Embedding safeguarding-led responses for children involved in violence requires sustained strategic commitment that is not dependent on changes in senior leadership. Stakeholders across the study emphasised that organisational priorities can shift with leadership turnover and that safeguarding is therefore most effectively embedded when it is anchored in formalised strategic levers, such as inclusion in force-wide strategic plans, performance frameworks and governance structures. Several participants also proposed establishing a designated senior safeguarding lead, mirroring arrangements common in other safeguarding systems. While not universally recommended, this was viewed by some as a mechanism for ensuring executive-level accountability, continuity and visible leadership in safeguarding.

Evidence from the VKPP's *National Vulnerability and Public Protection Strategy* (2025) reinforces the need for structural anchoring. The strategy positions leadership as central to creating a coherent, force-wide approach to vulnerability, encouraging leaders to “simplify the complex landscape of vulnerability and public protection” (VKPP, 2025: 5) and to align organisational activity around consistent principles.³⁷

As recognised in the NCVPP's *Governance of Vulnerability in Policing* report (NCVPP, 2025b) good leadership is characterised by a clear “golden thread” that links strategic aims to operational delivery, reducing the common disconnect observed between senior intent and frontline practice. Forces with explicit executive ownership of the vulnerability agenda were found to have stronger accountability, better alignment of workstreams and a more sustainable long-term focus compared to those in which vulnerability remained siloed within PPU or was dependent on individual leaders' interests. The NCVPP governance review also highlighted that simplified structures, clear lines of accountability, effective communication and the early involvement of enabling services (for example, analytics, IT, workforce development) are key markers of leadership that support, not hinder, effective safeguarding delivery. Moreover, the report emphasises that sustainable leadership requires active succession planning, structured learning, and governance and safeguarding principles embedded in leadership development pathways to ensure continuity beyond personal leadership styles or turnover.

9.3.2 Supervisory follow-through and culture-setting

³⁷ This is supported by a suite of governance toolkits, including the Governance Toolkit; Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Toolkit; and Data and Performance Toolkit, designed to strengthen leadership capacity and competence across the 4Ps framework (Prepare, Prevent, Protect, Pursue) and embed safeguarding responsibilities within performance structures, workforce expectations and strategic planning processes. While not specific to violence involving children, these toolkits offer generalisable principles that apply across all strands of vulnerability, supporting forces in adopting consistent governance and leadership approaches regardless of the form of harm being addressed (VKPP & NPCC, 2025).

While senior leaders set the overarching vision, it is firstline supervisors, sergeants and Inspectors who shape everyday practice, translating commitments into “how business is done”. Participants described supervisory behaviour as central to creating the conditions for safeguarding-led practice: Legitimising time for relational engagement, modelling professional curiosity, reinforcing proportionate and trauma-informed decision-making and offering reflective space when decisions are complex. This finding aligns with wider evidence on the role of firstline leadership in influencing organisational culture and safeguarding practice (NCVPP, 2025b)

9.3.3 Dedicated specialist roles and teams

While not in any way undermining the need to radically transform force-wide responses to children affected by violence, there was strong support in the research for greater investment in dedicated youth engagement roles and teams. As demonstrated in the case studies, these specialist roles need to be dedicated roles (rather than add-ons to other substantive posts), with protected duties to allow them the time required to do this work well.

Participants also noted the important role of specialist units such as CSE or county line teams, early intervention teams and child protection teams. Such teams were consistently described as providing more coherent, safeguarding-led and timely responses than mainstream policing structures, although care needs to be taken that the set-up of these units does not silo responses.

The benefit of specialist non-policing roles being embedded in or working in partnership with policing was also emphasised. Examples felt to improve safeguarding-led practice included embedded safeguarding specialists in policing teams, custody-based youth workers or navigators, and police being seconded to other settings to learn skills to bring back into their teams.

9.3.4 Consistent personnel

The study findings demonstrate the importance of consistency of personnel and the damaging impacts of the absence of this. Stable posts in schools, neighbourhood teams and specialist teams, such as those outlined above, were described as vital for building expertise and developing trust with children, families and community practitioners. Professionals noted that when these posts are routinely rotated or removed, accumulated relational capital is lost and early-help pathways are weakened.

A linked theme emerging from the data is the importance of recognising the specialism and expertise of these roles, both in terms of how they are viewed within wider force structures and in terms of specialist career progression routes that mean good staff (and the expertise, relationships and knowledge they hold) are not unnecessarily lost to other areas of policing that offer better career progression.

