



**Early Intervention to Prevent
Modern Slavery & Exploitation
of Care-Experienced Young
People in the UK: What Works &
What is Needed?**

Expert Roundtable Day Report

Acknowledgements

Justice & Care and Royal Holloway, University of London (host university) extend their sincere thanks to all the organisations who participated in the Expert Roundtable Day, as well as the guest speakers who shared their detailed insights and expertise. Guest speakers included the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Eleanor Lyons, and independent experts by experience, alongside leaders from the National County Lines Coordination Centre, Daddyless Daughters Project, Human Trafficking Foundation, Justice & Care, ECPAT, Barnardo's, Catch22, St Giles Trust, Craig Barlow Consultancy, and Royal Holloway, University of London. The wider list of participating organisations is detailed in Annex 1.

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The lead organisers – Dr Hannah Miller (Justice & Care) and Dr Josephine Chishti-Collins, Dr Sushri Sangita Puhan and Dr Shailesh Kumar (Royal Holloway, University of London) – have collaborated to produce this report, summarising the discussions from the Day and setting out the recommendations inspired by it. The organisations and individuals listed above and in Annex 1 do not necessarily share all the views, conclusions and recommendations within this report. This report is intended to form the basis for future discussion and partnerships between those present and across wider sectors.

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Note on Terminology:

In this report, '**modern slavery and exploitation**' is used as an umbrella term covering trafficking, forced labour, servitude, sexual and criminal exploitation, and related abuses such as forced marriage or organ removal (Cooper et al., 2017). The Palermo Protocol (2000) further defines trafficking as the coercive recruitment or control of people for exploitative purposes.

The report uses '**victim**' to describe anyone affected by modern slavery and exploitation, acknowledging its limitations alongside 'survivor' and 'lived experience.' '**Care-experienced**' is used expansively to refer to anyone who has spent any period in care across the various settings, e.g., foster, children's homes, supported accommodation, residential special schools, residential, supported, or secure settings - whether currently, leaving or previously in care.

Executive Summary

Modern slavery and exploitation pose a serious risk to many children and young people in the UK, yet much of this harm remains hidden and underreported. In 2025, 23,411 potential victims were referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) - the highest number recorded since its introduction - including 7,028 children, the majority of whom were UK nationals. Yet these figures capture only a fraction of the true scale of the problem. The Global Slavery Index estimates that as many as 122,000 people in the UK (adults and children) may be living in situations of modern slavery (Walk Free, 2023).

Within this wider context, care-experienced children are widely recognised as facing heightened vulnerability to exploitation. In 2025, 81,770 children were in care in England, many having experienced abuse or neglect and often navigating complex needs and instability which can in turn increase vulnerability to exploitation.

Despite increasing recognition of risks, effective early intervention to prevent exploitation remains underdeveloped and insufficiently embedded and funded within the UK's response. Care-experienced children are frequently treated as a sub-group within broader safeguarding or prevention strategies, rather than as a population requiring tailored prevention approaches. The result is fragmented provision, missed opportunities for early support, and a tendency towards reactive responses once harm has already occurred.

A central challenge is the need to shift from the often crisis-driven safeguarding towards the development of more early, proactive, relational intervention. Exploitation rarely begins with a perpetrator alone. It typically develops in the context of relational, emotional, and/or systemic absences that leave children vulnerable to manipulation, coercion and exploitation. Preventative approaches must therefore address these underlying gaps before they are filled by perpetrators.

Relationship-based and trauma-informed practice is widely recognised as foundational to effective prevention. Trust, stability, and emotional safety are critical conditions for engagement and disclosure. Early intervention cannot be effectively delivered through isolated programmes alone; it must be embedded across everyday interactions within education, social care, health services, policing, and across a wider range of community settings.

This report first briefly summarises current evidence on early interventions to prevent exploitation, grouping interventions around (a) victim-focused, (b) safeguarding, and (c) perpetrator-focused approaches. It then captures key themes from the Expert Roundtable Day, including a visual summary, case studies from practice, and reflections from experts by experience, before drawing together cross-cutting lessons on what works and what is needed to strengthen prevention for care-experienced and care-affected children and young people.

As this report demonstrates significant systemic barriers continue to undermine prevention efforts. These include shorter-term funding cycles that limit the sustainability of longer-term prevention work. Particular concern also arises around the transition out of care, where support can reduce abruptly as young people move into "independence". This creates a well-recognised "cliff-edge" around the age of 18, where formal safeguarding protections diminish even though vulnerability to exploitation often remains high.

