Feasibility of a survey on child abuse

Qualitative research findings

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Executive summary

Introduction and background

This report details the findings of a qualitative feasibility study on whether and how a survey on child abuse could be conducted in future. It brings together thematic findings from interviews and focus groups with young adults who experienced abuse as children, parents/guardians, school staff and child protection leads. The research was commissioned by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to feed into a wider feasibility study exploring whether and how a survey could be carried out.

If conducted successfully, a survey could help to address an important gap in existing evidence, as no single source currently reports the scale and nature of child abuse in the UK (ONS, 2019). Collecting data from young people on such a sensitive topic presents a number of challenges, however, which require careful consideration. The feasibility research is, therefore, an important first step towards establish whether a survey could be carried out successfully to fill this evidence gap.

Research aims

A key aim of the research was to explore the perspectives on the proposed new survey of young people who had experienced abuse and their parents/guardians. It also sought to explore areas identified by ONS for further investigation: willingness to participate whether and how data could best be collected; inclusion of particular groups; and safeguarding considerations and provision.

Methodology

Qualitative methods were used to gather the views of four key participant groups. Overall, the research involved:

- Four depth interviews with young adults with experience of abuse in childhood
- Two focus group with parents whose children experienced abuse in childhood
- Five focus groups with senior staff from a range of secondary schools and sixth form settings
- Ten depth interviews with child protection leads working in children's social care.

Interviews with up to nine children and five additional young adults, and three further focus groups with parents/guardians were also planned. Recruitment challenges meant, however, that it was not possible to conduct all fieldwork as intended.

Key findings

The following section provides an overview of key findings related to the five overarching research questions posed by ONS.

Would children and young adults with past experience of abuse, parents/guardians of children with past experience of abuse, and schools agree to a survey on child abuse?

For young people, parents and school leads, willingness to take part in or support delivery of the survey was partly conditional on design decisions such as eligibility criteria (including the possibility of exclusions relating to developmental stage, age, and perceived vulnerability) and disclosure requirements and processes. Ensuring children would have access to appropriate support before, during, and after a survey was a fundamental consideration highlighted by participants across groups.

Other key considerations affecting willingness included:

- individuals’ understanding of the need for a survey and expectations around its outcomes
- the degree of choice and control young people would be offered, in relation both to voluntary participation and, for those reporting experiences of abuse, the level of detail that would be required
- the delivery approach, including the level of flexibility that could be offered to schools, and choice for those aged 16–25 about the mode of survey administration
- the extent of advance notice and flexibility of scheduling.

Related to all of these, participants across the sample stressed the importance of provision of advance information about the purpose and parameters of the survey to support informed consent and encourage participation.

Would children and young adults be able to recall and willing to report experiences of abuse in a survey?

Young adults felt that respondents’ recall would vary on an individual basis, rather than in relation to characteristics such as age, gender, or the nature of abuse experienced. Asking about experiences across young people’s whole lives could reduce burden on respondent recall of precise timeframes and could avoid giving the impression that abuse that had continued over longer periods or was less recent was considered less important.

Reflecting on the level of detail they would feel comfortable providing in a survey, participants anticipated greater apprehension about questions requiring more specific information, particularly in relation to who was involved in abuse. Giving respondents control and choice about how much detail they provided was raised as an important consideration. A tiered approach to structuring questions – with less specific, closed response options before optional follow-up questions – was welcomed as a means of achieving this.

Participants across all four groups felt that confidentiality would influence the honesty of young people’s survey responses. Young adult participants said that they would have been unlikely to provide information about abuse that was not already known to others if it were to be shared for safeguarding purposes or could be accessed by parents/guardians.

Could a survey on child abuse be inclusive of children and young adults with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)?

Views were mixed on whether young people with SEND could be appropriately included. Key challenges related to comprehension, communication, and suggestibility. Three key approaches were discussed to enable young people with SEND to take part in the survey: basing eligibility on age and developmental stage; creating an accessible version of the survey; and allowing schools the flexibility to offer children one-to-one support to complete the survey if needed.

Could children who are home-schooled take part in a survey?

Key challenges to inclusion of home-schooled children related to sampling, recruitment and aftercare. Social care departments might be able to facilitate sampling and recruitment of those home-schooled children on their records, but registers of home-schooled children are not mandatory or comprehensive. Clear communication around the purpose and parameters of the research, including assurances around how data would be anonymised, could help to mitigate parental reticence, however.

Could appropriate safeguarding be provided to carry out a survey on child abuse?

Participants' views on what would constitute appropriate safeguarding and how it would best be carried out were mixed. If disclosure processes were implemented, participants noted that the administrative approach would need careful consideration.

If referrals were made directly by the survey administrator, as proposed by ONS, it would be necessary to determine with individual authorities what processes that would need to be put in place to align with local requirements. Barriers included variations in local approaches; the need to navigate schools' legal obligations and duty of care; and limited access to sufficient information and relevant contacts, which potentially linked to increased burden on children's services where they would be required to gather additional information. Timeliness of responses and coordination of support for young people were also important.

Two alternative options were proposed: signposting young people to standard avenues through which they could make disclosures directly, and returning cases where abuse was reported in the survey to school safeguarding teams to facilitate referral processes.

Participants across all four groups emphasised that, regardless of the approach taken in relation to safeguarding, ensuring that access to emotional support and aftercare was in place for young people should be a fundamental consideration. This included signposting to support within and beyond the survey setting.

School leads also indicated that the level of detail survey questions could address would necessarily be constrained by implications for safeguarding. A key concern was the risk that, if questions could be considered leading, formal investigation of disclosures of abuse could be compromised.

1 Introduction

This report details the findings of NatCen's second qualitative feasibility study for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on whether and how a survey focusing on child abuse could be conducted. This chapter provides the policy background and explains the research aims and methodology.

1.1 Background and context to the research

The research was commissioned by ONS to feed into a wider feasibility study by its Centre for Crime and Justice, which aims to determine whether a survey to measure the current prevalence of child abuse in the UK could be conducted effectively (ONS, 2021). The feasibility study responds to a recommendation from the National Statistician's Crime Statistics Advisory Committee that a UK-wide survey of all forms of child abuse and neglect should be commissioned by the Government.[1]

1.1.1 Background to the feasibility study

There is no single source reporting the current scale of child abuse in the UK (ONS, 2019). As such, a national survey would provide valuable information on the scale and nature of child abuse, which could inform policy in this area, help to improve support provided to victims/survivors and ultimately reduce the prevalence of child abuse.

Assessing whether such a survey could be carried out successfully is an important first step towards filling this evidence gap. The ONS Centre for Crime and Justice is therefore undertaking a feasibility study focusing on the potential coverage and methodology for a survey, its ethical and legal considerations, and whether it would provide accurate and useful data. To date, this has involved desk research on areas including international practice in measuring child abuse; stakeholder consultation to gather views and recommendations on implementing a survey; and qualitative research (also conducted by NatCen) which gathered the views of specialists in supporting victim/survivors of abuse; education practitioners; children with no known experience of abuse; and parents/guardians of such children. (The earlier research design also included discussions with children, young adults, and parents/guardians of children with past experience of abuse, but for various reasons it was not possible to speak with these groups.)

The current research seeks to build on these findings, gathering views of additional participant groups and exploring areas identified in the earlier phases of work for further investigation.

1.2 Research aims

A key aim of this research was to explore the perspectives on the proposed new survey of young people who had experienced abuse and their parents/guardians, which had not been possible in our first study.

This research also sought to explore areas identified by ONS for further investigation, including:

- Willingness to participate: whether children and young adults with past experience of abuse would participate in a survey of this nature; whether their parents/guardians would support this; and whether schools would support survey delivery

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[1] This was a key recommendation of the Task and Finish Group of the National Statistician's Crime Statistics Advisory Committee, established in 2015 to make recommendations for improvements to the official statistics on child abuse.

- Feasibility of data collection: young people’s ability to recall and report experiences of abuse in a survey
- Inclusion of particular groups: whether a survey could be inclusive of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and children who are home-schooled
- Safeguarding considerations and provision.

To explore these issues, this research also sought to speak with:

- senior school staff (hereafter referred to as school leads) – including headteachers and deputies, designated safeguarding leads (DSLs), and leads working with children with SEND; and
- child protection leads in local authorities (in England, Scotland and Wales) and Health and Social Care Trusts (in Northern Ireland).

The findings in this report will help inform decisions ONS makes around whether to pilot a survey of this nature.

1.3 Methodology

Ethical approval for all stages of this research was granted by the National Statistician’s Data Ethics Advisory Committee (NSDEC) and NatCen’s internal Research Ethics Committee.

In-depth qualitative methods, involving a combination of interviews and focus groups, were used to explore the views of the different participant groups on issues related to the key research questions. Table 1-1 shows the data collection method used with each participant group, the targets set for the number of interviews and focus groups with each, and achieved totals. For the reasons discussed in section 1.4, it was not possible to include children with past experiences of abuse in the research or to reach the target numbers of encounters with young adults and parents/guardians..

Table 1-1 Summary of target and achieved interviews/ focus groups by participant group

Participant group	Mode	Target	Achieved total
Children (aged 11–17)	Interview	9	0
Young adults (aged 18–25)	Interview	9	4
Parents/guardians	Focus group	5	2 (5 participants)
School leads	Focus group	5	5 (18 participants)
Child protection leads	Interviews	10	10

Fieldwork took place between August 2021 and January 2022. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, with focus groups lasting around 90 minutes.

1.3.1 Sampling

Purposive sampling methods were used to select participants. This involved selecting sampling criteria that would ensure diversity in the views, experiences or behaviours of interest within each participant group: children and young adults with past experience of abuse; parents and guardians of children with past experiences of abuse; school leads; and child protection leads. The sampling criteria selected are presented in Table 1-2.

Table 1-2 Sampling criteria used for each participant group

	Primary sampling criteria	Additional criteria
Young adults and children	Age Gender	Geographic location Ethnicity Types of abuse experienced (if provided)[2]
Parents and guardians	Child's age Child's gender	Geographic location Ethnicity Types of abuse their child experienced (if provided)
School leads	Geographic location School type (independent/ state, faith/ non-faith, single/ mixed sex, special/ mainstream) Individual roles	
Child protection leads	Geographic location (country, region, and urban/rural setting) Number of schools in area	

The sampling approach for schools and child protection leads aimed to ensure that the research was able to explore differences in safeguarding guidance and operational practice – including variation across devolved nations, and among local authorities/trusts and schools – as well as the range of perspectives relating to local contexts and school populations. For school leads, the aim was to convene separate, geographically-focused groups for each of the home nations – England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. As detailed in section 1.4, however, this was not possible for all four nations. A fifth group focused specifically on SEND was successfully recruited.

1.3.2 Recruitment

Recruitment of each participant group was undertaken as follows.

Recruitment of children, young adults and parents/guardians

Children, young adults and parents/guardians were recruited through support organisations. Across the UK, over 30 relevant support organisations were contacted, including those working across home nations and those delivering support at a local level, some supporting people in relation to all forms of abuse and others focused on particular abuse types (such as child sexual abuse). Honoraria payments were offered to organisations supporting recruitment as thanks for their time.

Organisations able to assist with recruitment nominated a lead contact (gatekeeper) to support recruitment, who was briefed by a member of the NatCen research team and provided with recruitment materials. Gatekeepers then spoke to potential participants about the research. Individuals interested in taking part could consent for their contact details to be passed to NatCen, or gatekeepers could liaise with the research team on their behalf to arrange the interview or focus group discussion.

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[2] Any young person who experienced abuse in childhood and had accessed support was eligible to take part in the research. The range of abuse types reflected the broad range of abuse types ONS anticipate the proposed survey would cover: neglect, physical and emotional abuse, sexual abuse, exploitation, and exposure to domestic violence/ abuse.

For young adults and parents, information about the study was also disseminated via support organisations' social media and networks, and shared to the research team's wider network, to facilitate eligible individuals to opt in directly.

School leads

Three recruitment approaches were used to involve school leads in the research:

- A list of schools was compiled using information in the public domain. This list included information on geographic region, urban/rural geography, school type and size. Potential participants were contacted directly via email.
- Information about the research was disseminated via relevant professional membership bodies, with individuals invited to opt in.
- Drawing on the personal networks staff across NatCen and in the wider ONS team – personal contacts within schools were sent introductory information about the research and invited to express interest in taking part.

Child protection leads

A list of children's social care departments in local authorities and, in Northern Ireland, Health and Social Care Trusts were purposively sampled using publicly available information, with diversity across nation, region, urban/rural location and number of schools supported. Child protection leads were then contacted directly via publicly available email addresses.

All those who expressed interest in taking part were sent a participant information sheet, outlining the research aims, purpose and what participation would involve. Interviews and focus groups were arranged at dates and times convenient for those wishing to take part.

1.3.3 Interview and focus group conduct

All interviews and focus groups were carried out remotely through the videoconferencing platform Zoom™. (Young adults and child protection leads were offered telephone interviews as an alternative, but none took up this option.)

To support participants to give fully informed consent, researchers reiterated information about the study at the start of each discussion and encouraged individuals to ask any questions about the research before deciding whether to participate. Researchers also ensured participants understood that they could skip any questions they preferred not to answer, take a break or exit the discussion at any time, without needing to provide a reason. Additionally, it was made clear that there was no expectation that participants would discuss any experiences of abuse that they, their families, or others known to them had had: questions about direct experiences of abuse were not included in the interviews or focus groups.

Tailored topic guides were used to support data collection. These were used flexibly to guide each discussion, ensuring consistency of topic coverage across members of the research team while allowing researchers to respond to the nature, dynamic, and content of each interview or focus group. More information on the topic guides used, and an overview of the key themes covered, are included in Appendix A.

At the end of each interview or focus group, all young adults and parents were provided with contact details for a range of support organisations. Young adults, parents, and school staff were provided with a £40 voucher to thank them for their time.

1.3.4 Analysis

With participants' permission, all interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim to support detailed thematic analysis using NatCen's Framework matrix approach (Spencer et al., 2014). Thematic analysis explored the full range of experiences and views, interrogating data to identify similarities and differences.

Throughout the report, verbatim quotations from focus groups and interviews are used to highlight key themes and findings where appropriate. Care has been taken to anonymise participants' views.

1.4 Challenges and limitations of the research

While this study was robust in its design and conduct, it is important to acknowledge limitations affecting its findings. These are discussed in this section.