9.3.5 Reflective supervision and psychological support

A key aspect of a trauma-informed approach is recognising the trauma police themselves may bring into and/or experience in the role and the potential for resultant re-traumatisation or vicarious trauma. There was strong support for rolling out reflective spaces and quasi-clinical supervision, not only for police’s personal wellbeing but also in relation to their ability to hold tension and difficulty without unnecessary escalation resulting from unprocessed trauma.

Regular debriefs, supervision or joint reflective sessions were seen as helping officers process the emotional demands of working with children in distress. Professionals described how these structures support officers in regulating their own responses, maintaining empathy and avoiding

defaulting to reactive or enforcement-driven approaches in future encounters; themes also replicated in the wider literature (College of Policing, 2025; Quigg et al., 2024/2025).

9.3.6 Training and workforce development

The need for further investment in training emerged as a universal theme across all phases of the study. Key content areas identified by participants mapped closely to the principles of 'best practice' and included:

- Child development and youth cultures
- Developmentally appropriate communication
- Children's rights and child-first and child-centred practice
- Intersectionality, cultural competence and anti-discriminatory practice
- Neurodiversity and communication needs
- Professional curiosity
- Trauma-informed approaches
- Relational and strengths-based practice
- Procedural justice and fairness
- Safeguarding duties, thresholds and information-sharing parameters

Many of these training areas were felt to require interactive, scenario-based training rather than online self-directed training, which was associated with a 'tickbox' rather than a practice-transforming mentality. Recurrent, scenario-based learning (including that led by non-policing partners and people with lived experience) was identified as enabling officers to develop practical skills in trauma awareness, exploitation dynamics, neurodiversity and counter-adultification. Training that includes opportunities to rehearse tone, pacing and communication with children was also highlighted as being important in helping to embed the interactional style expected in child-centred encounters. The importance of accessible bite-size learning packages was also highlighted as introductions to new topics or refreshers of existing learning.

A clear message emerged about the breadth of personnel requiring training, including civilian staff, call handlers, custody officers, neighbourhood teams, detectives and senior leaders, reflecting the multiple points of contact children may have with policing and the importance of a force-wide understanding of safeguarding-led practice. While many participants felt such training should be mandatory, they also acknowledged practical challenges relating to resourcing and capacity.

Cross-agency training was identified as having an important role to play in improving safeguarding-led practice, particularly around developing a shared understanding of safeguarding roles and responsibilities and common principles of working.

9.3.7 Embedding participation and feedback

Though examples of good practice exist, there was a clear sense amongst participants that more proactive participatory initiatives were required in the context of policing, both generally and specifically in relation to children affected by violence. Both inspection findings and research also highlight the importance of ensuring child-centred responses at both the individual and systemic levels, including through public accountability measures (usually restricted to adults) and force-level service development (Beckett et al., 2015; Allnock et al., 2026a; Ofsted et al., 2024). This aligns with national commitments to progress child-centred policing.

9.3.8 Accountability, scrutiny, and anti-discriminatory practice

A consistent message threading through all aspects of the study is that of harm done by police as an institution, whether that be through racism, misogyny or other forms of discrimination. Enhanced safeguarding practice must develop from a position of both individual and institutional accountability and include an active commitment to embedding anti-discriminatory practice, transparently reporting on achieved changes and holding individuals – at any level and in any role – to account when expected standards are not met. This includes aligning performance measures with safeguarding priorities and ensuring that internal and external scrutiny bodies routinely examine issues of equity, proportionality and lived experience.

9.3.9 Rethinking what counts as success

Participants, including those across policing, expressed significant discomfort with current performance frameworks, noting that policing is still largely assessed against enforcement-oriented indicators, which can unintentionally disincentivise safeguarding-led practice. They advocated for a broader, more balanced set of metrics that capture relational quality, reductions in vulnerability, continuity of support, timeliness of referrals, equity of access and children's own perceptions of safety and trust. They also emphasised the importance of recognising practice wisdom and lived experience as legitimate forms of evidence, rather than privileging quantitative outcomes alone.

While forces can broaden their own KPIs, participants consistently indicated that meaningful change also requires national direction. Current performance pressures are shaped by Home Office and HMICFRS priorities, which can, at times, privilege enforcement and short-term outputs. To embed safeguarding-led practice, stakeholders suggested that national bodies must mandate broader performance indicators, protect specialist roles, reform inspection frameworks and resource trauma-informed and child-centred training.