Insights from lived experience highlight how exploitation develops in practice and what barriers young people face in seeking and receiving support and protection. Systems that are not genuinely trauma-informed can unintentionally reinforce stigma, mistrust, and disengagement. Embedding lived experience meaningfully, fully, and ethically across policy, practice, and research is therefore essential to ensure robust evidence-based responses that reflect the realities of young people's lives.

Strengthening prevention will require deeper collaboration between statutory and non-statutory actors, alongside sustained investment in early intervention approaches tailored to the experiences of care-experienced and care-affected young people. Improved evidence, stronger partnership working, and long-term commitment to relational support is central to achieving this shift.

Addressing vulnerabilities before exploitation occurs and designing responses around the lived realities of care-experienced young people, has the potential to significantly reduce the risk of harm and improve outcomes for some of the UK's most vulnerable children and young people.

Summary Recommendations Inspired by the Expert Roundtable Day

- 1. Identify care-experienced and care-affected children and young people as a priority group within modern slavery and exploitation prevention.** Ensure national and local strategies, commissioning, and pathways explicitly include care-experienced and care-affected children and care leavers, so tailored prevention is built in alongside wider safeguarding strategies.
- 2. Strengthen a combined "early intervention + crisis response" model.** Maintain strong responses when harm is identified, while expanding access to earlier, relationship-based support so concerns can be addressed sooner - particularly where earlier intervention is harder to access or thresholds are applied inconsistently.
- 3. Firmly embed lived experience ethically and routinely across policy, practice and evaluation.** Move from informing and consultation to structured co-design in service design, workforce development, training and evaluation. Prioritising appropriate support, ethical co-design and fair remuneration to avoid tokenism.
- 4. Prioritise a consistent 'trusted adult' as a key protective relationship.** Wherever possible, ensure each care-experienced child or young person at risk of exploitation has a clearly identified, reliable adult (or small, stable team) - prioritising those with relevant lived experience where available - who provides ongoing, non-judgemental support, empowering them to safely navigate services and relationships. Consistent support can reduce isolation and the likelihood that exploiters become a primary source of attention, belonging, and/or practical help.

5. **Reduce criminalisation by aligning policing and safeguarding around a child-first exploitation response.** Strengthen trauma-informed policing, improve data systems, and use prevention and disruption tools in ways that reduce harm and avoid treating exploited children as offenders.
6. **Improve consistency of practice across different workforces, including education settings.** Build on existing examples of promising practice by expanding exploitation-focused training, supervision and practical guidance (risk indicators, referral routes, and “what best practice looks like”) across social care, education, health, housing, policing and wider community-based services - recognising variation in capacity and specialist input across settings.
7. **Embed more trusted, specialist roles in everyday settings where risk shows up early.** Sustain and scale prevention-focused practitioners in schools and alternative provision, care placements (local authority and private), health settings, custody suites and community settings, so support is accessible in more places and not limited to areas with existing funded provision.
8. **Address the “cliff edge” by strengthening continuity through transitions, including beyond 18.** Increase the design of exploitation prevention and support that reflects 18–25 developmental realities (housing, mental health, financial literacy, access to employment, advocacy, legal advice, and trusted relationships), reducing the likelihood of support ending abruptly during transition to adulthood.
9. **Invest in evidence and learning, minimum evaluation standards for prevention initiatives.** Enhance monitoring and independent evaluation (including longer-term follow-up where feasible), enabling shared learning across settings so effective models can be improved, adapted, developed and scaled.



1. Introduction and Context

Modern slavery and exploitation continue to affect significant numbers of children and young people across the UK, though the true scale of harm remains difficult to measure. Walk Free’s (2023) Global Slavery Index estimates that around 122,000 people (adults and children) may be living in situations of modern slavery in the UK. Official identification through the UK’s National Referral Mechanism (NRM) continues to grow, with 23,411 referrals of potential victims of modern slavery registered in 2025 - the highest annual figure since the system was introduced. Of these referrals, 7,028 involved children, reflecting a growth in the reporting of exploitation. However, policy makers, practitioners and researchers widely recognise that many victims remain unidentified due to the hidden and complex nature of exploitation.

Among the groups facing particular vulnerability are care-experienced children and young people. As of 2025, 81,770 children were in care in England, representing a substantial population. For broader context Table 1 provides an overview on the scale and characteristics of the care population in England and Graph 1 identifies the range and numbers of settings across England, by provider type.