For young people, parents and guardians, eligibility to take part in the research was limited to those who had received specialist support in relation to their experience of abuse. Defining eligibility in this way supported an ethical requirement to minimise risk of harm to study participants by ensuring that they had access to appropriate support. It should be acknowledged, however, that the views of young people and parents/guardians who had not received specialist support in relation to abuse experiences were not captured in this study. This should be taken into account when considering the research findings.

A fundamental methodological challenge for this research was that, despite varied and prolonged efforts, we were unable to recruit any children to the research, and smaller numbers of young adults and parents of children with known experience of abuse took part than originally planned. This reduced the range and diversity that could be achieved across sample characteristics including geographic location, ethnicity, age and types of abuse experienced. Gatekeepers with whom we worked to facilitate this recruitment reported a range of challenges, including their own capacity in the context of wider pressures on services; organisations' limited access to young people at appropriate points in their support journey to engage with research; and a lack of interest.

A range of approaches were used to mitigate these challenges as far as possible. These included offering honaria to all organisations supporting the recruitment as thanks and to help mitigate resource challenges; engaging with support organisations at the earliest point possible; using existing contacts identified by NatCen and ONS colleagues; disseminating invitations for young adults and parents to opt in to the research directly through support organisations' social media, member newsletters, and local networks; expanding the number of gatekeeper contacts; and extending the recruitment and fieldwork timeframes. Eligibility criteria for children and young people were also expanded in line with the expert guidance of support organisations: initially limited to young people whose abuse was two or more years in the past, eligibility was extended to any who had accessed support.

It was also more challenging to recruit school leads than originally anticipated, with the pressures placed on schools and individuals in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic cited as a key barrier. We were able to convene the planned number of focus groups, albeit with lower participant numbers and more limited geographic coverage than anticipated. Adaptations were made to our recruitment approach to support this, including contacting eligible individuals directly through NatCen and ONS staff networks.

A limitation of the achieved sample relates to its geographical diversity. Child protection and school lead participants' roles and remits covered work across the UK. However, the samples of young adults and parents were less diverse in terms of geographic spread: young adults were based in England and Wales; and parents were all based in England. Additionally, we were unable to recruit sufficient numbers of school lead participants for separate focus groups for Wales and Scotland, and instead included participants from different nations in some of the focus groups (with a greater proportion of participants in England in the achieved sample than originally envisaged). As such, we are unable to compare similarities and differences across home nations as originally intended.

1.5 Outline of the report

The rest of the report brings together the views of young adults, parents, child protection leads, and school staff. It is structured in the following way:

- **Chapter 2** explores participants' views about important survey design parameters, namely the proposed target population, survey content and design
- **Chapter 3** presents participants' perspectives on how the survey could be delivered for different groups, including where and how children and young adults should complete the questionnaire
- **Chapter 4** discusses views and expectations relating to confidentiality, disclosures of harm and data linkage, including key concerns and challenges, and preferred approaches
- **Chapter 5** describes participants' expectations around support for young people, parents/guardians, schools and services before, during, and after the survey
- **Chapter 6** sets out participants' views on the overall value and viability of a survey – including the need for and potential benefits of a survey on child abuse, and reflections on whether they would participate or support its delivery
- **Chapter 7** draws together key findings relating to each of the five overarching research questions, which can inform ONS's decision-making around piloting a survey on child abuse.

2 Key considerations: survey scope and design

This chapter explores participants' views about important survey design parameters, namely the proposed target population, survey content and design.

2.1 Survey target population

As well as responding to specific questions eliciting views about inclusion of three particular groups – young people with SEND, home-schooled children, and looked after children – participants spontaneously reflected on the inclusion of young people across the proposed age range, and of those who might be considered to experience greater vulnerability or support needs. These findings are discussed in the following sections.

2.1.1 Survey age group

ONS propose that children aged 11–17 and young adults aged 18–25 take part in a survey. Parents and school leads highlighted that understanding of concepts and language related to abuse would vary considerably across the proposed age range, and within the 11–15 age group to whom the survey would be delivered in school settings. School leads felt that this variation in understanding would be greater due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which had significantly delayed learning and development of younger year groups and exacerbated differences in maturity levels across genders.

> *"Year 7s really are operating at late Year 5 stage. They've missed out significant chunks of their education […] So, we treat them as if they are literally a year-and-a-half behind in that […] personal development. […] The immaturity, especially with the boys, is significant." (School lead)*

One view among parents was that it would be preferable to exclude children below year 11 (aged 15–16) from a survey of this nature. This was driven by a desire to minimise children's exposure to such a sensitive topic to preserve their 'innocence', and a view that their understanding of concepts around abuse should be developed gradually through age-appropriate education:

> *"I just think at that stage you still think of them as quite young and quite innocent, and it's horrible to cloud their mind with this […] murky world that we're in." (Parent)*

Others, however, thought it would be beneficial to include younger age groups, not least because the survey would offer an opportunity for them to report experiences of abuse. Participants anticipated that the survey would need to be tailored to different age groups to ensure it was appropriate and questions would be comprehensible for children with differing levels of knowledge and understanding.

> *"I don't think it would be appropriate – I don't think it would really work, even – to have the same questions for our Year 7s as you do our Year 11s! They are worlds apart at the moment." (School lead)*

Some school leads anticipated that separate versions of the survey would be necessary, rather than a single survey that would be suitable for younger children being administered to all ages. This was because older children could find it overly simplistic or patronising.

> *"If you had tailored your vocabulary and language to be accessible to Years 7 and 8, my 10s and 11s might potentially find that quite infantile and a little bit condescending. So,*

> *I think you need almost two surveys, getting to the same point and asking the same questions, but just age-differentiated.” (School lead)*

2.1.2 Should all children be included in the survey?

Some school leads suggested that it might not be appropriate for young people they would consider particularly vulnerable to be included in the survey. Among the examples given were children experiencing mental health issues or other illnesses, those with known experiences of child protection processes, and those for whom English is an additional language.

One view was that, as well as parents having the right to withdraw their child, schools should be involved in screening proposed samples of children to exclude those for whom they would anticipate the survey presenting difficulties. An alternative suggestion was that schools could be involved in introducing the survey to children to invite them to make their own decisions about whether to take part, for example convening one-to-one discussions with children, which might better support informed decision-making.

2.1.3 Including children with SEND

Views were mixed on whether young people with SEND could be appropriately included in the survey. Key challenges identified by school leads working with children with SEND related to their comprehension, communication, and suggestibility, as well as the potential emotional impact of sensitive questions for those who had experienced abuse. School leads noted that some children would not be able to engage with survey questions at all, and that some were likely to provide inaccurate responses – either from a desire to please, or because they tended to report as their own experiences things they had seen or heard about elsewhere.

> *“Thinking of our pupils that are in that age bracket […] you'll get pupils who won't understand what they're being asked [… and] others who will answer, their data will be based on something they've seen on EastEnders or Emmerdale.” (School lead)*

Some participants felt that these challenges could be mitigated, informed in some instances by previous experiences of working with research teams to adapt and administer surveys successfully on topics such as health and children’s safety. Three key approaches were discussed to enable young people with SEND to take part in the survey:

- Basing eligibility on age and developmental stage
- Creating an accessible version of the survey
- Allowing schools the flexibility to offer children one-to-one support to complete the survey if needed.

The following sections explore each of these in turn.

Eligibility and screening

School leads suggested that eligibility to participate should be based on young people’s cognitive ability/developmental stage, rather than age alone, to account for learning needs and developmental delay. One suggestion was that some form of pre-assessment or screening would be required to establish eligibility.

> *“Some of our children, you can ask them a question and […] the ed psych reports will show […] they've not actually understood – because […] they may be 14, but they're academically age three. Would there be […] a pre-assessment? […] to see whether they've got the capability to understand and answer questions at an appropriate level.” (School lead)*

Tailored survey materials

School leads felt it would be necessary to tailor the survey to meet some young people's accessibility/learning needs, drawing on specialist expertise to adapt the survey format and language, which might include, for example, use of visual communication tools or Makaton.[3] Testing the questionnaire would be important, and some school leads wanted schools to be consulted and provide feedback on the proposed questions as part of the survey development phase. Reflecting on previous experience of developing accessible survey materials, some noted that this could have considerable time and resource implications.

Support

School leads said that many children with SEND would need one-to-one support to take part in the survey. Participants discussed support from school staff, including staff reading and guiding children through the survey questionnaire; interpretation of both questions and answers to children's particular communication methods; and filling gaps in information provided by children to ensure their responses were sufficiently clear. (Specific mechanisms that could be used to support participation outside school settings were not discussed.)

For children taking part in school settings, school leads considered this support would be best provided by school staff for two reasons. First, children would likely feel more comfortable taking part with support from individuals with whom they had established, trusted relationships. Second, expertise and familiarity with individual children's way of communicating would be necessary to interpret and record their responses as accurately as possible.

> *"It would be possible to gather information about what children have experienced […] if they're asked by trusted people in […] language that they can understand […] we'll have children who've got very idiosyncratic communication styles, but people who know them best could do that." (School lead)*

Completing the survey with this kind of support would have clear implications for children's confidentiality, and some participants noted that this could affect the honesty of their responses. The approach could align with how children were typically supported in school, however, and one view was that it was therefore an appropriate and manageable way of ensuring that those who wanted to participate in the survey could do so.

2.1.4 Inclusion of harder-to-reach groups

Interviews with child protection leads included discussion of concerns and challenges that might arise for groups of young people that might face particular barriers to taking part in the survey – including looked-after children and home-schooled children. Participants were also asked whether any other groups would face barriers to taking part. This section sets out the challenges and possible mitigations that were discussed.

Looked-after children

Participants highlighted two key challenges to how looked-after children might participate in the survey:

- Potential **barriers to accessing looked-after children** were disengagement from support offered by children's services, which might make it difficult to contact individuals through

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[3] Makaton is a language programme combining signs with symbols and speech to enable people to communicate (further information available at https://makaton.org/)

social care teams, and research fatigue, which might reduce interest in taking part among those young people who could be contacted.

- The high incidence of abuse and trauma among looked-after children heightens the importance of **appropriate support being available and accessible** to them at all stages of the survey.[4]

Child protection leads confirmed that local authorities/health and social care trusts held records of looked-after children, which might be used to sample and recruit this group. This could either involve a sample being drawn and provided to the research team (assuming appropriate data sharing agreements could be put in place), or children's services drawing a sample using a sampling specification provided by the research team and introducing the research to children. One suggestion was that this could be done via familiar teams, such as children's social workers, for example. Cross-referencing with the school-based samples would also be important, as it was noted that the majority of school-aged looked-after children would be attending mainstream education.

Additional or alternative mechanisms through which looked-after children could be approached included their placements, support housing units, and voluntary forums such as service user and care leavers' groups.

One view was that, given the known high incidence of abuse and trauma, child protection teams should be involved in screening the potential sample and be able to exclude young people who were considered particularly vulnerable. Directly introducing the survey to young people one-to-one was the preferred approach of some child protection leads, as this would ensure that support could be offered from the earliest point. Participants also noted that the survey administrator would need to work proactively with social care to determine how the survey could be administered to those looked-after children with SEND outside school settings.

> *"I think it would be right and proper that they have the choice to be able to participate in the survey if they wish to. With that caveat that they may need support to do so, just from again the higher probability of them having had some experience of abuse or trauma in their own past." (Child protection lead)*

It would also be important to emphasise the voluntary nature of participation and ensure question wording was appropriate. Finally, offering incentives was suggested as a means of encouraging looked-after children's engagement (more specific details or possible downsides were not discussed).

Home-schooled children

Child protection leads were also asked to reflect on including home-schooled children in the survey. Key challenges related to access, parental reticence, and practicalities around support provision.

Participants reported that there were no comprehensive registers of home-schooled children. Children's services' records included those who had previously attended mainstream education settings and those with whom services had been involved; voluntary registers of home-schooled children were also mentioned. However, there was no mandatory registration for children who had never entered mainstream education.

> *"We have a record […] if they've been in the education system before. If they've never entered the education system, they don't have to tell us, so we only know about them if*

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[4] See NSPCC (2021) *Statistics briefing: looked after children*. Available at https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1622/statistics-briefing-looked-after-children.pdf

> *they've declared themselves to us or if they've been in an education system somewhere and they've left it." (Child protection lead)*

Parental reticence for children to engage with the survey was a second challenge participants anticipated for this group. This could result from families' perception that they were likely to be stigmatised and suspected of abuse because they were distanced from mainstream provision. Concerns about whether their children's data could be anonymised, given the small population of home-schooled children, might also affect willingness to support the survey.

An additional concern for child protection leads was that the degree of risk to home-schooled children taking part would be difficult to determine, as they generally had little contact with professionals. A key consideration would be how support could be convened for them in a timely way.

Social care departments might be able to facilitate sampling and recruitment of home-schooled children on their records. Clear communication around the purpose and parameters of the research, including assurances around how data would be anonymised, could help to mitigate some of the parental concerns that were anticipated.

Other barriers to participation

Participants also anticipated challenges to include young people from particular groups or communities such as travellers, asylum seekers, minority ethnic groups, and religious groups. Factors that could present barriers to inclusion of these groups in the survey included communication challenges and mistrust relating to a sense that their cultural practices were stigmatised or misunderstood. Working with trusted community gatekeepers to disseminate information about the survey and providing interpreters for a wide range of languages were suggested approaches to mitigate some of these issues.

> *"If we're trying to do anything difficult with a community that feels […] discriminated against […] we would try and get alongside community leaders, really think with them about what the benefits are to the community itself." (Child protection lead)*

2.2 Survey framing, scope and specificity

2.2.1 Framing of the survey

Participants' views on the framing of the survey – how it should be introduced to children, young adults, and parents – were mixed. One view was that this would make little difference in actuality, as the content of the survey would necessarily focus on abuse however the survey was framed.

Interviews and focus groups elicited participants' views on ONS's proposal that the survey be framed as being concerned with 'child safety'. A range of views were discussed. Some felt that this terminology was familiar, positive and approachable: as such, it might reassure both parents and young people and make taking part in the survey feel more comfortable and supportive.