9.3.10 Investing in data systems and safeguarding-focused analytics

Inspection findings and stakeholder contributions both emphasise the need for integrated, ethically grounded data systems capable of supporting disaggregated analysis, safeguarding considerations and multi-domain risk assessment.

Fragmented systems were described as a barrier to identifying cumulative risk and tracking safeguarding outcomes. Participants highlighted several areas where enhanced data infrastructure could support safeguarding-led practice, including:

- Prompts within IT systems (for example, cues to consider an NRM referral)
- Dashboards tracking safeguarding pathways, referral destinations and timeliness
- Processes that monitor equity and disproportionality
- The integration of indicators across agencies (for example, missing episodes, health presentations, domestic abuse history and police harm indicators)
- Quality assurance through routine data completeness checks
- Transparent learning cycles and feedback loops
- Simplified referral mechanisms (for example, QR-enabled submissions)

In the force-level survey, some forces reported plans to improve dashboards or risk assessment capabilities, reflecting an emerging recognition of the role data can play in earlier and more proportionate decision-making.

9.4 Interagency working

9.4.1 Enhanced operational structures for multi-agency working

As highlighted throughout this report, a safeguarding-led policing response cannot be delivered in isolation from multi-agency partners and is not intended to function independently of them (DfE, 2026).

For police to contribute meaningfully to a safeguarding-led approach, they must therefore be proactively and consistently involved in multi-agency forums, which might include co-located practice environments and shared governance structures. This reflects the expectations set out in the MASH *Guiding Principles*, which emphasise governance and accountability, communication and collaboration, and joint systems as core features of effective multi-agency safeguarding (VKPP & NPCC, 2025).

A strong linked theme emerging in the study is the need for non-statutory partners to be included in interagency forums. When these professionals are treated as integral safeguarding partners, they provide essential insight into children's communication styles, triggers, peer relationships and day-to-day contexts. Integrating this knowledge early in the process, rather than retrospectively, was seen as supporting more accurate assessments and more child-centred planning and conversations.

9.4.2 Co-location & co-response

Participants also emphasised the value of co-response and co-location arrangements, through which police work directly alongside youth workers, health practitioners or social care professionals at the point of contact, a theme also identified in inspection reports.

Evidence from multiple JTAs and inspection reports demonstrates the value of co-located and well-connected teams. They show that when staff working across missing, exploitation, schools, gangs and CSE pathways sit alongside each other, information is exchanged more quickly and interpreted in a richer context. This practical proximity supports rapid problem-solving, strengthens relationships across organisational boundaries and enables earlier identification of risk factors for violence involving children. Strong MASH interfaces and daily multi-agency briefings similarly support timely responses at the point of referral, ensuring that information is shared, analysed and acted on in a coordinated way (see, for example, Ofsted et al., 2016).

While not formally evaluated, the consistency of these themes across inspection findings and participant accounts suggests that physical proximity, shared practice environments, and joint first-contact responses are important facilitators of effective child-centred safeguarding.

9.4.3 Information-sharing

Enhanced information sharing, including reciprocal information exchange with partners, is a central component of improved multi-agency safeguarding. Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of two-way, lawful information-sharing supported by a clear feedback loop. Standardised agreements, rapid joint briefings and consistent updates on actions taken were seen as mechanisms that reduce fragmentation, prevent misunderstandings between agencies and limit the emotional burden on children who might otherwise have to relive their experiences multiple times. Such approaches were viewed as essential for maintaining continuity around the child and ensuring that all professionals hold an accurate and current safeguarding picture.

Evidence shows that effective information-sharing is closely tied to the quality and consistency of multi-agency relationships. Where partners meet regularly, understand each other's roles and thresholds, and come together around a shared safeguarding purpose, information flows more reliably and supports better assessments. Inspection evidence shows that:

- Robust processes and infrastructure are vital. Areas with clear information-sharing agreements, established digital platforms and routine mechanisms for exchanging intelligence are better able to sustain consistent, lawful and purposeful communication between agencies. Examples include the use of partnership information portals, online forms that allow schools and social care to flag emerging contextual concerns, and structured systems for sharing intelligence about exploitation or locations of concern (see, for example, HMICFRS, 2021; Ofsted et al., 2024a).
- Strategic information-sharing is as important as operational exchange. Strategic multi-agency meetings provide opportunities for partners to share intelligence on patterns, locations and emerging threats, enabling targeted disruption activities and coordinated planning across agencies (Ofsted et al., 2016).
- Clarity of roles, expectations and responsibilities is central to effective information-sharing (see, for example, HMICFRS, 2023). Where partners understand what information they need to share, when to share it, and how it will be used, they are better able to contribute confidently within multi-agency forums. Professional stakeholders echoed this, emphasising the importance of two-way, timely information-sharing supported by feedback loops and consistent updates to help avoid duplication and reduce the emotional burden on children who might otherwise be required to repeat their experiences.