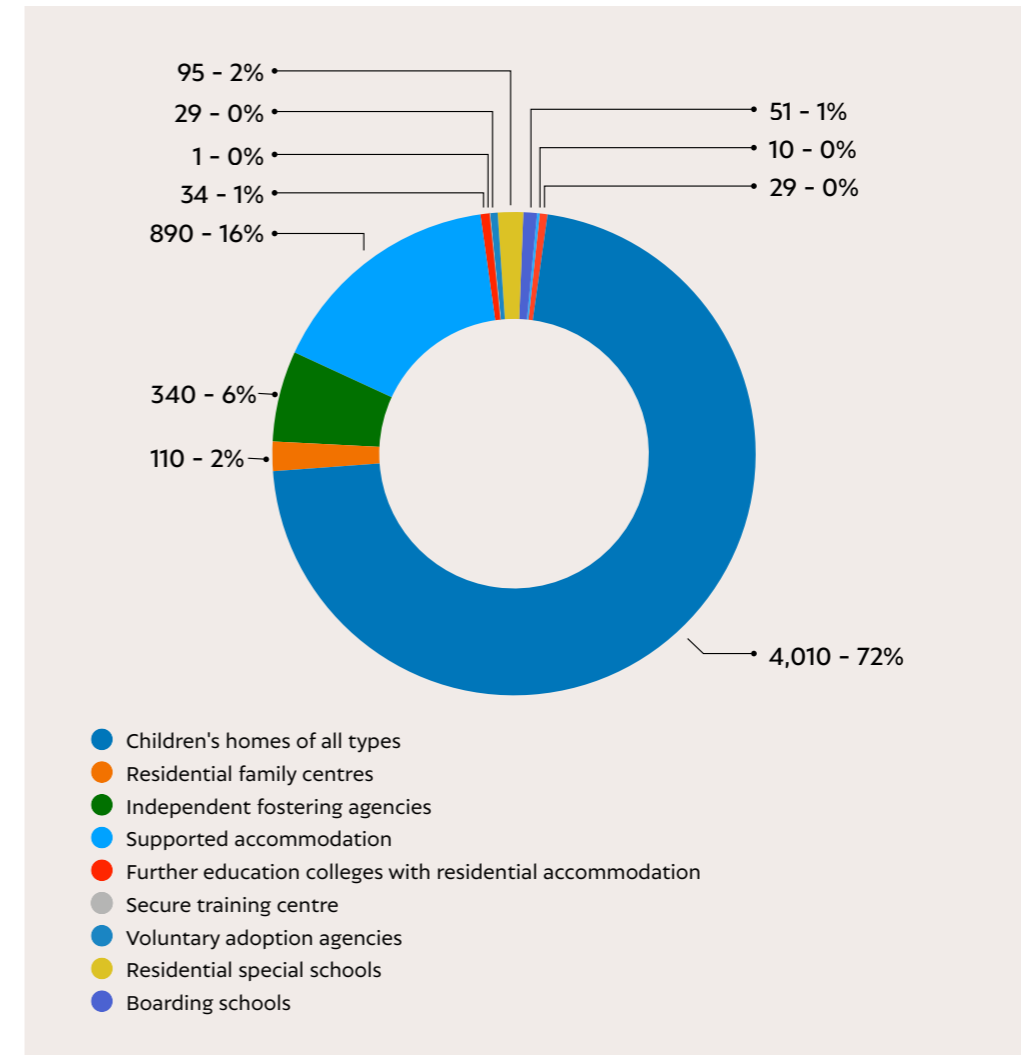
Table 1: Statistical Breakdown of Children Looked After in England

		2025	2024	2023	2022	2021
Sex	Male	46,040	47,670	48,000	46,300	45,010
	Female	35,740	35,860	35,750	35,790	35,770
	Total children	81,770	83,530	83,750	82,090	80,780
Age Range	Under 1 year	3,630	3,730	3,830	3,960	3,930
	1 to 4 years	10,030	10,740	11,080	11,300	11,630
	5 to 9 years	15,110	15,010	14,890	14,870	15,000
	10 to 15 years	30,930	31,430	31,880	31,690	31,340
	16 years and over	22,060	22,620	22,070	20,270	18,880
	Total children	81,770	83,530	83,750	82,090	80,780
Placement	1. Total foster placements	54,820	55,960	56,610	57,170	56,990
	2. Total secure homes and children's homes	9,480	8,710	8,020	7,610	7,440
	3. Total independent and semi-independent living arrangements/ supported accommodation	7,520	6,080	8,620	7,470	6,070
	4. Total other residential settings	1,170	1,170	1,170	960	1,010
	5. Total residential schools	100	90	90	100	120
	6. Total other placements	2,050	4,020	1,180	710	600
	7. Total placed with parents or other person with parental responsibility	4,970	5,390	5,830	5,710	6,070
	8. Total placed for adoption	1,660	2,120	2,230	2,350	2,490
	Total children	81,770	83,530	83,750	82,090	80,780