> *"I think 'keeping safe' is better language than 'abuse' […] when you say 'abuse', it's like a negative picture immediately, isn't it? 'Keeping safe', it's […] positive […] Definitely that would be better for them." (Parent)*

A contrasting view, however, was that focusing on safety risked masking the intended purpose of the survey and could be perceived as downplaying the seriousness of abuse. School leads also suggested that the phrase 'child safety' might cause confusion for young people, bringing to mind things like crossing roads and fire safety, rather than abuse and “keeping yourself safe”.

Participants across groups stressed that, however the survey was labelled, it was crucial that its purpose and the parameters of participation were made absolutely clear to young people, to ensure that they were able to make an informed choice about taking part.

2.2.2 Scope of survey questions

Three key factors underpinned participants’ views on the level of detail that the survey could ask about. These were: young people’s ability to recall the information being sought; their comfort and willingness to share information; and potential implications for safeguarding responses. These factors are discussed in turn.

Recalling abuse

Participants expressed mixed views on young people’s ability to recall details about abuse. Young adults felt this would vary depending on the individual, rather than in relation to any particular characteristics such as age, gender, or the nature of abuse experienced (variation among siblings in their ability to recall very similar abuse was mentioned as one example).

Recalling dates and timeframes of abuse was identified as a particular area of challenge. While some young adults vividly recalled these details, others said they would only be able to provide a rough age, or confirm that they experienced abuse in broad timeframes such as ‘primary school’ or ‘last year’. Pinpointing the timeframe of continuous or repeated abuse, or where multiple types of abuse overlapped, was also identified as a potential challenge.

School participants also noted that recalling dates and timeframes would be a particular issue for children with some types of SEND. Some of these children had little concept of time in general, whilst others would ‘relive’ traumatic experiences and report them as having just happened.

Young adults and school leads agreed, however, that the survey should ask about experiences across young people’s whole lives rather than narrower timeframes. This would ensure that data captured fully reflected the range of experiences of abuse that respondents were able to recall and willing to report in a survey – including, for example, non-recent experiences and abuse that continued over longer periods of time. Doing so was felt to lessen the risk that victims/survivors of abuse would feel dismissed, which participants felt could be detrimental to their emotional wellbeing.

It would also be important to ensure that response options were comprehensive, for example, by including a ‘too many to count’ category to capture instances where it was difficult to define the frequency of abuse.

Safeguarding constraints

One view among school leads was that the level of detail survey questions could ask for would necessarily be constrained by the implications for safeguarding. A key concern for school leads was the risk that, if questions could be considered leading, formal investigation of disclosures of abuse could be compromised. This reflected school safeguarding practice around typical disclosure processes, where staff were trained to take a ‘Tell, Explain, Describe’ approach that explored children’s accounts in as open a way as possible. Children could be asked to say whether an adult or peer was involved in abuse, for example, but providing more specific response options could be considered suggestive. As such, there was a preference for the lowest level of detail to be included in the survey’s opening questions, with very open, optional follow-up questions answered in open text.

> *"If a disclosure has been made which could lead to criminal prosecution, then […] we absolutely have to […] ask very, very open questions […] 'Tell me about…' or, 'What do you want to say about…?' or, 'Do you want to share anything with us?' Rather than the 'W' questions, the 'Who was it? When was it? What happened?'. Particularly in a survey […] I would be very nervous about that, because effectively you might be making it very difficult for further police action to be taken. […] That would have to be very carefully set up […] in terms of making sure that you were not putting a suggestion to them that it might have been a parent and that they just click 'parent'." (School lead)*

Young people's comfort

Reflecting on the level of detail they would feel comfortable providing in response to a survey, participants anticipated feeling more apprehensive about questions requiring more specific information, particularly in relation to who was involved in abuse. Some young adults said they would feel comfortable reporting, for example, that 'an adult' was involved in abuse they had experienced, but would be unlikely to provide greater detail in the survey; others felt 'a family member' was sufficiently broad.

A tiered approach, with less-specific response options and optional follow-up questions, was welcomed as a means of giving young people as much choice as possible, which all young adults felt would be important. One suggestion was that broad categories could be provided for initial responses, with optional text boxes for more specific detail to be provided, giving young people space to share information that would be required for a safeguarding response to be triggered if they chose to do so.

Some young adults also said they preferred to select responses to closed questions, rather than being asked to fill out open text responses. This was because closed categories required less reflection on details of their experience, and one view was that providing specific dates or numbers of times something happened would feel more exposing than choosing the relevant band.

> *"If you […] have to think about the exact, like, how many times and you have to write it down, I could very easily see myself going back through my whole childhood with flashing images of each incident, and that could be more traumatic." (Young adult)*

Other young adults suggested offering space for further information to be provided on an optional basis, however, to ensure people would feel able and supported to provide all information they considered relevant. One suggestion was that this could support respondents' wellbeing, and the information provided might not need to be considered as part of the survey data analysis.

> *"I do think it would be worthwhile offering a text box, whether [or not] that's taken into account in [the analysis for the] research […] it just gives young people an opportunity, […] if [the question] brings something up for them, […] they can elaborate on it a bit further. Sometimes, writing it down will be easier than coming away from a survey and ruminating on it." (Young adult)*

Underlying these considerations were reflections on the risk of retraumatisation from the survey for young people who had experienced abuse. Some participants felt this risk would always exist and depend on the individual and their mindset on the day. One view among young adults was that, rather than being triggered by a particular question or specific level of detail, the risk of emotional distress related primarily to respondents' sense of agency and control – particularly as this was often taken from them as part of the abuse they experienced. It would therefore be crucial that respondents were supported to choose how much detail they wished to provide and skip questions that would exceed their comfort level. Providing access to appropriate support would also help to mitigate this concern.

> *“Sometimes, depending on […] the abuse […], they might not have had that option […] to say […] no. So I feel like if they can say 'yes' or 'no' in the questionnaire, they might be like, ‘Okay, they're taking my opinions and my needs into account […] these are good questions […] good people […] and they just want to know. I feel like if the questions were optional, they might want to answer more.” (Young adult)*

3 Survey delivery

This chapter explores participants' reflections on options relating to the survey administration approach, including where and how children and young adults should complete the questionnaire and who, if anyone, should be in the room with them during data collection. Implications of these design decisions on survey participation are examined throughout.

3.1 Delivery to children aged 11–15

In interviews and focus groups, researchers asked participants to consider potential benefits and challenges to delivery of the survey to children aged 11–15 in school settings. The main approach proposed by ONS was that children would independently complete the survey in a class setting, using tablet computers with a second activity loaded for them to switch to as an alternative/when finished with the questionnaire. Participants considered the implications of this approach in terms of children's comfort, confidentiality, support needs, and practical considerations, as follows.

Participants across all groups felt that completion of the survey in school would be appropriate. This would help ensure a familiar, supportive environment that could facilitate children's comfort, engagement, and access to support, including safeguarding responses, as needed.

> *"If you want the most pupils to complete it, doing it through schools in […] lesson time […] is where you're going to get that." (School lead)*

Expectations and preferences regarding the number of children who could participate in each school varied across participants. Some school leads anticipated delivery to just two classes (60 children) would be manageable and appropriate for them. Others felt that delivery to the whole school would help to ensure children felt neither missed nor singled out.

3.1.1 Survey setting

All participant groups felt that children who did not need individual support could complete the survey alongside familiar peers, for example in Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE) or scheduled tutor group sessions in classrooms or computer labs. This was based on children's comfort and practicality. One view was that delivering the survey in a typical classroom environment would feel most relaxed and comfortable for children. An alternative scenario in which groups of children were taken to a computer lab throughout the day was also discussed as a practical solution schools had used in past surveys.

By contrast, one-to-one, small group, or independent participation was considered less practicable for mainstream schools in terms of facilitating engagement and support for children. Participants also suggested that these approaches could make children feel singled out or intimidated.

> *"It's in a group […] it normalises it. 'This is a survey for everybody', not, 'Oh, it's a survey because we're trying to find out about you.' If you make it smaller groups, then it does tend to put a bit of a spotlight on the two or three people that are doing that survey." (School lead)*

Participants stressed the importance of measures to provide privacy and confidentiality for class-based survey completion. To support this, ONS proposed that children could complete the questionnaire on tablets, and would be given a second activity to switch to after or instead of the survey so that their participation and completion times would not be obvious to others in the room. These measures were considered appropriate and welcome for children without additional needs. Additional measures participants suggested could enhance confidentiality of survey participation in schools included:

- **physical spacing** of children in the room
- **randomisation of question order** (making it harder for anyone glancing at their screen to tell what each child was answering); and
- a **'hide screen' function** children could use to display a different window if they were concerned their survey responses were visible.[5]

Children with SEND

For some children with additional needs, participants across school, child protection and parent groups felt one-to-one support would be necessary to support comprehension and communication, for example, interpreting and scribing for children, and ensure privacy from peers.

> *"We would probably do it on a one-to-one basis […] not in a class environment […] our children do look over each other's shoulders, they do get out of their seats, they do move. I think if you said [to them…], "Don't look at each other's [answers]", that [would be] like saying, "Don't press that big red button!" […] As well, if someone is disclosing something, if they become distressed or upset, I wouldn't want that in front of the other pupils." (School lead)*

Special schools anticipated that one-to-one support for children to complete the survey would be manageable for them, given staffing and pupil numbers. While providing support for children to complete their questionnaire would mean the survey would not be confidential for these children, which participants acknowledged that it might compromise the honesty of children's responses, one view was that this would be appropriate and necessary to enable young people with some forms of SEND to take part, though.

Given the range of needs and abilities in their student populations, one view was that schools should be given the flexibility to administer the survey in whichever way would best suit individual children, deciding on a case-by-case basis. This could include independent completion of the survey in class, in smaller groups, or one-to-one with a trusted adult.

> *"It's never a case of one size fits all […] there are some young people [for whom…] it would be the right thing for the assistant to read and work through the survey with them. For others, that wouldn't be the right thing, and it's about allowing the schools the flexibility to decide with the young person what they feel comfortable with." (School lead)*

3.1.2 Supervision

School leads said that supervision and support for children taking part in the survey would be provided by staff such as tutors or pastoral staff and class assistants. Additionally, they suggested that DSLs and safeguarding teams should be on standby to ensure they were able to speak to children and support any disclosure processes at the earliest point.

Views were mixed when considering whether a researcher should support delivery of the survey to children in schools. Some child protection leads felt that this should be optional, with the decision given to each participating school. Participants identified benefits of researcher support which fell into three key categories, relating to credibility, clarity and consistency:

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[5] The Childline website, which has a "Hide page" to quickly switch screens to the Google homepage, was mentioned as an example of this.

- **Credibility:** School leads and young adults said that involvement of a member of the research team would emphasise the survey's independence from the school. This could support children's confidence in the process, including about the confidentiality of their responses, and might help to ensure children took the survey seriously.

  > *"Anything that you can do to make it clear that this is of national importance and being conducted across the whole country […] that it's not school-based [use of children's data] and that there's a degree of confidentiality and anonymity about it, is far more likely to reassure children to be able to disclose things." (School lead)*

- **Clarity:** A key benefit of a researcher being present was that their expertise and familiarity with the survey would ensure any questions could be addressed most effectively. The immediate ability to clarify any areas of confusion could help to mitigate concerns about children's comprehension of specific questions.
- **Consistency:** School leads also noted that, where researchers provided the introduction to the survey to children, the approach and information provided would be consistent across schools. While information could be disseminated by school staff, their limited survey expertise and familiarity could mean that details were missed. An alternative suggestion was that the researcher could record an introduction that could be played to children at the start of the survey.

A possible disadvantage of researcher support for survey delivery was that the presence of an unfamiliar adult could be unsettling for some children, which might affect willingness to take part.

> *"Thinking of somebody who hasn't disclosed before, it could scare them into not disclosing, to see this random person that they don't know in the corner […] whereas their tutor groups […] are established, it's normal – which I think would be more effective." (School lead)*

One preference among school leads was that researchers and school staff supervise together.

> *"[Having] somebody from [the research] organisation there […] might be good, to do the introduction as to why [they] are collecting this information, how it's going to be used and how anonymity is going to be preserved […] it's a reassuring moment. But then I […] would still expect the [school's] pastoral […] staff to be there." (School lead)*

It was also important that, other than when individuals needed support, supervising staff stayed at the front of the room rather than roaming between children during the survey, for confidentiality reasons.

> *"The adults [should be] in the room, but [… children should] be left alone while doing it, unless they're showing signs of distress. I wouldn't do it […with] teachers […] walk[ing] up and down, sort of peer[ing] over your shoulder. I think that would be counterproductive." (School lead)*

3.1.3 Scheduling

Appropriate scheduling of the survey was also highlighted as an important consideration, to ensure that schools had sufficient planning time to prepare to administer it, and that children were not required to go straight back to lessons following completion. This would be particularly important for those who disclosed abuse or became distressed during the process.

3.2 Delivery to young people aged 16 to 25

Participants were asked to consider two options for administering the survey to older children and young adults aged 16 to 25. These were independent online completion of the survey, and at-home self-completion using a tablet provided by a visiting researcher. Views on each of these are set out in Table 3-1.

Table 3-1 Participant views on independent online completion versus home visit self-completion

	Independent online completion	Home visit, self-completion
Practicality/access	Limited access to the internet, an appropriate device, and technical skill to respond online were identified as potential barriers for some young people's participation online.	Provision of a tablet by the visiting researcher would support access for all young people taking part.
Comprehension/ accessibility	Limited ability/skills required to read and respond online were identified as potential barriers for some young people's participation online.	The researcher could answer any questions and could help the young adult to read and/or respond to the survey if required: *"There may be people who haven't got the skills and abilities to complete something online, and they might need that extra support to complete it […] Someone there […] to ask questions […] makes it more accessible." (Young adult)*
Privacy	Completing the survey alone would maximise respondents' privacy and confidentiality, which child protection leads anticipated would increase honesty of reporting. Young adults said they would prefer not to be observed while completing the survey, including in instances where questions might cause them distress.	Some young adults anticipated that they might feel embarrassed if they got upset in front of a stranger: *"I think I'd find it really hard to have someone there […] I would think, 'Okay, I want to do this survey because it's important, but I don't know how I'm going to react to all of these questions, and I don't know how I'm going to feel afterwards, and I don't want an audience for that'." (Young adult)*
Comfort	Flexibility on when, where, and how quickly the survey could be completed would allow young people to take part where and how they chose. Some young adults felt that the survey should include 'save and return' functionality so that respondents did not have to complete it in a single sitting. This could be particularly important to support young people who found the questions upsetting: the opportunity to take a break from the survey would support their emotional regulation and mitigate the risk of retraumatisation.	Some young adults felt that being observed would make them feel intimidated and/or rushed: *"I don't like the idea of someone watching me take a survey! […] I would be worried that I wasn't doing it fast enough, no matter what." (Young adult)* One view was that advance information, including a specific appointment time and interviewer name, would help young people to feel more comfortable as they would have a clearer idea what to expect.