Misalignment of local authority and police force boundaries means that forces may need to negotiate separate information-sharing arrangements with multiple local authorities. In recognition of this, the College of Policing is exploring the feasibility of a national approach to information sharing.

9.4.4 Holistic and proportionate responses

The evidence also highlights the importance of proportionate, multi-agency disruption strategies. Rather than defaulting to reactive enforcement or routinely relocating children out of the area, participants advocated for approaches that target perpetrators, exploitative locations and harmful peer dynamics while maintaining the child's stability and relationships.

Inspection findings similarly indicate that proportionate, multi-agency responses are most effective when they focus on the sources and contexts of harm rather than on punitive action directed at the child. Examples include targeted activity by specialist exploitation teams, multi-agency meetings that analyse patterns of risk and coordinate action around specific concerns, and initiatives that avoid unnecessary criminalisation by offering early intervention or diversion.

9.4.5 Transitions

The evidence points to the importance of visibility and planning across key developmental and service transitions, particularly as an individual legally transitions from childhood to adulthood. Participants described the risks created when support diminishes abruptly at 18 years of age or when SEND status or the victimisation–perpetration overlap are not fully recognised within safeguarding and exploitation pathways, including within national systems such as the NRM. Though not explicitly linked to transitions, national inspection frameworks emphasise the importance of ongoing visibility, coordinated planning and continuity of safeguarding across all

stages of a child's involvement with agencies (HMICFRS, 2024); aligning with an increasing focus on transitional safeguarding (Holmes, 2022).

9.5 Wider systems-level change

A series of wider systems-level changes were also identified as key to progressing enhanced safeguarding-led policing in the area of violence involving children.

9.5.1 Investment in early intervention and diversion

There was an overwhelming consensus across both policing and non-policing partners, and in the desk-based review, on the importance of prevention and early intervention. LCSPRs, for example, highlight the importance of investing in community-led initiatives and dedicated youth engagement roles (see, for example, Birmingham SCP, 2024; Croydon SCP, 2023; South Gloucestershire Children's Partnership, 2024; Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together, 2023); themes that were echoed in the case studies, consultations and surveys.

Greater and more secure investment was identified as key to realising such an approach. Indeed, increased funding to invest in such work was the most frequent response to the force-level survey question *"What external developments (for example, changes in law, guidance, funding, inspection) would help your force better safeguard children known/suspected to be perpetrating violence/harm?"*:

"Funding would enable longer-term initiatives with partners, particularly VRUs, to work with young children at a young age to prevent getting into crime. This is a long-term strategy that would not show results immediately; however, [it] has proven long-term gains" (Force-level survey respondent).

Particular concern was expressed in the professional stakeholder consultations and case studies about the short-term nature of VRU funding and the need for longer-term funding commitments that support the retention of good staff, ensure effective commissioning arrangements with community and voluntary sector partners, and offer greater continuity in support pathways. Such pathways and partnerships are important elements of diversionary initiatives and out-of-court disposals, which is an area Inspections also repeatedly note should be further invested in to prevent unnecessary criminalisation of children.

9.5.2 Identifying and sharing promising or innovative practice

A notable insight from the qualitative components of this study, particularly the professional stakeholder consultations, was the high value participants placed on the opportunity to hear what other forces were doing. Many described these discussions as one of the few opportunities they had to learn about emerging practice, exchange ideas and build the relationships needed to support shared learning. This indicates a strong appetite for regular, structured forums in which police personnel at all levels, not only senior leaders, can come together to share learning, discuss challenges, and co-develop solutions. The importance of regionalising learning so that effective practice does not remain disproportionately London-centric was also recommended, as was the adoption of iterative 'pilot-and-learn' approaches to wider system reform.

Participants also emphasised that proactive investment in evaluation would strengthen the field's ability to understand the difference interventions are making and, in turn, support more nuanced decision-making about future service development priorities.

9.5.3 Inspection and oversight

Participants in this study consistently emphasised that strategic oversight structures, such as PCCs and HMICFRS, play a decisive role in shaping whether safeguarding-led, child-centred practice becomes embedded in day-to-day policing. While local leadership and workforce capabilities remain crucial, many of the levers that influence operational culture sit above the force level, within commissioning, scrutiny and inspection systems.