Source: Gov.UK (2026)¹

¹ From source: Numbers have been rounded to the nearest 10. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number. Figures in some tables may be suppressed, denoted by a 'c', percentages <0.5% are denoted by a 'k'. Historical data may differ from older publications which is mainly due to amendments made by local authorities after the previous publication. However, users looking for a longer time series may wish to check for the equivalent table in earlier releases of this publication. Figures exclude children looked after under a series of short-term placements. The category 'Independent and semi-independent living arrangements/ supported accommodation' reports data for young people in placements in former semi-independent living arrangements and living independently up to and including 2023. From 2024 all placements are supported accommodation (registered with Ofsted). From 28 October 2023 it became illegal for young people to be placed in former semi-independent and independent living placements. Supported accommodation providers were required to submit a completed application to Ofsted by 28 October 2023. From 2024, young people who were placed in former semi-independent and independent living placements with providers who had not submitted a completed application by the deadline are reported within the 'Other' category.

Graph 1: Number Of Settings Across England, as of 31 March 2025, by Provider Type



Source: Ofsted (2025)

Many will have entered the care system following experiences of abuse and/or neglect, leaving them with complex emotional, behavioural, and social needs (Department for Education, 2024). Inadequate support, significant trauma, stigma, poor accommodation, and frequent missing episodes increase their vulnerability to exploitation (Shaw, 2017; Shaw & Greenhow, 2020; Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020; Shaw & Greenhow, 2019). The transition out of care at 18 represents a substantial "cliff edge" moment where support can drop suddenly, leaving many without essential skills, mental health provision, or safeguarding practices (Celiksoy et al., 2024; Kohli et al., 2019; Beddoe, 2021; Human Trafficking Foundation, 2022; Edwards, 2023).

Recognising these challenges, Justice & Care and Royal Holloway, University of London convened an Expert Roundtable bringing together 40 experts by experience and senior practitioners from across government, local authorities, social care, youth and family services, education, mental health, housing, law enforcement, civil society, community organisations, and academia. The roundtable explored how earlier and more effective intervention could strengthen prevention of modern slavery and exploitation among care-experienced and care-affected children and young people.

2. Review of Current Evidence

At the start of the Expert Roundtable Day, researchers from Royal Holloway, University London, set the scene by providing a summary review of current evidence on the effectiveness of early intervention to prevent the exploitation of UK care-experienced children and young people. Key findings are summarised below.

Conceptual Framework and Research Priorities Concerning Prevention

In their research into the prevention of *adult* sexual and labour exploitation, Such et al. (2022) define prevention as 'an ongoing process of avoiding and minimising exploitation and harm'. This is based on what Such et al. identify as the BETR prevention cycle – where action should be taken Before exploitation occurs, Early intervention to reduce emerging risk, and responses that Treat harm and prevent Re-exploitation. Prevention is conceptualised around enabling individuals to exercise choice, maintain control over their lives, and ultimately to thrive (ibid, p. 3). Such et al. suggest five 'pathways' to prevent adult labour and sexual exploitation, which they group around: 'access', 'literacy', 'power and control', 'deterrence and disruption' and 'partnership.' These pathways form part of the prevention continuum, which suggests a spectrum of activity ranging from building resilience and equipping individuals and professionals with knowledge, to targeted early intervention for those at risk and responses that address harm and prevent re-exploitation. While the framework provides a useful structure for understanding adult prevention activity, it does not focus specifically on particular high-risk groups, such as care-experienced children and young people.

In line with Such et al. (2022) the Modern Slavery Policy and Evidence Centre (MSPEC) positions prevention as a key priority in efforts to address modern slavery, alongside research on forced labour in supply chains, survivor support, and legal enforcement. Research commissioned by MSPEC on child trafficking highlights the importance of a child-centred approach, drawing attention to institutional bias, the lack of trauma-informed practice, and systemic barriers that can undermine effective safeguarding. It also emphasises the role of trusted adult relationships and the increased vulnerability young people may face during transitions to adulthood (Skeels & Bashir, 2024).