Risks to respondents	Participants identified that there would be potential for responses to be observed and influenced by an abuser or somebody else: the research team would not have oversight or immediate influence over this. Though they could be signposted to support, respondents completing the survey independently would not have immediate support to e.g. answer questions or access safeguarding.	For young people experiencing abuse at home, being visited by a survey researcher might draw abusers' attention and increase risk of harm. One view among young adults was that interviewers could intervene immediately to safeguard young adult disclosing abuse, reducing risk of further harm.

Young adults said they would personally prefer to complete the survey online but felt both options could be appropriate for young people more broadly. Some young adults and child protection leads felt that respondents should be offered a choice.

An alternative suggestion from parents was that young adults should attend a neutral venue in the local area where they could complete the survey in a more controlled, supported environment. A church hall was suggested as an example.

4 Confidentiality, disclosure, and data linkage

This chapter explores considerations relating to the degree of confidentiality that could be afforded to survey respondents, and how safeguarding would work for those who disclosed experiences of abuse in the survey. It examines expectations relating to how disclosures of abuse would be handled, exploring the implications on young people's comfort and ability to respond truthfully to questions about abuse experiences. It goes on to explore reflections on parents/guardians being able to access children's responses to the survey, and views on data linkage, and the implications this would have for individual children and for data quality.

4.1 Overarching views on confidentiality and disclosure

Confidentiality was a key consideration for the survey, and participants across all four groups felt that young people were less likely to answer survey questions honestly if their responses would not be kept confidential and anonymous. School leads, for example, noted that confidentiality was a marked concern for their students even when data was being collected on topics that were not considered particularly sensitive:

> *"They can be very worried about filling in […] fairly innocuous wellbeing surveys. They can worry hugely about, 'Is this really anonymous or is it not?', and then we say to them […] "If there's something [in your answers] that we're concerned about [for] your safety then it wouldn't be anonymous, we would speak to you", and then a lot of them say, "I don't want to say anything". Something of this nature, when they're having to disclose abuse, would make them a great deal more fearful." (School lead)*

Young adults indicated that a key factor informing young people's willingness to report abuse in a survey would be their existing disclosure status – that is, whether they had previously told anybody about their experience. Thinking about how they might have experienced a survey of this nature before disclosing elsewhere, young adult participants said that they would have been unlikely to provide information about abuse that was not already known to others. This was because revealing abuse for the first time would instigate a safeguarding response some participants considered 'a bigger can of worms'. [6] Answering questions about abuse that had already been disclosed felt more realistic, though participants noted that they might still prefer to provide limited detail.

> *"After I had disclosed [elsewhere…], I probably actually would have [answered the survey honestly] – because the school were made aware of it, my mum was made aware of it […] there was no secret to still keep anymore." (Young adult)*

One view among parents and young adults was that reticence to report experiences of abuse in the survey might vary according to age, due to different safeguarding requirements for children and adults. While decisions around safeguarding of children would typically be made by professionals in school and social care teams, adults would have a choice about actions taken in response to a disclosure of abuse.

> *"I'm very aware of the rights that I have as an adult: I don't have to take it further if I choose not to. As a child, though, I probably wouldn't tell anybody anything that I already hadn't disclosed because I know that I don't have a choice [about what*

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[6] This relates, naturally, to experiences young people had themselves recognised as abuse. Experiences young people had not recognised and classified as abuse might be disclosed unwittingly.

> *happens next…] it is in the authorities' hands to do what they see fit […] for safety reasons […]. I would have been […] very aware that I don't want authorities involved, so I wouldn't have said anything.” (Young adult)*

4.2 Expectations around disclosure and safeguarding

4.2.1 Standard safeguarding processes

Standard processes used by school and social care colleagues to refer and respond to safeguarding concerns formed the backdrop of participants’ thinking about how disclosures in the survey would be handled. A broad overview of what usual processes would typically involve is set out below, to contextualise the views discussed throughout the rest of this chapter.

Participants described a staged process to gathering and assessing information, determining whether or not it required escalation to the relevant authorities, and initiating referrals within a short timeframe. In the first instance, any indications of harm disclosed to or identified by staff would be passed to the school safeguarding leads for triaging. A trusted adult would then speak to the child to gather more information. School leads stressed the importance of using very open, non-leading questioning at this stage, to ensure information-gathering did not compromise any subsequent formal investigation.

> *“We're not allowed to ask direct questions around safeguarding, because it plants ideas in suggestible heads […] a direct, leading question […] would never be allowed in the context of a disclosure […] It's a big no-no.” (School lead)*

Information would be cross-referenced with existing records held by the school to determine whether and to whom it should be shared. Whether the issue was already known would affect the course of action – if it was a new disclosure, information would need to be shared straight away; if it was something with which social workers were already involved it would be flagged to them rather than a safeguarding hub, for example.

If assessed by the school’s safeguarding leads as meeting the criteria set out in relevant safeguarding guidance, the information would then be referred to social care who would quickly assess and determine whether their referral thresholds were met to determine what, if any, further action was required beyond the school. School leads highlighted that approaches varied across areas, within and between each of the four nations. For example, some schools directly attended a local multi-agency safeguarding hub (or MASH), while others worked with an education liaison officer or threshold decision-making services.

> *“Every area does things differently […] all different manners of managing safeguarding with local authorities and external services.” (School lead)*

Whether parents/guardians should be informed before information was shared with social services was not always clear. Some participants described this as a mandatory requirement for all referrals from schools; some indicated that it was dependent on the nature of the abuse and/or whether parents were involved; and others said that parents should be notified only at the point that social worker assessments were completed. This range of views may indicate variation in practice across areas, participants’ understanding of this part of the process, or the kinds of abuse they had in mind when considering these questions during the research encounter.

Participants emphasised the importance of a timely response throughout this process. Ensuring that initial concerns were flagged, assessed, and passed on as soon as possible was considered crucial to minimising risks of children being left to return to unsafe situations.

4.2.2 Survey approach to disclosure

The approach proposed by ONS for the survey was that referrals of disclosures over a certain threshold would be made by the research team rather than schools. Participants anticipated that referrals made in this way would be escalated through established channels and that, as with referrals made by schools, responses would potentially involve social services and the police.

Participants felt the management and administrative approach around disclosure would need careful consideration. Barriers and potential mitigations relating to the proposed approach included:

- **Schools' legal obligations and duty of care:** While some participants felt that referrals could be handled by the survey administrator without school involvement, a contrasting view was that – unless an arrangement could be made for responsibility to be delegated to the survey administrator – schools would be legally responsible for any disclosures recorded on their premises, meaning information would have to be shared with and referred by the school through their usual channels.
- **Sufficiency of referral information:** Typically, referrals required a level of detail and context that participants anticipated survey responses were unlikely to include.

  > *"You need a bit more context to then refer. It can't just be, 'Someone hit me,' […] because to make a referral that actually meets the [authority's] threshold, you need a bit more information." (School lead)*

  One view was that, to capture sufficient information to facilitate safeguarding responses, follow-up questions would need to be included within the survey instrument (with careful attention to ensuring these would not be considered leading), or an external follow-up process triggered. Participants acknowledged that this process would require sensitivity, and that if children did not engage sufficiently in the survey, it might not be possible to gather sufficient information for further action.

  > *"We would have to be mindful that this child has done a survey, it's come out that way, and we need to try and do this as sensitively as possible. What might happen is, if they're not wanting to tell anybody other than the survey reader that this has happened, we'll get them into an interview and they will just say nothing." (Child protection lead)*

- **Access to relevant information and contacts:** The survey administrator would not have access to contextual information to determine whether issues were already known to schools or social care, for example. This would potentially increase the burden on social care teams to review and match referrals with existing records and staff involved. Related to this, the process by which parents/guardians could be notified of potential referrals was not clear.
- **Variations in local approaches:** school leads noted that safeguarding processes differed across areas, which could prove challenging for a single research team to familiarise and coordinate across the survey. Further discussion with social care teams in the sampled areas might be necessary to fully understand and agree processes required for safeguarding to be effective in each.

Two additional considerations related to coordination of support for children:

- The potential lag between children completing the survey and their data being reviewed and referred was a potential cause for concern.

> *"One of my worries is […] the idea that they take the survey and they're potentially disclosing something that's going to cause them enormous emotional distress, and they're not disclosing it to a person. There could then be quite a time lag before any action was taken, and that's really putting them at risk […] That is a worry, the idea that a child bares their soul and then it's going to take three or four weeks before somebody actually picks up that information and does something with it." (School lead)*

Ensuring that the survey included clear signposting to support, including within schools, as well as information on the disclosure process would be important to mitigate this risk.

- For children taking part in school settings, school leads were clear that they needed to be informed about any referrals made by the research team so that they could ensure support was put in place for the child, regardless of the outcome.

> *"You could possibly make that referral in good faith but if it doesn't […] pass [the LA] threshold, it's just not going to go anywhere. At least if we know at school, then we can put support in place. So, I think you have to […] at least let us know." (School lead)*

For some, this would be a key condition of taking part in the survey: if not informed of referrals, they would decline to be involved altogether.

4.2.3 Alternative approaches

There were a range of views on the requirement for and division of responsibilities around disclosure. Considering the practical and ethical issues around the proposed approach, some participants raised two alternative options: signposting young people to standard avenues through which they could make disclosures directly; and returning cases where abuse was reported in the survey to school safeguarding teams to facilitate referral processes. Equivalent processes for young people participating outside school settings were not discussed.

One view among child protection leads was that the survey should not be considered a mechanism for disclosure: it was not considered realistic for researchers to take on a safeguarding function, and a preferable approach would be to signpost young people to usual avenues for disclosure (including, for example, speaking to staff at their school). This approach would give young people choice and control about whether to disclose abuse beyond the survey, with potential implications for their willingness to answer survey questions truthfully.

Others, however, felt that the survey would have to follow local policies and procedures around reporting concerns for children's welfare to social services. For the 11- to 15-year-olds taking part in school settings, an alternative suggestion to that proposed by ONS was that the survey administrator return cases to schools for follow-up and referral. One view among schools and child protection leads was that this would be a practical necessity, as schools had the relevant safeguarding expertise and held records on what children had discussed previously. In addition, schools could easily access children for follow up discussions, and had established relationships with referral agencies and parents/guardians to facilitate referrals. Schools mentioned a similar approach being taken by examination boards, for example, who would return any concerning content from pupil's exams to the school for assessment and follow-up, with the school required to provide a written response to confirm what action had been taken in response.

> *"Would it actually be easier and safer to send it back to the school, saying, 'We feel this needs your urgent attention. Please investigate and refer to the appropriate services'? […] it will probably cause people like us a lot more work […] but potentially, that would help eradicate some of the difficulties between different areas and just make sure that the students are getting the right support, because we know the kids best […] it could be something that's already a known issue here at school […] that's*

> *already got tons of support around it, and we'd go, 'Yes, we know about that. Thank you', 'Oh, but we don't know about her…'." (School lead)*

4.2.4 Referral timeframes

Two main views were shared in relation to the urgency of initial assessment of the survey data, if disclosure processes were going to be undertaken. One was that immediate triage would be necessary to ensure that referrals could be made within 24 hours of data collection. Some participants understood this to be a requirement of local guidance, to mitigate risks of children returning to abusive situations. To align with this, a member of the research team with safeguarding expertise would need to immediately review the data collected in each school and flag to relevant school staff any cases requiring action, such that schools could arrange for children to be interviewed by a trusted adult at the earliest opportunity.

> *"I would want a researcher there to be able to look at the answers on site before the end of the day [… If there is a] disclosure that someone is being harmed at home, the school's duty is to refer that out before that child goes home. It would put the school in a very tricky position if a disclosure was on the school site, that then a referral hadn't been made [about] because we weren't aware of it." (School lead)*

A contrasting view was that the mandatory time limit for referrals would start from the point at which data was reviewed. Participants would want this to be done at the earliest opportunity to minimise delays to support for young people, and flagged that the process would require expertise in safeguarding guidance. Similar to the approach used by exam boards, if cases were passed to schools, their obligation to review and respond within a set timeframe would begin from the point at which they received the information.

4.2.5 Referral thresholds

There were four views about the thresholds that should be implemented if disclosure processes were going to be undertaken:

- It would be necessary to coordinate with individual social care departments to confirm the appropriate approach.
- Any indication of abuse would constitute a need for referral. Some child protection leads said that this was legally required in their areas; others considered it would be better to err on the side of caution and refer 'everything', regardless of, for example, the timing or severity of abuse that was reported, or the level of detail provided. Where referrals were made directly by the survey administrator, however, without reference to background information, this could place significant burden on social care teams, and processes to assess and investigate further would need to be determined.
- The standard process should be followed, and anything covered in local practice guidance (e.g. Keeping Children Safe in Education) referred.[7] Participants noted that this would require expertise within the research team to assess responses.
- Data should be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, with input from social care. Participants did not discuss the precise mechanism for this.

4.2.6 Informing respondents about caveats to confidentiality

Participants agreed that advance materials provided to young people about the survey must include clear information on procedures and parameters around confidentiality and disclosure, to ensure they know what to expect. Information about the safeguarding process and

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[7] *Keeping children safe in education 2021: Statutory guidance for schools and colleges* (Department for Education, 2021)

signposting to support were also considered important to ensure young people would not be left ‘on tenterhooks’ if they shared information about abuse.

4.3 Data linkage

Young adult participants were also asked how they would feel about individual survey responses being linked to administrative data, such as records of educational attainment, school exclusions, and hospital admissions. It was explained that the purpose of data linkage would be to understand patterns in people’s experiences in more detail, which could help to understand risks to young people and impacts of abuse. Data would be linked using something like the Unique Pupil Number that each child is assigned in school, rather than names. Identifiers would not be included in the linked dataset and nobody would have access except the research team.

Young adults were broadly supportive of the idea of data linkage, as examining patterns of abuse and impacts was considered positive, and would be willing for their data to be linked. Thinking about how this might feel to other young people, participants noted the potential for concerns around anonymity and confidentiality and/or being judged. Participants felt that clear advance information about the purpose and methods could mitigate these concerns.