PCCs, for example, were noted to be able to influence practice not only through high-level vision but also through very explicit contractual and commissioning mechanisms. Participants highlighted that where PCCs made explicit safeguarding commitments in their plans, forces were more able and willing to resource dedicated youth-focused roles and invest in multi-agency collaboration. PCCs (or successive commissioning/oversight bodies)³⁸ can:

- Mandate routine reporting on safeguarding-linked metrics, ensuring these are monitored with the same seriousness as crime-type indicators.
- Require forces to prioritise child-centred, trauma-informed approaches within their performance frameworks (through KPIs tied to relational quality, timeliness of referrals or children's perceptions of fairness).
- Allocate ring-fenced funding for early intervention roles, such as youth engagement officers, navigators in custody or violence reduction projects, and require evidence of both reach and impact.
- Commission independent community organisations to provide scrutiny, lived-experience input or specialist training (for example, on exploitation, cultural competence and neurodiversity).
- Have public scrutiny panels trained in trauma-informed practice that routinely review body-worn camera footage.

HMICFRS inspections and JTAs offer an important mechanism to assess and hold forces accountable for safeguarding performance, particularly in relation to early intervention, multi-agency coordination and equity. HMICFRS audit cycles were noted to be integral to monitoring practice and driving improvement where practice is lacking. Specific actions within these, such as dip-sampling body-worn cameras and eliciting partner perspectives, were observed to be particularly key in this area of practice, though this could be further strengthened by the integration of feedback from children in Inspections.

9.5.4 National frameworks and system alignment

Participants, from both policing and non-policing perspectives, emphasised the need for system-level policy reform, noting that current frameworks are insufficient, poorly implemented and/or misaligned with children's lived realities. The need for an integrated policy framework for violence involving children was also identified as key to addressing many of the barriers outlined in this report. Concerns were expressed about the 'crowded and complex nature' of the policy landscape in this field, emphasising the need to provide a clear policy directive (and supporting legal framework) for a safeguarding-led approach to violence against children. Specific reference was made to the need for alignment between Home Office and DfE policy mandates to provide a clear frame of reference for forces as to both their criminal justice and safeguarding obligations.

Specific changes identified by participants include:

³⁸ While the specific structures through which this oversight is exercised will evolve following the November 2025 announcement of plans to abolish PCCs, the functions of commissioning, scrutiny and performance governance remain critical levers for influencing operational culture.

- A unified approach to children's experiences of harm (rather than siloed harm-type or victim/perpetration-based responses) that can hold children's multi-faceted experiences in view and design proportionate, protective interventions that speak both to the whole and the specificity of children's experiences of harm
- Addressing gaps in policy and legal frameworks (around age parameters for adolescent domestic abuse, for example, or transitional safeguarding concerns)
- Ensuring policies remain updated (for example, SEND and safeguarding specialists highlighted that some statutory guidance, such as the DfE 2014 Missing Children guidance, is outdated; does not reflect current patterns of exploitation, neurodiversity, or contextual harms; and urgently requires a full national review and revision.)
- National and/or regional communications that foreground evidence-based, proportionate messages about risk, in contrast to fear-amplifying narratives that can unintentionally drive defensive weapon-carrying among children
- A single, mandatory national protocol governing data-sharing across police, education, health, social care and the voluntary sector. Existing local pilots (for example, Thames Valley Together and Sentinel) were cited as strong models to scale nationally.
- Moving away from annual or short-term commissioning cycles that undermine the stability and continuity of support. Participants urged the government to legislate minimum three-year commissioning periods for voluntary sector and violence-prevention services, replacing current short-term, crisis-driven funding.
- Statutory guidance defining the remit, boundaries and safeguarding responsibilities of school-based police roles, ensuring they support safety and trust rather than enforcement
- An updated national procedural justice standard around stop and search, requiring clear explanations, respectful communication, oversight of body-worn video and routine disproportionality analysis
- A revised national policy on weapon possession reflecting children's vulnerabilities, not adult criminal frameworks
- Formal policy requirements for vulnerability and exploitation screening at the arrest, custody and pre-charge stages, together with mandatory consultation with specialist services

9.6 Concluding observations

The study identified a series of practical changes that could be made to how police engage with children at an individual level. It also identified a series of broader changes that are required to support the practical exercise of safeguarding-led practice by frontline officers. These span the interrelated domains of police cultures and structures, interagency working and wider system-level barriers and, as such, require action by multiple stakeholders on multiple fronts if a consistent holistic approach to safeguarding children involved in violence is to be realised.