This framing provides a useful lens through which to assess the range of early interventions currently implemented in the UK.

Early Interventions to Prevent Exploitation

Several international reviews have examined the evidence base for assessing the effectiveness of preventing modern slavery and exploitation. However, most focus on victims outside the UK or on those already victimised, with limited attention to prevention for care-experienced children within the UK. Nonetheless, existing academic and grey literature that identifies UK-based interventions aimed at preventing exploitation can be broadly grouped into those targeting potential victims, safeguarding responses, and those focused on perpetrators, as summarised below:

a.) Victim Focused Interventions

Information Campaigns

National awareness campaigns form an established component of prevention by increasing public understanding of exploitation and encouraging reporting. In the UK, organisations such as Stop the Traffik deliver targeted campaigns designed to help the public recognise indicators of trafficking and labour exploitation, including digital approaches aimed at reaching higher-risk communities. These initiatives seek to improve awareness and provide accessible routes for reporting concerns or seeking support.

Evaluations indicate these campaigns can generate measurable behavioural impact. For example, reporting campaigns led by Crimestoppers have been associated with a 22% increase in modern slavery reports to police and a 72% rise in information sharing in relation to county lines exploitation. Local evaluations across Leicester, Cambridgeshire and Greater Manchester have found increased engagement with support services, including higher volumes of helpline calls and attendance at drop-in centres (Brady & Van Dyke, 2020). Together, these findings suggest that awareness-raising can mobilise community intelligence and support earlier identification of exploitation.

Alongside national and locally targeted campaigns, survivor-led initiatives represent an important and emerging strand of prevention. For example, the Dirty Water podcast, developed by Daddyless Daughters in partnership with Solace Women's Aid, amplifies the lived experiences of care-experienced young women and girls while providing practical guidance and promoting resilience. Its trauma-informed and evidence-informed approach enables content to be tailored to the specific needs of this group, highlighting the potential of co-produced and survivor-led models in early intervention.

However, despite evaluation of some campaigns (e.g., Brady & Van Dyke, 2020), evidence on long-term outcomes and impacts specifically for care-experienced children and young people remains limited. Moreover, few campaigns appear to be explicitly designed with this group in mind, indicating a gap between general population-level awareness raising and targeted prevention for those at greatest risk.

Skill Development

Research suggests that education – particularly at secondary and higher levels – can act as a protective factor against gender-based violence and exploitation (United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2011). Internationally, teaching resources focused on human trafficking, human rights and gender have also been developed to build awareness and prevention literacy among young people (Inter-Parliamentary Union & United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2009).

In the UK, a range of educational initiatives targeting sex education, healthy relationships, and assertiveness – such as Disrupting Exploitation, Ariel Trust's SafeSkills, and Keeping Our Girls Safe – demonstrate promising practice in raising awareness and potentially strengthening resilience among vulnerable youth. Some programmes, such as Disrupting Exploitation, have primarily focused on children already experiencing exploitation rather than those at earlier stages of risk, highlighting a broader gap in early preventative intervention (The Children's Society, 2021).

Alongside school-based approaches, community-based and holistic interventions - including the School Transition and Reach Service - aim to support at-risk children and families during key developmental transitions. Arts-based and peer-led models further contribute by fostering supportive relationships, confidence, and engagement.

Despite this conceptual promise, a consistent limitation across these initiatives appears to be the lack of robust empirical evaluation. Many programmes, including those delivered by Ariel Trust and Kirklees Council, have not yet published rigorous independent assessment. Where evaluations do exist, such as for Keeping Our Girls Safe, findings are based on small samples and lack evidence of long-term impact. As a result, the overall effectiveness of these approaches in preventing exploitation remains uncertain.

Improving Professionals' Knowledge and Awareness

A range of statutory and UK organisations - including the Home Office, Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Rights Lab (Nottingham University), UK Border Force, and the College of Policing - have developed training resources to raise professional awareness of modern slavery and exploitation. Additional initiatives, such as Project Phoenix in Manchester and the Passage Modern Slavery Service, have delivered training to frontline professionals.

Training has improved knowledge and reduced harmful stereotypes among police officers (Clarke, 2020) and increased awareness and confidence among healthcare students (Metcalf & Selous, 2020; Birks & Ridley, 2021). Structured training and care pathways have further contributed to increased referrals to the NRM, enhanced intelligence reporting, and improved investigations and prosecutions of slavery-related offences (Bright, 2016).