4.4 Parental access to survey responses

Young adults were also asked for their views on parents’/guardians’ right to access their children’s survey responses. This might occur, for example, as the result of a subject access request. Two interrelated concerns were identified about this possibility: that young people’s willingness to share information in the survey would be reduced, and that it could increase risk of harm for any young person who disclosed abuse. While particularly concerning in relation to young people who experienced intrafamilial abuse, some young adults also felt this could be detrimental regardless of the nature of abuse reported, depending on how parents/guardians might react.

Participants were clear, therefore, that any limits to young people’s confidentiality should be clearly conveyed from the outset to ensure that they were able to make fully informed decisions about taking part. Provision of a broad range of support within and outside the survey setting would, similarly, be important.

5 Support

This chapter sets out findings about support provided before, during and after the survey. It begins with support provision for young people taking part in the survey and their parents and guardians. It then considers resources and support required by schools and services to support survey delivery.

5.1 Support for young people

Participants discussed a range of support and guidance that should be provided to young people at three key points: when they were first informed of and invited to take part in the survey; during the survey itself; and afterwards.

5.1.1 Advance information for young people

Two key forms of advance information and guidance for young people were discussed: information about taking part in the survey itself, and – for those taking part in school settings – education around the concepts to be explored.

Information about the survey

Clear information about the research aims and parameters must be provided in advance of the survey to ensure that young people know what to expect and can give informed consent. Participants suggested that, to ensure accessibility, these materials should be tailored to age, SEND, and different languages.

> *“If I knew exactly where my information's going to go, who would have access to it and what would be done with this, then I would feel more comfortable taking part.” (Young adult)*

Key areas to be included in advance materials included the purpose of the research and intended use of data, its voluntary nature, and, crucially, information on what would happen if abuse was disclosed. Detail about the sampling approach could mitigate any misconceptions that young people might have that they or, for children, their schools were selected because of particular experiences or perceived risk, for example. Advance information could also encourage engagement by highlighting the survey’s importance. Inclusion of contact details for the research team was also suggested, to ensure that young people could ask questions directly.

One suggestion from school leads was that one to two week’s advance notice would ensure that young people had sufficient time to consider the invitation. Others suggested that a detailed, researcher-led introduction and Q&A immediately prior to the survey could be sufficient, though it was noted that children were likely to hear about the survey when parents were notified. As discussed below, the idea of introducing the survey over a longer timeframe in the context of relevant lessons was welcomed.

If the survey were administered in people’s homes with researcher support, one view among young adults was that a specific appointment should be arranged and the researcher’s name provided ahead of time.

Education

For children participating in school, participants discussed the idea of building familiarity with relevant topics and terminology through, for example, PSHE/Relationships and Sex Education

(RSE) or equivalent lessons prior to the survey. Delivery of this information from an external provider might usefully distance the survey from day-to-day school life. An alternative suggestion was that information could be delivered to children in a preparatory talk by PHSE or pastoral staff.

> *“I think it's great to give the children information in advance […] yes, delivering something in [RSE] before giving a survey […] it might be an option to explore whether someone external comes in [to do this], and then it also helps that survey to remain external from your school life.” (Young adult)*

One concern among school leads was that this could be perceived as ‘planting’ ideas in children’s minds, and they questioned whether it might damage the survey’s integrity.

> *“there would definitely be some parents – or […] staff, maybe, even – who would be uncomfortable with the idea of us almost kind of leading [children] into it. I can see some people implying that we were actually planting the idea in their heads.”*

Participants felt, however, that the approach would support understanding of relevant concepts and develop children’s skills, confidence, and language to answer questions. Related to this, one view was that this would help to reduce barriers to participation for children with English as an additional language.

5.1.2 On the day

Three types of support during survey completion were discussed: information about the research, practical measures to support accessibility and comprehension, and in-person supervision.

Introduction to the survey

Participants felt that a clear explanation of the research should be provided immediately prior to data collection, covering the same key information as provided in advance, to ensure this was fresh in young people’s minds at the point at which they decided whether or not to take part. This process should include assuring young people that participation is voluntary and checking informed consent.

As noted in section 3.1.1, options for delivering this introduction in schools included information being shared by supervising school staff, provided directly from a member of the research team, or recorded and played at the start of the survey. How the information would be delivered to respondents taking part outside of school settings was not discussed.

Practical support measures

Participants across all four groups stressed the importance of using clear, simple language to support young people’s understanding of questions and concepts throughout the survey. Additional measures to support accessibility and comprehension during the survey included audio functionality (reading questions aloud), large text options, and survey documents tailored for SEND and different languages. Those with some forms of SEND would require more tailored one-to-one support.

> *“I would definitely love the questions to be read to me, or just have a little feature where you can just press it if you want to […] but definitely have headphones so nobody can hear the questions that are being asked.” (Young adult)*

Invigilation and immediate adult presence

Views differed on who (if anyone) should be present in the room to provide support when surveys were completed:

- For **children aged 11 to 15**, participants suggested that supervision during the survey could be provided by familiar staff and/or a researcher. Privacy concerns might be mitigated by the suggestion that invigilators stayed at the front of the room unless called upon to clarify any areas of confusion or to respond to any sign of distress. Practical arrangements including ‘hide screen’ functionality and randomised question order could further support confidentiality (as discussed at section 3.1.1).

  Some school leads suggested that only a researcher should be present in the room, with staff immediately outside, as a means of emphasising the survey’s independence and sense of confidentiality. However, another view was that the presence of an unfamiliar adult could increase children’s apprehension.

  Support would differ considerably for some **children with SEND**, including those using communication aids rather than verbal or written responses, who might need one to one support to interpret and respond to survey questions.
- For **young people aged 16 to 25**, participants suggested that in-person support from a researcher might be beneficial for some, as discussed in section 3.2.
- Support for home-schooled children and any looked-after children taking part outside school settings was not discussed in detail and would require further consideration.

5.1.3 Emotional support and aftercare

Ensuring young people had ready access to emotional support and aftercare was a key consideration for all participant groups. This included support while the survey was being completed, available immediately afterwards, and over the longer term. Across groups, participants said that signposting to a range of options (including school-based and external support) was important to maximise choice and control for young people.

Some participants also discussed proactive approaches that schools or the survey administrator might take to initiate conversations with young people and connect them with relevant support. Suggestions from school and child protection leads included school staff looking out for and following up on any behavioural changes that might indicate distress, and the survey administrator undertaking a follow-up call to each young person to check in with them a day or two after they took part in the survey. A similar suggestion from young adults was that follow-up contact – either by email or led by school staff – be scheduled for the week following survey completion.

Support within schools could be provided by staff including tutors, heads of year, pastoral teams and school counselling services. During and after the survey, staff should proactively look out for behavioural indications of distress and initiate safeguarding responses as appropriate. Children should also be signposted to staff that they could talk to, with schools ensuring staff availability and access to appropriate quiet rooms for these ‘drop-in’ conversations to be supported.

Participants also suggested that the survey administrator might commission specific emotional support provision externally. Suggestions from child protection and school leads included a bespoke emotional support helpline, with expertise around safeguarding and the survey, and access to counselling services for a set period after the survey. This chimed with a suggestion from young adults that provision of dedicated counselling could ensure accessibility for survey respondents who needed it.

Young adults also suggested that signposting should include relevant support organisations (including local ones); and the research team for any specific questions about the survey.

As discussed in section 4.2.6, views varied on the role and responsibility of different agencies to support safeguarding processes, with some schools anticipating that their standard processes would kick in immediately and others accepting the proposal that referrals would sit with the survey administrator. Some child protection leads also mentioned connecting young people who disclosed abuse to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and counselling services according to their standard processes surrounding safeguarding.

5.2 Support for parents

School leads, child protection leads and parents felt it was important to provide clear information about the research aims and parameters to parents. School leads agreed that written information about the research should be sent to parents in advance. One suggestion was that two letters should be sent, with an initial notification three weeks in advance and a follow-up a week before the survey; others felt that a few days' notice would be sufficient. An additional suggestion from parents was that the research team host briefings for parents ahead of the survey to ensure any questions could be answered.

> *"Facilitate a meeting for […] parents and carers and guardians […] to have a discussion about their […] concerns [… with] not the teacher, but the person who's connected with facilitating this survey […] you've got to set the foundation before you do the survey." (Parent)*

One view among child protection leads was that support could include contact information for the research team and advice/guidance on how to support their children post-survey.

5.3 Support for schools

Views on the potential impact of the survey on schools varied. The burden on schools would depend on:

- the survey's scope – including the number and range of children to be included, and the duration of the survey itself
- support needs in their student body, which would influence arrangements to enable children to take part
- roles and responsibilities relating to screening, safeguarding, and support.

While some schools anticipated that it would be relatively straightforward for their staff to accommodate the survey, for others, staff capacity to support additional work represented a key constraint. One view was that this was particularly challenging in the context of staffing pressures during the Covid-19 pandemic. Agreeing clear roles and responsibilities well in advance, and carefully considering the timing of the survey to make it as convenient as possible for schools to accommodate, were key means of mitigating these challenges.

Scheduling was identified as a main challenge for schools: it was felt important to work with them to determine the best timing for the survey and to provide as much notice and flexibility as possible.

- Upwards of a half term's notice was considered appropriate to facilitate arrangements, namely, booking staff time and undertaking any preparatory work such as staff and parent briefings.
- Offering schools flexibility around the survey completion timeframe would also help to ensure it could be accommodated at a convenient point in their wider schedules.

- It would be important to consider when children would take part in the survey and following up on disclosure. School leads suggested avoiding survey data collection in the afternoons, latter parts of the week or ends of terms.

Practical measures including provision of tablets for children to complete the survey, and financial incentives/funding to cover expenses (such as staff cover) would help some schools. Some also valued the suggestion of research team staff being present to support delivery on the day, which would reduce staff burden in terms of taking responsibility for introducing the survey to potential respondents, for example. Additionally, being able to refer children to support outside of school could help alleviate the burden of aftercare, which school leads said often defaulted to them where disclosures were deemed not to meet social care services' thresholds, for example.

School leads felt that support for staff involved in delivering the survey should include advance information and support to facilitate safeguarding of children during and after the survey. Specific forms of advance information school leads mentioned were:

- briefing meetings for staff – including information on the survey process, roles and responsibilities, including in relation to safeguarding and referrals of disclosures
- advance copies of survey materials, including information provided to parents and children and a copy of the survey questionnaire to ensure familiarity
- information about which children would be taking part, so that staff could be alert to any indications of distress during and after the survey.

Aftercare provision for staff was also recommended. This could include access to emotional support for staff dealing with disclosures, for example.

5.4 Support for children's social care

Child protection leads discussed two key stages at which social care departments would be affected by the survey: sampling and recruitment and dealing with referred disclosures of abuse.

Supporting sampling and recruitment of home-schooled and looked-after children and young people would involve production of data sharing agreements and/or direct dissemination of information about the research to young people. Child protection leads noted that the resource and staffing implications of these activities would depend in part on the number of young people to be contacted and the mechanisms by which this would be carried out. Advance notice and provision of clear information about the research, including protocols for practitioners, would support this element of their involvement.

Participants also anticipated a spike in referrals stemming from the survey, the manageability of which would again depend on the number of young people participating in the survey in each area. The extent to which disclosure processes aligned with standard local processes would also have a bearing on what was required, as additional steps might be needed to follow up and investigate information provided in the survey and link this to existing records.

One suggestion was that, if administered in several schools in a single area, roll-out of the survey could be staggered so that referrals would not all be returned at the same time. This would support social care departments to manage the anticipated increased workflow.

Some child protection leads anticipated that additional staff resource would be required to process and respond to referrals. One view was that, with sufficient advance notice, it would be possible to distribute this work across existing staff pulled in from the wider team. An alternative view was that additional staff would be needed to ensure sufficient capacity – one suggestion was funding a dedicated social work post for the survey period. Others estimated that this resource would need to be in place for longer periods – one suggestion was up to 18 months after the survey, to accommodate the entire process to respond to disclosures of abuse.

Given variations in capacity across areas, one view was that more detailed discussions with each of the sampled social care services would be necessary ahead of the survey taking place to make appropriate arrangements. Participants' estimates of the lead-in time required ranged from two to six months.

Participants discussed two forms of support for staff, who would be involved in managing referrals:

- Briefing materials to provide a clear understanding of the survey aims, importance, and its implications for social care teams. Related to this, one suggestion was that top-down endorsement of the survey from each nation's parliament could help to secure buy-in from social care staff supporting the survey
- Provision of occupational health/access to emotional support was recommended for staff involved in disclosure processes to mitigate any distress resulting from higher-than-usual child abuse referral caseloads.

6 Value and viability of a survey on child abuse

This chapter sets out participants' views on the overall need for and potential benefits of a survey on child abuse, and their reflections on whether they would participate or support delivery of a survey of this nature.

6.1 Views on the need for a survey on abuse

Participant views on the value of a survey about child abuse were mixed. Across the sample, some participants felt that the proposed survey was an 'important' and 'exciting' prospect that would fill a key gap in existing evidence, with a range of benefits as set out in section 6.2. Measures including informed consent, voluntary participation, and support provision could mitigate concerns.

> *"I don't think there's enough awareness of the different natures of abuse, about where it can occur. I think there's this very narrow-minded view of […] who can be affected by abuse […] if you, as a child, if you don't fall into that category, you can be quite easily overlooked […] there needs to be a bit of an awakening across the country to it, and it needs to be reflected in services." (Young adult)*

At the other end of the spectrum, some participants felt that the survey was not necessary, based on a perception that data on child abuse was already available through, for example, NSPCC surveys on safeguarding.