The study findings demonstrate that oversight, inspection, commissioning and national policy must align if safeguarding-led, child-centred policing is to become routine. Participants stressed that when these structures reinforce one another, when scrutiny prioritises relational quality, when PCCs fund youth-focused roles and when national guidance is embedded into data and performance systems, forces are far better positioned to reduce disparities, strengthen early intervention pathways and treat safeguarding as core police business rather than an optional enhancement.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This study set out to understand how police safeguard and protect children involved in violence, what constitutes 'best practice', where gaps and inequities persist and what changes are required to move towards a consistently child-centred, safeguarding-led response. Across all stages of the research, a consistent picture emerges: Safeguarding-led policing is possible; is occurring in some areas; and is valued by children, families and partners, but practice remains uneven, fragile and dependent on local structures, cultures and individuals rather than embedded system design.

10.2 Contribution to the evidence base

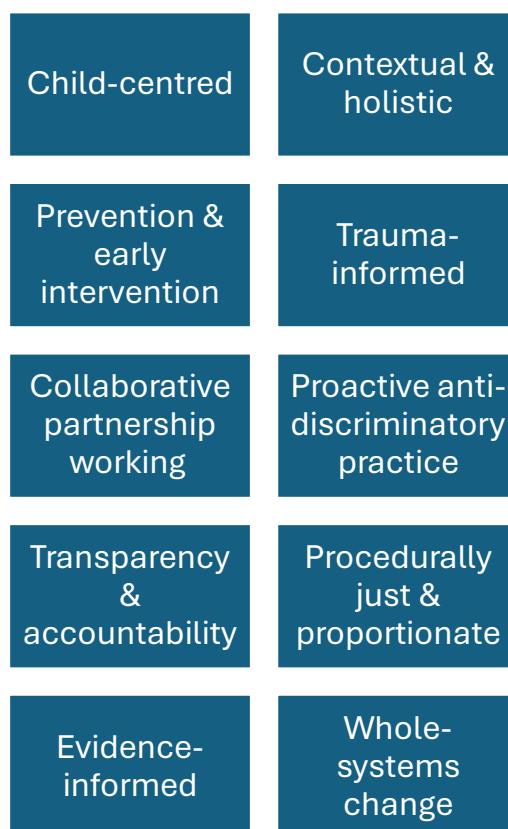
This study advances the evidence in four important ways. Firstly, it brings together multiple data sources to articulate a clear framework for 'best practice' safeguarding-led policing responses. While individual strands of that framework exist in national guidance and specialist teams, this study synthesises them into an integrated set of principles (as summarised in Figure 10.1) grounded in a broad range of evidence sources.

Secondly, the study provides new empirical insight into frontline knowledge gaps: Not only where officers lack safeguarding literacy but also where organisational pressures and cultures shape how that knowledge is applied. This distinction helps elucidate why strong practice is visible in specialist units yet inconsistent in first-contact encounters.

Thirdly, it evidences the mechanisms of inequity within police and multi-agency responses, including adultification, racialised assumptions, neurodivergence-related misinterpretation, missing data, gendered assumptions and fragmented pathways that differently position children according to how they first enter the system.

Fourthly, the study offers practice-grounded insights into the structural and system-level conditions that enable or inhibit safeguarding-led policing, drawing on case study examples that show what is practically achievable when systems are aligned.

Figure 10.1: Ten principles of ‘best practice’



10.3 Insights for practice and policy

Several cross-cutting insights emerge from the study.

Safeguarding-led practice depends on whole-system alignment. Specialist units demonstrate that child-centred, contextual and trauma-informed policing can be operationalised, but scaling this requires coherent pathways, supportive supervision, consistent expectations and a reduction in conflicting performance pressures.

First contact is pivotal. Children’s early experiences with police strongly shape trust, engagement and the success of later safeguarding interventions. Ensuring relational, developmentally attuned and procedurally fair encounters is fundamental.

Policing cannot achieve safeguarding alone. Effective responses rely on multi-agency planning, consistent thresholds, reciprocal information-sharing and parity of respect between police and non-police professionals. Where this coordination exists, children receive earlier and more coherent support.

Equity must be an explicit aim of safeguarding. Patterns of adultification, racialised assumptions, gendered invisibility and unrecognised neurodivergence are features of the current system. Addressing them requires accurate data, reflective practice, culturally sensitive approaches and an acknowledgement of historical and ongoing harms.