Although a wide range of training resources exist, there is limited evidence on their long-term effectiveness in preventing exploitation. For example, while training improved police officers' knowledge, these gains were not consistently retained over time (Clarke, 2020). Similarly, studies involving healthcare students rely on self-reported measures and small, unrepresentative samples (Metcalf & Selous, 2020; Birks & Ridley, 2021).

There also appear to be few initiatives specifically targeting professionals working with care-experienced children, potentially leaving critical gaps in addressing their distinct vulnerabilities to exploitation.

b.) Safeguarding Interventions

Safeguarding interventions aimed at preventing exploitation operate across multiple levels, including targeted support for individuals, family and community-based responses, and wider system-level reform.

At a practice level, initiatives such as the Safer London Child Sexual Exploitation Safeguarding in Public Spaces Pilot provide peer education, professional training, and dedicated safeguarding tools focused on risks in public spaces (Cousins, 2018). Similarly, the Engage Team in Blackburn delivers preventative support to children identified as vulnerable to exploitation through staff training, return home interviews for missing children, risk reduction planning, and intensive one-to-one intervention (Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, n.d.). Programmes such as SHiFT further emphasise sustained, relationship-based approaches, offering 18 months of tailored, multidisciplinary support to young people at risk of crime, with early evaluations indicating promising outcomes (SHiFT Manchester, 2025).

Alongside these targeted interventions, family- and community-based approaches aim to address wider contextual risk factors. The Supporting Families Programme and Family Hubs promote early intervention through multi-agency collaboration, with a focus on improving family functioning, wellbeing, and long-term life chances (Department for Education, 2024). Extending this further, system-level approaches such as the Contextual Safeguarding framework implemented in Hackney seek to address extra-familial risks across peer groups, public spaces, and online environments. Evaluation findings suggest this provides a workable framework with potential to strengthen responses to exploitation, although evidence of sustained impact remains limited (Lefevre et al., 2020).

Despite the range of activity, few initiatives are specifically designed to meet the needs of children currently in care. One notable exception is Barnardo's Safe Accommodation Pilot Project (2011–2013), which provided targeted support to care-experienced young people at risk of trafficking or sexual exploitation. The project demonstrated improvements in frontline practice and contributed to keeping the majority of participants safe from harm (Shuker, 2013).

However, as with other areas of prevention, a key limitation is the lack of robust, independent evaluation across many safeguarding interventions, making it difficult to assess their long-term effectiveness in preventing exploitation.

c.) Perpetrator Focused Interventions

Stop It Now! works to prevent child sexual abuse through education, offering confidential support services and self-help resources. Its national deterrence campaign and targeted interventions in Wales aim to reduce offending and support vulnerable families. An evaluation of its awareness programmes found participants viewed them as beneficial and shared their learning with others, though the study did not seek to assess impact on potential perpetrators (Hudson, 2018).

Summary Discussion:

Based on the available published evidence, prevention efforts are wide-ranging and employ diverse approaches across awareness-raising, education, safeguarding, and criminal justice responses. However, there is limited published evidence demonstrating how these interventions effectively address the specific needs of care-experienced and care-affected children and young people, despite their heightened vulnerability to exploitation.

Promising practice includes professional training, multi-agency collaboration, survivor-led and co-produced initiatives, and community-based programmes, as well as emerging work targeting potential perpetrators. However, there is limited published evidence from robust, independent evaluation, with existing evidence often relying on small samples, short-term outcomes, or self-reported measures.

A key limitation across the evidence base is a strong focus on responding to harm rather than preventing it. Many interventions target young people already experiencing exploitation, with comparatively less emphasis on early, targeted prevention for those at heightened risk. This highlights a need for more rigorous research and investment in early intervention approaches tailored to care-experienced populations.

3. Visual Representation of Core Discussions Held During the Expert Roundtable Day



Early Intervention to Prevent Modern Slavery/ Exploitation of Children in Care and Care Leavers

LIVED EXPERIENCE

People think 'you're in a gang and then it's over'

I live in SURVIVAL EVERY DAY

How can you **nurture** lived experience?

Don't just expose it!

PAY US! VOUCHERS won't pay our bills!!

Create OPPORTUNITIES for young people to escape into!

LEAVE THE DOOR OPEN - needs resources, what does it look like?

FUNDERS need to think of LONGTERM

WHAT WORKS AND WHAT IS NEEDED?

Many survivors of lived experience will say...