One view among school leads, child protection leads and parents was that a survey would not be appropriate. Three sets of factors influenced this view:

- **Anticipated limitations of the survey would undermine the usefulness of data.** Some adult participants across school, child protection and parent groups felt that the limitations they anticipated in relation to sampling and data accuracy would undermine the validity of the survey data collected, such that robust inferences could not be supported. Parents' ability to withdraw children from the research, and potential exclusion of harder-to-engage groups such as young people with some types of SEND, language barriers, or who were home-schooled would skew the survey sample. Moreover, participants suggested that some young people would conceal abuse experiences and that some false reporting of abuse might arise (from young people not taking the survey seriously, seeking attention, or mistakenly defining some experiences as abuse, for example). Limited comprehension of concepts and terminology about abuse could also distort the data generated.
- **Alternative approaches to gathering data on abuse were preferable** as they posed fewer concerns about detrimental impacts on young people. Participants discussed, for example, drawing data from child protection registers or school safeguarding records. School lead participants did, however, acknowledge that levels of identification/disclosure could vary between settings, dependent on local processes.
- There was also scepticism across parent, school, and child protection participant groups that action would be taken based on survey evidence. One view was that **the balance of risk to reward in taking part in the survey was not viable**. Focusing on teacher training around safeguarding would be better use of resources, as statistics alone were considered to be of limited use.

> *"Everybody knows that children are getting abused all over the place. We don't need a survey to prove that; we know it. [...] a survey doesn't help us if it doesn't instigate real action, it's just a tick box exercise [...] the police, the authorities will do nothing […] we*

> *have got the figures. [...] It's going to get pushed under the rug like everything else, and we are going to put our children through it again for nothing." (Parent)*

6.2 Views on potential benefits of a survey

Participants identified a range of potential benefits of a survey of this nature, for young people, their families and schools, as well as broader societal benefits relating to improved understanding and response to child abuse.

6.2.1 Societal benefits

If the survey could be administered successfully, its intended outcome would be a clearer understanding of the scale and nature of child abuse. Participants felt that it would provide a deeper understanding of abuse that could facilitate prevention, disruption, and response to abuse, helping to set policy priorities and target use of resources more effectively – at school, local authority, and national levels. This could result in better support provision for victims/survivors and their families, and help to reduce shame and stigma.

> *"The idea of being able […] get an idea nationally of just how significant a problem this is would be a very good thing […] it would have the impact, hopefully, of making policy and resources […] more available to this area – because it's hugely under-resourced […] and it's becoming more of an issue […] to access the right support for children." (School lead)*

6.2.2 Respondent benefits

For individual young people taking part in the survey, participants identified a range of potential benefits that fell into three main categories: identification of abuse; improved understanding of abuse; and emotional wellbeing outcomes.

- **Identification of abuse:** participants suggested the survey could serve as an additional opportunity for disclosure or identification of abuse. Young adults suggested that, for some young people, the survey might be a more comfortable format for disclosure, as it could be easier to share information remotely than by speaking to somebody. It might also be that the survey prompted disclosure at the right time for people or helped them to realise that an experience was abusive. Further, the survey might also identify abuse that young people did not explicitly recognise as such and therefore would not disclose elsewhere.

  > *"It can never be harmful to give another forum for somebody to speak out about perceived abuse […] as long as it's a safe space to do so" (School lead)*

- **Improved understanding** of what constitutes abuse could result from the survey itself and/or from additional teaching around it. Related to this, some young adults suggested young people might recognise and seek help in relation to their own experiences earlier on as a result of the survey.
- **Emotional wellbeing:** participants across groups felt that the survey could give young people a sense of empowerment and give voice to their experiences. For those who had experienced abuse, it might also be cathartic and, by bringing discussion of abuse more to the fore, help to reduce secrecy and shame. Young people could also benefit from a sense of helping others.

  > *"I think it would enable them to think that their voice was being heard and that they were having a say […] I think young people really do feel quite keenly that things are done <u>to</u> them […] to give them a voice to say, 'This is what my experience is, and this is how I feel about it,' would be really valid."* (School lead)

> *"I like taking part in these things because I feel as though my experiences can then help shape future support." (Young adult)*

Participants also suggested that the survey could offer an opportunity for families to have more open discussions, which could feed into outcomes around wellbeing and understanding.

> *"I think parents would appreciate that too […] Because I think it's a conversation a lot of parents are uncomfortable in having with their children. It would give them a way in to do that." (School lead)*

6.2.3 Local benefits for schools and social care

Participants suggested that evidence from the survey could support important learning for schools and authorities, which could be used to target education and prevention activities at a local level with longer-term positive impacts on young people. School leads anticipated that survey outputs could include provision of school and local-level data for participating schools, which could inform, for example, their PSHE curriculum, teacher training around prevention and responses to abuse, and support for children through (greater) coordination with local social care teams.

> *"We do have some data and information, and we know our students, but actually, to get more information, we can then say, 'Right, we're going to contact this service to come and do a workshop on this topic', or 'We need to be asking our social workers and […] family engagement workers to support our children more around this', or 'Personal development classes need to shift their focus a bit.'" (School lead)*

Similar outputs from previous surveys had been helpful for some school leads and could help to incentivise their involvement.

> *"That [survey] informed our revision of our PSHE schemes of work; it helped with the way we did things in assemblies; sometimes things were picked up in English [lessons], looking at a particular piece of literature which might reinforce [children's understanding]. […] We […] find that [information] quite useful. […] We could see our school's response and […] compare with students of a similar age in [the] county, so we had a benchmark." (School leads)*

6.3 Willingness to participate or support the survey

Young adults, parents and school leads were asked respectively whether they would be willing to take part, allow their children to participate in, or support delivery of the survey. Participants reflected on the range of potential concerns and benefits discussed throughout this report in weighing up their overall views, which are set out below.

6.3.1 Young adults' willingness

Young adults considered the survey to be important and felt that it could contribute to positive outcomes. Provided they knew what would happen with information provided, that participation was optional and that they were given choice around the level of detail to provide, young adults said they would be pleased to be offered the opportunity to take part in a survey of this nature.[8]

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[8] It is important to bear in mind that those sharing this view had opted in to contribute to our research. This may be indicative of a greater willingness to participate in research generally than is held by the wider population of young adults.

> *"I definitely would. I would find it really […] empowering in a way, knowing that I was […] helping shape whatever would come out of it, or […] could potentially help improve an issue that I think needs to be spoken about more, and […] supporting a lot more. So yes, I would definitely love to take part." (Young adult)*

Whether or not they had previously disclosed their experiences of abuse, and expectations around what would happen to responses they provided, would influence whether young people responded honestly.

> *"I personally wouldn't worry about confidentiality being broken […] because I know that there's nothing in my case that hasn't already been brought to professionals' attention, or […] already been dealt with. As a child though, yes, I would very much be very aware that this could become bigger than what I anticipated." (Young adult)*

While they would be comfortable sharing information they had disclosed elsewhere, young adults said they personally would have been unlikely to report in a survey abuse that was not already known about. Parents reflected that young people's willingness would also depend on their capacity to engage, which could be lower while they were experiencing or dealing with trauma after abuse.

One view was that over-16s/adult respondents might respond more honestly, because they would have a greater deal of autonomy in relation to safeguarding responses to the information they provided.

6.3.2 Parents' willingness

Whether parents participating in the focus groups would have supported their own children's participation in a survey of this nature was not clear.

Some parents were generally supportive of evidence-gathering as they wanted to see support and justice for victims/survivors of abuse improved. Based on a perception that abuse was already known about and ignored, however, they were sceptical that a survey would affect any change. Whether the survey would lead to outcomes they found meaningful, such as prosecution of perpetrators, was a key consideration for parents who took part in the research in weighing up anticipated risks around fatigue and retraumatisation, which some parents said their children had experienced in relation to fruitless attempts to disclose abuse previously. Parents also felt young people were likely not to report abuse honestly because of concerns about consequences of disclosure.

Other participants, however, suggested that parental reticence would be an important challenge for the survey administrator to address, particularly when considering involving populations who might be harder to reach, including young people with SEND, who were home-schooled, or whose religious or cultural backgrounds made it more likely parents would be reticent for them to engage with the topic.

6.3.3 Schools' willingness

Views were mixed among school leads. Some said they would be willing to accommodate the survey, given appropriate notice and clarity around key parameters.

> *"In principle, I'm in favour of it as an idea. Abuse thrives on secrecy, and it would be healthy […] to normalise talking about abuse, [to] remove the element of shame and secrecy from it. It should be talked about." (School lead)*

Other school leads felt unable to reach a conclusion without further information, but said they would be willing to consider the proposed survey further if this was provided. Some would want to consult internally with their staff teams to reach a decision. Details that would inform decision-making included:

- A clearer understanding of the purpose and intended outcomes of the survey (how evidence would differ from data on abuse collected elsewhere)
- Information on how disclosure and support for children would be handled
- Sight of the survey questionnaire.

Within this group, some SEND schools in particular reported feeling ‘extremely hesitant’ about the survey, as they considered it unlikely that their pupils would be able to take part. This would link to decisions around eligibility criteria, related screening processes, and support for children with additional needs to comprehend and complete the survey.

> *“I'm less in favour of doing it in special schools […] just because a lot of my children would not be able to engage with the process at any level, because developmentally, that is not where they are.” (School lead)*

School leads were clear that the particular parameters for survey delivery would need to be carefully thought through and made clear to schools, parents and children in order for the survey to be effective. Careful planning and scheduling would also be crucial, including preparatory education and post-survey discussions and support for children.

7 Conclusions and implications

As outlined throughout this report, participants identified a number of (sometimes conflicting) issues that would need to be addressed in preparation for piloting a survey on child abuse. Each need careful examination in order to balance the utility of the survey with the need to support respondents' wellbeing before, during, and after taking part.

To feed into decisions by ONS about the feasibility of a survey on child abuse, this chapter draws together findings relating to the five overarching research questions. The tables provided in Key considerationsAppendix A offer a more detailed overview of options discussed by participants – including benefits, challenges, and alternatives they identified – and implications of these for the proposed survey.

7.1 Reflections on the research questions

This section sets out views and key considerations relating to each of the research questions:

- Whether children and young adults with past experiences of abuse, parents/guardians of children with past experiences of abuse, and schools would agree to take part in a survey of this nature
- Whether children and young adults can recall and would be willing to report experiences of abuse in a survey
- Whether a survey could be inclusive of children & young adults with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- Whether children who are home-schooled could take part in such a survey
- Whether the appropriate safeguarding needed for carrying out such a survey could be provided.

7.1.1 Willingness to be involved in a survey about child abuse

Participants across young adult, parent/guardian, and school leads groups were asked to consider whether they would be willing to take part or support delivery of a survey on child abuse. As all young adults included in the research had discussed and accessed support in relation to their abuse, we asked them to reflect on both their current willingness to participate and how they might have felt if invited to take part in a survey before they had told anyone about their experiences.

While some participants across these participant groups expressed willingness, others said they would require further information to determine whether or not they would agree to be involved in a survey on child abuse.

Areas about which people would require further information included: the sample scope – including eligibility criteria such as children's developmental stage, age, and perceived vulnerability; support provision (particularly, as discussed in 7.1.3, in relation to children with SEND); and disclosure requirements and processes.

Other key considerations affecting willingness to be involved in the proposed survey included:

- Individuals' understanding of the need for a survey and expectations around its outcomes. Mixed views on these issues indicated a need for clear messaging and detailed advance information to support informed decision-making

- The degree of choice and control young people would be offered, in relation both to their overall voluntary participation and, for those reporting experiences of abuse, around the level of detail that would be required
- How the survey would be delivered to young people, including the level of flexibility that could be offered to schools, and choice for those aged 16–25 about the mode of survey administration
- For schools, the extent of advance notice and flexibility of scheduling survey data collection.

Related to all of these, participants across the sample stressed the importance of provision of advance information about the purpose and parameters of the survey to support informed consent and encourage participation.

Delivering the survey in schools was generally considered appropriate. Views on administration to young people outside the school setting were mixed, informed by considerations relating to practicality, the level of privacy and comfort offered, as well as flexibility and access to support.

7.1.2 Young people’s recall and willingness to report experiences of abuse in a survey

We asked young people who had experienced abuse how willing and able they would be to answer survey questions about it accurately. The design of the survey was an important factor that would influence their decision about whether to respond honestly. Specific considerations were the level of privacy the survey afforded respondents when completing the questionnaire, who would have access to their completed questionnaires, how much detail they would be asked to provide about the abuse and whether they could skip questions they did not want to answer.

Participants felt that both ability to recall abuse and willingness to report it in a survey would vary by individual, as well as the amount of detail that the survey questions went into. Young adults anticipated that they would be less willing to share information not already known to others if safeguarding responses would be initiated. Parental access to data would also affect willingness to respond honestly.

Maximising respondent choice was highlighted as important to ensure young people were supported to take part in a way that would feel as comfortable as possible to them. It was also considered crucial to inform young people in advance about the level of confidentiality they could expect, and what would happen in instances where data was shared for safeguarding purposes.

7.1.3 Inclusion of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

School leads were asked whether and how young people with SEND could be included in the survey. Views were mixed, which may in part relate to the wide variety of SEND to be considered. Particular challenges related to inclusion of children with lower levels of comprehension and those who used alternative ways of communicating, such as Makaton or visual tools.

One view was that eligibility should be linked to comprehension (considering cognitive/developmental stage as part of eligibility criteria, rather than age alone), which would necessitate screening by gatekeepers or through a pre-assessment activity. School leads also suggested that a tailored version of the survey would be needed to make it accessible, and that allowing schools to offer individual support from a trusted adult would enable more children with communication difficulties to take part. Processes to support delivery to people with SEND outside school settings were not discussed and would need further exploration.

7.1.4 Inclusion of home-schooled children

Child protection leads identified three key challenges were discussed in relation to inclusion of home school children, relating to sampling, access, and support needs.
Child protection leads noted that no mandatory registration currently exists for home schooling, though records are held by children's services for home-schooled children who were previously enrolled in mainstream education or have come into contact with social care services. While participants anticipated that the survey administrator could work with children's services to sample and recruit these children, their records would provide an incomplete sample frame.

Approaches to administer the survey to home-schooled children, including delivery of the questionnaire and processes to provide any support that might be necessary, would need to be determined.

Clear communication of the purpose and parameters of the survey would be particularly important to encourage parental engagement.

7.1.5 Safeguarding

Participants in all four groups discussed expectations and considerations relating to confidentiality and safeguarding. Participants' views on what would constitute appropriate safeguarding and how it would best be carried out were mixed. Disclosure of responses for safeguarding purposes was anticipated to have a detrimental impact on young people's willingness to report abuse they had not previously talked about. Participants also noted that, depending on the number of young people involved in each area, it would be important to consider practical arrangements for schools and social care teams to handle the workload resulting from disclosures arising from survey participation. Maximising the notice period and staggering roll-out of the survey across local schools could support social care teams to manage a potential influx of referrals.