Prevention and early intervention are achievable when structurally supported. Case studies demonstrate that when systems invest in prevention, such as school-based officers with clear safeguarding remits, contextual multi-agency teams and early diversion panels, children’s risks are identified sooner, escalation is reduced and trust improves.

10.4 Areas for future research and development

As explored in Chapter 2, both the breadth and the time limits of the study inevitably limited the depth to which issues could be explored. Key areas in the data that would benefit from further investigation include the following: How to practically address ongoing inequities, how to best achieve the required culture change across frontline policing and how to practically support officers in recognising vulnerability alongside perpetration. As the practice principles were developed primarily on the basis of professional accounts (captured in the desk-based review and primary research), these should be reviewed with children and young people themselves. Their views on how best to improve children and young people's opportunities to influence responses to their needs and experiences should also be elicited.

10.5 Concluding reflections

Across all strands of evidence, the central message is clear: Children's experiences of policing are too often shaped by geography, pathway, organisational culture and identity rather than by consistent child-centred safeguarding principles. Yet the study also shows that when policing, partners and systems align around children's rights, developmental needs and contexts, safeguarding-led practice is both feasible and impactful.

The challenge ahead is not only to identify what 'best practice' looks like – this study provides that blueprint – but also to create the structural, cultural and relational conditions that make such practice the norm rather than the exception. The findings offer key insights for future YEF guidance and sector-wide improvement centred on a shared ambition: That every child affected by violence, whether harmed or harming, receives a response that protects, understands and supports them.

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Appendix 1: Force-level survey

Force-Level Survey: Safeguarding Children Involved in Violence

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Some important information before you start:

- **SCOPE:** This survey focuses only on violence perpetrated by children (under 18). Violence by adults is outside of scope. All forms of youth violence are in scope.
- **TIMEFRAMES:** Please note the new date - the survey will remain open until **TUESDAY 3 FEBRUARY**.
- **SURVEY QUESTIONS:** Please feel free to pass on any of the questions that you are unable/would prefer not to answer.
- **REPORTING:** Findings will only be reported anonymously; no force will be named.
- **CONSENT:** You will need to complete a short consent statement which you'll find on the next page. If you want a refresh of the terms of involvement you can download the information sheet [here](#):
- **QUESTIONS:** If you have any questions about the survey, please contact Helen Richardson Foster at hrichardsonfoster@lancashire.ac.uk

Section 1: About you

Police force: [drop down list]

Your name: [open text response]

Your role: [open text response]

Your department/unit: [open text response]

Section 2: Patterns of violence involving children

1. Please indicate, using the scale below (where 1 is very low and 5 is very high), the extent to which these forms of violence and harm, perpetrated by children, are a current priority for your force:

	1	2	3	4	5	Don't know
Weapon-enabled violence (e.g. knife crime, firearms)						
'Gang' or group-based violence						
Sexual violence (any form of sexual harm perpetrated by children)						
Criminal exploitation (including county lines)						
Online harm (of any nature)						
Domestic abuse in peer relationships						
Child-to-parent/sibling violence						
Other, please specify in the box below: [open text box]						

2. Have you seen any changes in the patterns of violence or harm perpetrated by children within your force area in last two years (for example, the nature of violence, where it is occurring, characteristics of children perpetrating or experiencing it)?
[open text response]

Section 3: Data

This section covers collection and use of data about violence involving children. If you are unable to answer any of these questions, please just leave blank and answer those you can.

3. Which of the following types of data does your force routinely monitor, in relation to violence involving children? (select that all that apply)

- ☐ Data about offence type/nature of harm
- ☐ Data about levels of harm (number of offences/suspects/victims etc)
- ☐ Data on victimisation/perpetration overlap
- ☐ Stop and search data
- ☐ Data on possession of a weapon
- ☐ Data on children going missing
- ☐ Any other data, please specify in the box below: [open text response]

And in terms of the demographics of children involved:

- ☐ Age
- ☐ Ethnicity
- ☐ Gender
- ☐ Neurodivergence or SEND needs
- ☐ Other demographic features, please note in the box below: [open text response]

4. Which of the following sources of data are most helpful in understanding the scale and nature of violence by children in your force? (select up to five)

- ☐ Strategic profiling (e.g. problem profiles; hotspot mapping)
- ☐ Case-level flags and indicators
- ☐ Data dashboards
- ☐ Routine performance monitoring
- ☐ Data from specialist in-force team (e.g. exploitation unit)
- ☐ VRU data
- ☐ Data from strategic oversight board
- ☐ Data from multi-agency intelligence sharing/multi-agency panels
- ☐ Operational tasking
- ☐ Community engagement
- ☐ Other, please specify in the box below: [open text box]

5. Does your data show any demographic patterns (around a child's age, gender, ethnicity, SEND etc) in relation to the following issues?