FRAGMENTED system

VULNERABILITY does not end when someone turns 18

Lack of research into CCE and care leavers

This began when I was a child and already VULNERABLE

Letting that young person know

I'M FIGHTING YOUR CORNER (even when they're wrong)

SURVIVORS Know what that experience LOOKS LIKE and what SUPPORT looks like for us

People are labelled by their TRAUMA MASKS

'DIFFICULT' 'PROSTITUTE'

we don't just have experience, we can **make change**

Multi dimensional Interventions

Positive representations of young women in care BEYOND TRACY BEAKER!

Creative projects FILM, involving & mentoring young people in production

Therapeutic support for survivors

SISTER SQUAD

PRACTITIONER REFLECTIONS FROM SURVIVOR-FOCUSED SERVICES

Victim Navigators

Embedded in police force

Help to manage limited time

Keep victim at heart of case

Justice & Care

11 victim navigators across UK

Barnardo's

National Counter Trafficking Centre

Strategic oversight for London area

Up to 18

WHOLE PERSON RELATIONSHIP CARE

Helping survivors navigate benefits

Provide emotional & material support

ADULT ONLY - occasionally take on 17yr old

EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITIES OF EARLY INTERVENTION: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT IS NEEDED?

from community

Knows what they want and how to get it

EXPLOITER

only interested in ticking boxes

Trauma informed care conflicts with safeguarding

LACK OF TIME

Young people may not see themselves as VICTIMS

Family history and experience

Contributing Factors and Difficulties:

YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGING AT CRISIS POINT

Placement breakdowns

DEBT BONDAGE

Poverty

Underutilisation of Slavery & Trafficking Prevention and Risk Orders

what can **success** look like?

celebrating SMALL victories

GEOGRAPHY can be a barrier. (it shouldn't be, but relationships with services may not be there)

Takes TIME to create TRUST with young people (especially where trust has been broken)

HEALTH+ creating awareness around substance abuse issues

4.) Case Studies from Practice and Key Insights

Case Study One – Evidence from Barnardo’s Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship Service

Jenny* is a 17-year-old from a rural area of Wales. Jenny is now a child who is looked after under the Wales Children’s Act S.76 who signed herself into care about 2 years ago due to breakdowns within the family unit. Concerns for Jenny started when she was about 14 years old, Jenny and her friendship group, who were all similar ages, were spending time in areas of concern and being discussed in exploitation panels, as professionals were concerned around Child Criminal Exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation. In 2024 Jenny was referred into ICTG alongside her NRM submission. This was due to several indicators of CCE:

- Jenny was using a significant amount of substances including Ketamine, Cocaine and Cannabis.
- Jenny was going missing regularly and professionals were unsure where she was going or who she was with.
- There was intel around concerns she maybe being exploited/trafficked for the purpose of drug supply.
- Professionals had concerns around her drug use and how she was funding this as she had very little money. Professionals were concerned that this added to the risks to her and her vulnerabilities to further exploitation.

Jenny engaged well with the Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG). Initially time was spent getting to know each other and learning about her aspirations for the future and using a trauma informed approach to engage Jenny. The ICTG explored her understanding of exploitation and at that time she had very little understanding. They worked through what exploitation is, what this might look like with different scenarios relating it back to her own experiences. This was done in a creative and trauma informed way so that she felt comfortable and safe to explore this with the ICTG. Jenny found this much easier to recognise, she often stated she much preferred to do things creatively and asked the ICTG to ask professionals to do similar things with her as she struggled to talk in a 1:1 setting with someone.

Jenny was struggling to engage with professionals at the time of referral as she felt overwhelmed, was using several substances at the time, approaching 18 and had no clear plans of what was next for her. The ICTG tried different approaches to engage with Jenny, including creative sessions.

Jenny soon started to open up about substance misuse concerns within the family and the difficulties in those relationships. This highlighted potential familial exploitation and was shared with the network including the police. Jenny didn’t want to speak with police regarding the Modern Slavery Investigation, which is common for young people who have been trafficked, often due to fear of repercussions to them or their families.

Shortly after, she stopped using ketamine and cocaine and reduced her cannabis use. There were no more missing episodes and her contact with placement staff became more regular. Jenny started to discuss plans and aspirations for her future.

The ICTG carried out sessions around drug debt, friendships, exploitation and aspirations. Jenny wanted to look to the future and find a job and look towards independent living.