Considering the approach proposed by ONS, wherein cases involving reported abuse above a certain threshold would be referred directly by the survey administrator, one suggestion was that it would be necessary to determine with individual authorities whether this would be feasible and, if so, what processes that would need to be put in place to align with local requirements. Challenges included the need for nuanced understanding of local safeguarding practice; access to sufficient information to make referrals; and the potential burden on children's services where they would be required to gather additional information that would usually be provided as part of more typical referral processes.

Alternative approaches suggested by participants included information being returned to schools to follow up and refer, or young people being signposted to disclose separately through usual channels. Challenges for a school-led referrals process related to the potential burden for schools, as well as the impact on young people's willingness to report information. While some school leads considered this could be manageable, processes to review and return cases to schools for investigation would also require further development.

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Appendix A. Key considerations

The following tables provide a more detailed overview of options and approaches discussed by participants, along with potential benefits, challenges, and implications.[9]

Sample scope

Options discussed by participants	Benefits	Challenges/ alternatives	Implications and considerations for research team
Work with social care teams to facilitate access to **looked-after children**	Social care hold comprehensive records of looked-after children – could be used as sampling frame Social care involvement in sample screening could exclude looked after children considered particularly vulnerable Introductions via familiar social care teams could support children's wellbeing and engagement Offering incentives could support engagement	Burden on social care Exclusions and individuals' disengagement from services could limit sample coverage Need to cross-reference with school-based sample to avoid duplication Recruitment through placements, supported housing providers or voluntary forums were suggested alternatives - may not be appropriate for random probability survey	Further discussion with social care needed to explore options and develop processes Resource and staffing implications would depend on numbers of young people to be contacted and approach agreed Advance notice and clear information needed to support social care involvement
Work with social care teams to reach **home-schooled children**	Children's services hold partial list of home-schooled children and could potentially facilitate access	No comprehensive register of home-schooled children – sample would be limited to those who had engaged in mainstream education or received social care intervention Parental reticence a likely challenge Concern about risks to children and access to support Increased burden for social care	Excluding home-schooled children would contribute to survey coverage error, but sample frame is limited and may not fully represent home-schooled population Administration approach would require development. Resource implications for children's services depend on numbers and mechanisms for sampling and recruitment Clear communication around research purpose and parameters, including assurances around respondent anonymity, could mitigate some anticipated parental concerns

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[9] Purple text, including the content of the 'Implications' columns, has been inferred by the research team, while all other content is drawn directly from the qualitative data.

Introduce pre-survey screening for **cognitive ability/ developmental stage**	Developmental stage-based eligibility criteria supports wellbeing and data quality: reduces comprehension/ communication challenges May reduce administrative burden of survey for schools providing support for participating children with SEND	Limits sample, skewing data Screening could be additional burden for schools	Administration approach to be determined Resource and cost implications
Allow gatekeepers to **screen and exclude more vulnerable** young people	Screening out children considered vulnerable (in relation to e.g. mental health, illness, known experiences of child protection, language barriers) could protect their wellbeing if survey would be particularly difficult for them	Children's agency reduced; wellbeing may be affected by e.g. feeling singled out Risk of sample bias due to subjective judgement of gatekeepers Skews data Parent/guardian opportunity to withdraw child, and support for children to make own informed choice, considered sufficient by some	ONS to consider implications around sample bias and data requirements Clear and consistent guidance needed to guide school processes
Exclude younger children below year 11 (aged 15-16)	Would minimise children's exposure to sensitive topics Data may be more accurate, as older children considered more likely to comprehend questions and concepts relating to abuse	Reduces extent of data captured Wellbeing disbenefit: loss of opportunity for children to report experiences of abuse Tailoring survey versions considered sufficient/preferable by some	ONS to consider implications for sample and data requirements/usefulness Would not fulfil user need expressed as part of the ONS consultation

Survey scope and questionnaire design

Options discussed by participants	Benefits	Challenges/ alternatives	Implications and considerations for research team
Provide **age-differentiated** survey versions	Tailoring survey to younger and older year groups could enhance comprehension Reduce risk of older children finding survey simplistic and therefore disengaging	Inconsistency across sample – affects ability to compare groups	Implications for resources, accuracy and data comparability would need to be determined
Create **accessible version** of survey for SEND	Supports broader participation by removing communication/ comprehension barriers for those with SEND	Children would still require support to complete survey Unlikely to be universally accessible	Time, resource and budget implications Testing the questionnaire would be important, and some school leads wanted schools to be consulted and provide feedback

	School involvement in questionnaire development may support buy-in		Specialist input required
Framing of survey – **focus on 'child safety'**	Familiar, positive terminology: may be reassuring and make taking part feel more comfortable and supportive	Risk of confusion and masking intended purpose – need to be upfront to ensure clarity	Crucial that survey's purpose and parameters of participation are clear to support informed consent
Ask about experiences across young people's **whole lives**	Ensures data captures full range of abuse experiences to, reduces risk to wellbeing of victims/survivors feeling dismissed May reduce concern around challenge of recalling more specific timeframes of abuse	Increased burden on recall	Implications for generation of prevalence estimates and for any planned time series analysis
Use **closed questions**	Selecting from response options may require less reflection on details of experience and feel less exposing	If questions considered leading, formal investigation of disclosures of abuse could be compromised. Lowest level of detail could be included in the survey's opening questions, with optional, open follow-up questions answered in open text	Implications and limitations around disclosure require further exploration Questionnaire design will require care to ensure questions are clear and response options comprehensive
Use a **tiered question approach**, with broader questions followed by optional follow-up questions	Risk of emotional distress related primarily to sense of agency and control – important to offer choice Could reduce apprehension around being required to provide more detail May encourage more honest response/reduce skipping Open, optional follow-up questions could avoid detrimental impact on safeguarding investigations	Detail of responses may be reduced	Implications for scope and usefulness of data would need to be explored
Include **space** for young people to add anything additional they wish to share	Space to share everything they wish could help reduce rumination and support wellbeing	May impact on number of questions that could be included in survey due to time/space constraints	Implications for scope of data would need to be explored Ethical considerations around collection of data that would not be included in analysis Would need to feed into safeguarding process

Survey delivery considerations

Options discussed by participants	Benefits	Challenges/ alternatives	Implications and considerations for research team
Deliver in schools for 11–15 year olds	School provides a familiar, supportive environment: could facilitate children's comfort, engagement, and access to support, including safeguarding responses Offering schools flexibility to decide case-by-case how to administer the survey could ensure individual needs are considered and supported	Planning time required for schools Going straight back to lessons following completion could be distressing: careful scheduling important Burden on schools dependent on numbers of children included, about which expectations varied	Clear and consistent guidance needed to guide school processes Implications for data would need to be explored further
Offer schools choice on how to deliver survey	**Class-based** completion, with children completing survey alongside familiar peers considered practical and could help 'normalise' survey	Measures to provide privacy and confidentiality would be necessary, including use of tablets, physical spacing, randomisation of question order, a 'hide screen' function	Clear guidance needed to support school processes Implications for data would need to be explored further (including e.g. question order randomisation impacts on data validity/comparability)
	Individual/small group delivery could suit some children better. One-to-one support is necessary for some children with SEND to complete the survey: would increase participation Would be manageable for special schools, given staffing and pupil numbers.	Less practicable for mainstream schools. Could make children feel singled out or intimidated Confidentiality of children's responses compromised. May have implications for disclosure/safeguarding processes if these deviate from usual local approach Resource and timeframe would be affected	
Researcher support/supervision	Could lend credibility, build confidence in survey's independence, support children's comprehension and clarity Would reduce school staff burden if researcher held responsibility for introducing the survey, Q&A etc Could supervise alongside school staff	Willingness to participate may be affected by presence of unfamiliar adult Recorded introduction could be played at the start as an alternative Collaborative support/supervision could mitigate concerns	Cost implications of this approach would need to be determined

Offer 16- to 25-year-olds a choice on how to take part in survey	**Completing online** enhances choice on where, when and how quickly to complete questions – increased privacy and confidentiality could enhance honesty	Access to internet, appropriate devices, and required skills are barriers for participation online. Respondents would not have immediate support to answer questions or access safeguarding. Less control for research team over confidentiality – responses may be observed/influenced by somebody else.	Cost implications of online/researcher-supported completion differ; implications of flexible approach would need to be explored Response rates affected by different modes Wellbeing issues relating to support vs privacy considerations Implications for sampling approach and survey communications would need to be explored web-only survey risks excluding young people who are not online, who may be more at risk of some types of abuse. Protocol for home visit would need careful consideration, specifically around what is said to whom. The tablet would also need to be secure, so that no one other than the respondent can view the questionnaire or the responses. Need to be very clear about who would have access to individual's survey responses, in what circumstances. Survey invitation letters and information needs to make this clear
	Self-completion at home with researcher present could enhance comprehension and accessibility; researcher could have safeguarding role to prevent further harm	Researcher support would reduce privacy and flexibility, and might draw abusers' attention if this were ongoing within the home	
	A **neutral local venue** could offer a more controlled, supported environment.	Risk to response rates; lower level of privacy; resource implications	

Access to data and disclosure processes

Options discussed by participants	Benefits	Challenges/ alternatives	Implications and considerations for research team
Data linkage	Examining patterns of abuse and impacts was considered positive; clear advance information about the purpose and methods could mitigate concerns.	Potential concerns around anonymity and confidentiality and/or being judged.	Advance information would need to ensure clarity on who would have access to data and in which circumstances

Parent/guardians' access to children's survey responses		Willingness to share information in the survey would be reduced Could increase risk of harm for any young person who disclosed abuse Any limits to young people's confidentiality should be clearly conveyed from the outset to ensure that they were able to make fully informed decisions about taking part.	Implications for data – young people's willingness to report abuse reduced. Advance information would need to ensure clarity on who would have access to data and in which circumstances
Referrals of disclosures **made by the research team** rather than schools	Greater level of confidentiality for children whose responses would not require disclosure information to be shared with schools – could benefit data Important to ensure survey signposts to support and provides information on the disclosure process	Young people less likely to report abuse experiences where disclosures would be made. If had not disclosed before, concern over safeguarding response to disclosure may stop young people taking part/reporting abuse/providing detail Follow-up would be needed to capture sufficient information for safeguarding. Roles and responsibilities for this unclear Research team would have limited access to relevant information and contacts Could increase burden on social care teams: additional steps might be needed to link survey data to existing records and follow up Safeguarding processes differ across areas, which could prove challenging for a single research team to coordinate across the survey Time lag between data collection and review would need to be managed Some schools would not support survey delivery unless they would be informed of any referrals	Safeguarding protocol has implications for data collection – may reduce participation and validity of data collected Safeguarding procedure needs to be considered very carefully, particularly whether localised approach to identifying disclosure and notifying the appropriate agencies can be scaled up for a national survey Further discussion with social care teams in sampled areas might be necessary to fully understand and agree thresholds and processes required for safeguarding to be effective in each Roles and responsibilities to be determined. Legal delegation of duty may be required for schools to hand responsibility to survey administrator –would need to be explored further

Referrals should not be made from survey data: signpost young people to standard avenues through which they could make disclosures directly	Mitigates practical challenges around disclosure Gives young people choice and control about whether to disclose abuse beyond survey, with potential implications for their willingness to answer survey questions truthfully	Some participants anticipated the survey would have to follow local policies and procedures around reporting concerns for children's welfare to social services	Further exploration required to determine most appropriate approach
Survey administrator should **return cases to schools for follow-up and referral**	May be a practical necessity. Schools hold relevant safeguarding expertise and records, can easily access children for follow up and have established relationships with referral agencies and parents/guardians to facilitate referrals	Compromises children's confidentiality, which young people said would reduce willingness to disclose abuse in the survey	Further exploration required to determine required timeframes for review and return of cases Local variation in safeguarding and disclosure policies and procedures should be investigated to identify areas of commonality and difference and understand how any requirements may impact on design of survey

Support

Options discussed by participants	Benefits	Challenges/ alternatives	Implications and considerations for research team
Support for young people could include advance information, education, and practical tools to support comprehension	Clear information could reduce children's apprehension and encourage engagement in the survey Tailoring materials to age, SEND, and different languages would ensure accessibility Information should be provided in advance and on the day School support to introduce survey could support individuals to make own decisions about whether to take part Building familiarity with topics and terminology could develop skills, confidence, and language to answer survey questions. Delivery by an external	None – comprehensive support a key requirement for the survey	Processes to disseminate information and support consent processes need to be determined. Clear and consistent guidance needed to guide school processes. Resource/cost implications

	provider might usefully distance the survey from school life, reducing children's concerns about confidentiality Clear, simple language throughout the survey would support young people's understanding of questions and concepts Audio functionality (reading questions aloud), large text options, and survey documents tailored for SEND and different languages could support comprehension		
Allow **1:1 support for children with SEND** – from e.g. trusted adult in school	Staff could e.g. guide children through questionnaire, interpret questions and answers, scribe Approach could align with how children were typically supported in school Appropriate and manageable way for schools of ensuring that those who wanted to participate in the survey could do so	Implications for children's confidentiality; could affect honesty of responses Important to support children's choice about participation and sources of support to mitigate risks May not be feasible outside school settings	Detailed guidance around acceptable parameters for support needed to support children's voluntary participation and mitigate risks to data quality (including e.g. alteration of child's responses) Capturing information on whether a child was supported in taking part in the survey and what support involved would allow cases to be identified and reviewed Specific mechanisms to support participation outside school settings would need to be explored
Ensure young people have ready access to **emotional support and aftercare**	Signposting to a range of options important to maximise choice and control for young people. Some suggested proactive approaches to connect young people with relevant support. Ability to refer children to external support could help alleviate the burden of aftercare for schools	Support options should support individual preference and choice	Feasibility and cost implications of suggestions including individual follow-up calls to respondents and provision of bespoke emotional support services would need to be explored. Parameters for schools' provision of support would also need to be determined.