- a) Known/suspected perpetration of different types of violence/harm [open text response]
- b) Stop and search [open text response]
- c) Possession of a weapon [open text response]
- d) Patterns of children going missing [open text response]

6. Are there any data that you don't currently have access to (in-force or via partner agencies), that you think would help you better address violence involving children in your force? [open text response]

Section 4: Safeguarding children from violence

7. What stage of development is your force currently at, in relation to ensuring a consistent safeguarding-led response to:

	Early stages of development	Somewhat developed	Well developed	Don't know
a) Children experiencing violence/harm				
b) Children perpetrating violence/harm				
c) Children who are known to both experience and perpetrate violence/harm				

8. Which department(s)/unit(s) hold lead responsibility for safeguarding in relation to violence involving children? If this differs according to type of violence or whether identified as victim or suspect, please include that information. [open text response]

9. Is there a dedicated in-force role/roles that champion a safeguarding-led response to children involved in violence (e.g. child/youth lead or safeguarding lead)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

9b. If yes, what is this role and what difference do you think it makes? [open text response]

10. What policies or strategies inform your approach to safeguarding children involved in violence? (e.g. Serious Youth Violence Strategy; Working Together to Safeguard Children). Please note if these are force-specific or national, in your response. [open text response]

11. Do you have any specific force-level policies/procedures for safeguarding children in the following contexts? Please note what these are and, if you wish to, please email the research team a copy of relevant policies.

- ☐ Going missing [open text response]
- ☐ Stop and search [open text response]
- ☐ Possession of a weapon [open text response]
- ☐ Perpetrating violence [open text response]
- ☐ Perpetration/victimisation overlap [open text response]

Section 5: Child perpetration of violence

This next section focuses specifically on safeguarding children who are suspected or known to perpetrate violence/harm.

12. What do you think are the key challenges to safeguarding children who are known/suspected to perpetrate harm? Please select up to five:

- ☐ Inconsistent or insufficient training across the workforce
- ☐ Resource constraints (e.g. staffing, time, funding)
- ☐ Fragmented multi-agency coordination
- ☐ Inadequate policy guidance or strategic direction
- ☐ Mistrust of the police
- ☐ Legal or procedural limitations (e.g. thresholds, custody arrangements)
- ☐ Poor data quality or fragmented intelligence system
- ☐ Lack of trauma-informed or child-centred practice
- ☐ Lack of professional curiosity
- ☐ Tensions between safeguarding and criminal justice considerations
- ☐ Don't know

☐ Other (please specify in the box below): [open text response]

13. Please share any reflections on what might help address these challenges: [open text response]

14. To what degree are the following mechanisms used to identify and respond to the safeguarding needs of children known/suspected to perpetrate harm?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Don't know
Formal safeguarding referral						
Multi-agency assessment processes (e.g. MASH, strategy meetings)						
Internal police safeguarding protocols or checklists						
Officer discretion or informal assessment						
Referral to specialist teams (e.g. exploitation units, youth offending services)						
Other, please state in the box below: [open text response]						

15. What in-force initiatives have taken place to support officers to understand and implement their safeguarding duties in relation to children suspected/known to be perpetrating violence?

	Ongoing	Ad hoc/one off	Not taken place	Don't know
Training of specialist teams				
Training of frontline officers/broader force				
Multi-agency training				
Internal awareness-raising campaign				
Guidance on making safeguarding referrals				
Access to specialist in-force advice				
Access to external safeguarding specialist				
Other - please describe in the box below: [open text response]				

16. What, if anything, do you think your force is doing particularly well in relation to safeguarding children known/suspected to perpetrate violence/harm? Please include information on what contributed to this positive practice. [open text response]

17. What, if any, future initiatives are planned to help better safeguard children known/suspected to perpetrate violence/harm in your force? [open text response]

18. What external developments (e.g. changes in law, guidance, funding, inspection) would help your force better safeguard children known/suspected to be perpetrating violence/harm? [open text response]

Thank you for answering our questions. If there is anything further you would like to add about safeguarding children involved in violence, please do so here: [open text response]