Support for parents could include written information and briefing/Q&A sessions	Participants suggested providing advance written information and briefing sessions ahead of the survey Contact information for the research team and advice/guidance on how to support their children post-survey could also support parents' engagement and buy-in		Resource implications
Support for schools and staff includes flexibility, information, aftercare	Scheduling and agreeing key parameters, roles and responsibilities crucial for schools to support survey. As much notice and flexibility as possible would mitigate scheduling challenges Advance information important for staff to support delivery Aftercare provision for staff could include access to emotional support for staff dealing with disclosures Practical measures including provision of tablets and funding to cover expenses (such as staff cover) would help some schools.	Staff capacity to support additional work represented a key constraint	Burden on schools would depend on survey scope, timing, their students' support needs and eligibility, and roles and responsibilities relating to screening, safeguarding, and support. Resource implications
Support for **children's services** handling disclosures could include resource for staff, timing survey, and advance information	Additional child protection staff resource may be required to process and respond to referrals, depending on sample sizes and alignment with usual safeguarding processes. Staggered survey timing could help manage workflow Briefing materials and occupational/emotional support would also be helpful		Any implications for data would need to be determined Resource implications

Appendix B. Methodology

Additional detail about the methods used in this research are set out in this section.

Sampling

It was hoped that participants would be purposively sampled to ensure range and diversity across the study population as far as possible. Unfortunately, due to a range of recruitment challenges outlined in chapter 1, it was not possible to carry out as many interviews and focus groups as intended or achieve the diversity originally envisaged. However, a range of participant groups were included, as outlined in Table A.1.

Table A.1 – Overview of achieved data collection encounters and sampling characteristics.

Participant group	Data collection mode	Characteristics sampled/monitored for diversity	Total number of participants involved in data collection encounters
Young adults with experience of abuse in childhood	Depth interviews	Age, gender, ethnicity, geographic location and types of abuse experienced were monitored sample characteristics.	4
Parents whose children experienced abuse in childhood	Focus group	Child's age, geographic location, gender, ethnicity and abuse types were monitored.	5
School leads	Focus group	Senior staff from a range of secondary schools and sixth form settings across the UK Region, school type, and individual roles were monitored sample characteristics.	18
Child protection leads	Depth interviews	Child protection leads working in children's social care across the UK. Geographic location and numbers of schools in the area were monitored.	10

Recruitment

As outlined in chapter 1, all gatekeepers were given a detailed briefing from a member of the NatCen research team about the recruitment and fieldwork process prior to contacting any potential participants.

The aims of the research and what taking part would involve were explained to all potential participants. This included an overview of:

- why they had been contacted
- topics to be covered
- duration of the encounter
- how their information would be used; and
- the level of anonymity offered.

Relevant materials, including information sheets and the privacy notice, were provided to each participant in advance of the interview/focus group. Key information about the study was reiterated before the start of interviews and focus groups. All participants had the opportunity to ask the research team questions about their involvement.

Permission to audio record the discussion was also sought. Details of relevant support organisations were also provided to young adult and parent/guardian participants.

Data collection and analysis

The research team scheduled interviews and focus groups to ensure that participants would be able to access appropriate support if needed after the discussion. To ensure accessibility and convenience, individuals were offered either telephone or online interviews according to their preference.

Interview and focus group data were managed and analysed using the Framework approach developed by NatCen. Key topics emerging from the interviews and focus groups were identified through familiarisation with the transcripts to develop a thematic framework for data management. All members of the research team were given a thorough briefing about the analytical framework and a detailed description of what should be included in each sub-theme, to ensure consistency of approach.

The Framework method has been embedded into NVivo version 12. The software enabled the summarised data from the research to be linked to the verbatim transcript. This approach meant that each part of every transcript that was relevant to a particular theme was noted, ordered and accessible. The final analytic stage involved working through the charted data, drawing out the range of experiences and views, identifying similarities and differences and interrogating the data to seek to explain emergent patterns and findings.

Research ethics

Ethical approvals

All stages of the research were reviewed in detail and approved by two research ethics committees: the National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee, and NatCen's internal Research Ethics Committee which is comprised of senior staff. These committees considered all aspects of the research design in detail and approval was given prior to fieldwork taking place.

We also completed ethics applications and processes for gatekeeper organisations as required to provide the necessary level of detail about the study that they could share with staff and partners for recruitment purposes. It was also important for them to be sure that we were going to carry out the study safely and ensure participant wellbeing throughout the data collection process.

Key issues that were considered by NatCen and ONS in designing the study and other committees in planning and conducting fieldwork are detailed below.

Participation based on informed consent

- Participants were made aware of what the research involved and that they could consent or refuse to participate on an voluntary basis. We prepared and provided tailored, accessible materials and informed participants across the groups that taking part was voluntary, confidential and anonymous.
- Researchers facilitated participants to make an informed decision about taking part, ensuring that they understood what confidentiality and anonymity meant and being clear about the limits of confidentiality. The ongoing nature of consent was explained, including that withdrawal was possible up until the point of data analysis.

Participants’ wellbeing

- Careful consideration was given to protecting the welfare of research participants, which is particularly important when exploring sensitive topics or engaging people who may be in vulnerable circumstances. Although participants’ personal experiences of abuse were not explored as part of the research interviews, there was a possibility that children, young adults, and parents of children would wish to share information about upsetting experiences of abuse. In the instance of any disclosure, we would have followed NatCen’s disclosure policy (see below).
- Throughout all stages of the research – from recruitment to participation in interviews/focus groups – we provided participants with clear information about the topics being covered and agreed clear ground rules for participants ahead of each interview.

Confidentiality, anonymity, and disclosure

- NatCen’s disclosure policy was put in place to deal with any instances where a participant disclosed past, current or potential significant harm to themselves or identifiable other. This would involve raising the issue with the NatCen disclosure board to ensure swift safeguarding action could be taken if necessary.
- The circumstances in which participant confidentiality might have to be breached were carefully explained to participants in the information sheets, consent forms, and by researchers at the time of the interview. No incidents of disclosure took place during fieldwork.
- Rigorous data security and protection against direct or indirect disclosure of identity was built into all stages of the research, in line with the Data Protection Act and GDPR obligations.

Appendix C. Topic guides

A tailored topic guide was used with each participant group to ensure a consistent approach across data collection encounters and between members of the research team. The guides were used flexibly to allow researchers to respond to the nature and content of each discussion. Researchers used open, non-leading questions, and answers were fully probed to elicit greater depth and detail where necessary.

The main headings and subheadings from the topic guides used for this study are provided below.

Young adults topic guide

1. Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen
- Introduce research, aims of study and interview (including length; voluntary nature of participation; anonymity, confidentiality and caveats; data storage and security; and brief overview of topics to be covered)
- Permission to audio record interview
- Questions
- Start recorder; ask participant to confirm consent

2. Background

- About them
- Knowledge/experience of surveys
- General views about participating in surveys
- Thoughts about taking part in a survey about something personal to them that is not a particularly sensitive topic

3. Understanding of abuse

- What they think ‘child abuse’ is
- Views on NSPCC definition

4. General views on children completing a survey on abuse

- Whether and why this survey could be important
- Views about taking part in a survey about abuse
- Concerns/challenges about participating
- Reflections on how they might have felt doing this as children (aged 11–17), including any differences relating to age/disclosure/recency of abuse/other

5. Possible coverage of a survey on abuse: questions and format

- Views on example question, including any concerns and suggestions for improvement

- Reflections on young people's ability to recall experiences across life and within last 12 months – including differences relating to e.g. age, recency of abuse
- Willingness to disclose information about abuse
- Views on the appropriate level of detail to ask, including any differences relating to e.g. age, recency of abuse, other factors.
- Approaches that would increase their comfort

6. Completing the survey

- Views on introduction of the survey to young people, including information they'd want to receive and any concerns
- Views on options for survey delivery to young people aged 16–25 – including benefits and challenges/concerns
- Alternative suggestions for where and how a survey could be delivered to those aged 16–25
- Views on children completing the survey in school and suggested delivery scenario
- Alternative suggestions for where and how a survey could be delivered to children aged 11–15

7. Views on anonymity, confidentiality, and disclosure

- Expectations around disclosure and safeguarding, including any impact on willingness to participate and any differences for groups of young people
- Views on parent/guardian access to survey responses for children aged 11–17
- Views on survey responses being linked to other data sources

8. Support and aftercare

- What support should be in place for young people before, during and after a survey
- Particular support organisations they would want to receive information about / be referred to, including rationale and any differences for particular groups of young people
- What participant considers most important about support offered

9. Overall reflections on children's participation

- Whether they would be willing to participate in this kind of survey
- Reflections on willingness to participate when they were younger (including differences relating to e.g. age, recency of abuse, support)
- Final thoughts on how survey could best support children and young people to feel comfortable and to respond honestly

Thanks and close

Parent/guardian topic guide

1. Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen

- Introduce research, aims of study and focus group (including length; voluntary nature of participation; anonymity, confidentiality and caveats; data storage and security; and brief overview of topics to be covered)
- Permission to audio record discussion
- Ground rules for focus group
- Questions
- Start recorder; ask participants to confirm consent

2. Background

- About them and their children
- Knowledge/experience of surveys

3. Understanding of abuse

- Views on NSPCC definition of child abuse

4. General views on children completing a survey on abuse

- Thoughts about children taking part in a survey about different forms of abuse
- Potential benefits of a survey on abuse
- Concerns parents would have about children participating, including variation among groups of children, particular concerns about those who have experienced abuse, and ways of addressing concerns
- Views on sampling approach
- Views on framing and introduction of survey

5. Completing the survey

- Views on children completing the survey in school, including suggested scenario for delivery
- Alternative suggestions for where and how a survey could be delivered to children aged 11–15
- Views on options for survey delivery to young people aged 16–25
- Alternative suggestions for where and how a survey could be delivered to those aged 16–25
- Differences for groups of children

6. Views on anonymity, confidentiality, and disclosure

- Expectations around disclosure and safeguarding, including any impact on parents' willingness for children to participate
- Views on survey responses being linked to other data sources

7. Support and aftercare

- What support should be in place for children before, during and after a survey

- Particular support organisations they would want children to receive information about / be referred to, including rationale and any differences for particular groups of children
- Preferences on how information is provided
- Views on what good support for parents would look like
- What good support for parents would look like – before, during and after survey

8. Overall reflections on children's participation

- Key benefits and concerns for parents for a survey
- Whether they would be willing for their child to participate in this kind of survey
- Reflections on measures that would reduce/resolve any outstanding concerns
- Final thoughts on how survey could best support children to feel comfortable and enable them to respond honestly

Thanks and close

School leads topic guide

1. Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen
- Introduce research, aims of study and focus group (including length; voluntary nature of participation; anonymity, confidentiality and caveats; data storage and security; and brief overview of topics to be covered)
- Permission to audio record
- Ground rules for group discussion
- Questions
- Start recorder; ask participants to confirm consent

1. Background

- Individual introductions: participants' current roles and responsibilities
- Roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding

2. General views on a survey on child abuse

- Potential benefits of a survey about child abuse
- Perceived challenges/ concerns about a survey of this nature
- Views on framing and introduction of survey

3. Children's ability and willingness to recall and answer questions about abuse

- Views on children's ability to recall detail about abuse (within their lifetime; within last 12 months)
- Views on children's ability to respond accurately

- How children might feel about sharing detail, including differences for different groups of children
- What would best support children’s comprehension and ability to answer questions

4. Completing the survey

- Views on children completing the survey in school, including local procedures or rules that survey would be subject to
- views on suggested scenario for survey delivery: including benefits, concerns, and any mitigations
- Any alternative suggestions
- Any differences for ages/groups of children (including children who have experienced abuse before and after they’d disclosed elsewhere; children with SEND; different age bands)
- Adaptations that would be required for children to take part – including rationale; impacts on children’s ability to participate, privacy and confidentiality
- Expectations around sample selection and number of children/classes that would be included in their school

5. Views on anonymity, confidentiality, and disclosure

- Expectations around disclosure and safeguarding: reflections on proposed approach including impact on children taking part and on schools.
- What should happen if abuse is reported in the survey

6. Support and aftercare

- Views on support that should be in place for children before, during and after the survey
- Any particular organisations/information they would like information to be provided about – probe what and why
- Preferences on how information is provided (e.g. format; whether opt-in/mandatory)
- What good support for parents would look like
- Support and resources for schools and social care – what should be provided to support effective delivery of the survey and response to disclosures.

7. Final reflections

- Key considerations for schools for a survey of this nature; willingness to take part and support delivery of survey
- Reflections on measures that would reduce/resolve any outstanding concerns – most important things to include
- Any final thoughts on how survey could best support young people to feel comfortable and enable them to respond honestly
- Final thoughts on how survey could best support children with SEND to take part.

Thanks and close

Child protection leads topic guide

1. Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen
- Introduce research, aims of study and interview (including information on its length; voluntary nature of participation; anonymity, confidentiality and caveats; data storage and security; and brief overview of topics to be covered)
- Permission to audio record interview
- Questions
- Start recorder; ask participant to confirm consent

2. Background

- Participant's current role and responsibilities
- Brief overview of how local authority works with schools and other agencies prevention and response to child abuse

3. General views on a survey on child abuse

- Potential benefits of a survey about child abuse
- Challenges/ concerns about a survey of this nature
- Views on framing and introduction of survey

4. Inclusion of children in the survey

- Views on inclusion of looked-after children in the survey
- Views on including home schooled children
- Any other groups of children that might face barriers to taking part.
- Anticipated impacts on child protection services of including these groups

5. Completing the survey

- Views on children completing the survey in school
- views on suggested scenario for survey delivery
- Any alternative suggestions
- measures that would reduce/resolve concerns
- Views on options for survey delivery to 16–25 year olds – including benefits and concerns
- Any alternative suggestions
- Differences for groups of children (including children who have experienced abuse before and after they'd disclosed elsewhere; in relation to age)

6. Views on anonymity, confidentiality, and disclosure

- Expectations around disclosure and safeguarding: what should happen if abuse is reported in the survey

- Overview of process from the point at which researchers shared information with them
- Implications for children's services in dealing with disclosures, including benefits, challenges, and any solutions

7. Support and aftercare

- Views on support (emotional and practical) that should be in place for children before, during and after the survey
- Any particular organisations/information they would like information to be provided about – probe what and why
- Preferences on how information is provided (e.g. format; whether opt-in/mandatory)
- What good support for parents would look like
- Support and resources for schools and social care – what should be provided to support effective delivery of the survey and response to disclosures.

8. Final reflections

- Weighing up key benefits and concerns – what are the key considerations for children's social care for a survey of this nature
- Reflections on measures that would reduce/resolve any outstanding concerns – most important things to include
- Any final thoughts on how survey could best support young people to feel comfortable and enable them to respond honestly