**Name changed to protect identity*

Case Study Two: Evidence from Justice & Care’s Victim Navigator Programme

In January 2021, a British teenager went missing. When she was found and taken into police protection, she described a series of events that revealed the scale of exploitation her and her friends had been subject to.

Between December 2020 and January 2021, a group of men targeted a friendship group of looked after girls, aged 14 to 17. The girls had all grown up in care. And had got to know each other through the care system, moved frequently to different care placements but always managing to stay friends.

The men posed as friends, inviting them to “parties” and encouraging them to bring others along. The girls were picked up and taken across county lines to unfamiliar houses, where they were given alcohol and drugs. There, they were subjected to abuse and raped before being dropped back to their care home as if nothing had happened.

The victims were already known to police and social care as vulnerable, deliberately chosen by those looking to exploit them.

But they found the courage to speak out.

Thanks to the bravery of two of the girls, Willow* and Summer*, five men were arrested, along with the mother and grandmother of the youngest victim. While not all could be charged due to lack of evidence, two men were prosecuted for multiple offences, including 10 charges under the Modern Slavery Act, and 2 of sexual assault.

The legal process was long and brutal. The first trial, in April 2023, ended in a hung jury. But Willow and Summer stayed engaged with their Justice and Care Victim Navigator and remained committed to fighting for justice.

Willow had initially felt unable to tell the police everything that had happened. But with the time, trust, and support of her navigator she was finally able to share the extent of the abuse. Both Willow and Summer went on to give evidence in court - Summer for the second time. The defence challenged them at every turn, but they stood firm. They refused to be intimidated and held on to their truth.

When the defence tried to have the case dismissed, the judge was clear: there was a case to answer.

Every step of the way, their Victim Navigator was there. Not just in the courtroom but walking alongside them through the hardest moments of their journey.

When benefit delays meant they had no money for essentials, the navigator helped provide food and toiletries. When housing debts and social care issues left Willow at risk of homelessness, the navigator advocated for the local authority to step in, and they did.

When Summer became trapped in an abusive relationship, it was the navigator who supported her through a police interview. When her beloved dog needed emergency care, the navigator helped with transport and emergency vet visits.

When they were ready, the Navigator supported both girls to access counselling, helped them make successful Criminal Injuries Compensation claims, and secured long-term housing for each of them, providing new levels of stability and safety.

Today, both girls are focused on rebuilding their lives. Willow has completed her first year at college, studying animal care. Summer is working with social services with the hope of being reunited with her daughter.

**Name changed to protect identity*

Case Study Analysis

Case study analysis was developed through an interactive workshop. Participants highlighted successes and shortcomings of current systems in protecting vulnerable care-experienced young people. Patterns of vulnerabilities were analysed, as were challenges faced by professionals and systemic barriers that hinder effective safeguarding. Below we include a summary of the analysis

What Gaps Prevented Effective Early Intervention?

- **Missed early interventions:** Support was limited despite prior involvement with statutory services. Young people were not truly 'seen' nor known by trusted adults responsible for safeguarding
- **Ineffective NRM engagement:** British children like Willow and Summer found the NRM process confusing and challenging, leading to disengagement.
- **Support cut-off at 18:** Jenny lost statutory support despite ongoing risks, showing the need for age-flexible services.
- **Complex survivor-perpetrator dynamics:** Feelings of empathy or responsibility toward abusers complicated 'rescue' and legal cooperation.
- **Systemic barriers:** Distrust in police, poor data sharing, and regional divides weakened safeguarding efforts.

What Worked Well with Later Support?

- **Specialist support:** Victim Navigators and ICTGs built significant trust where others were unable or absent, empowering young people to speak out and also reduce risk-associated behaviours.
- **Relationship-based approaches:** Trust enabled disclosures that led to arrests, prosecutions, and reduced vulnerability.
- **Consistent, longer-term wraparound care:** Holistic support – e.g., safe housing, food, emotional and psychological support, advocacy, long-term support navigating the criminal justice system – addressed further risk to re-exploitation and numerous underlying vulnerabilities.

What Emerges as Organisational and Strategic Priorities?

- **Early intervention:** Embed trained professionals to identify and support at-risk young people before exploitation escalates.
- **Continuity of care:** Extend specialist services beyond age 18 to reflect ongoing vulnerabilities.
- **NRM reform:** Make the system accessible, trusted, and effective for UK children.
- **Strengthen multi-agency collaboration:** Improve data sharing and consistent safeguarding frameworks across regions.
- **Child-centred relational interventions:** Design responses that prioritise safety, belonging, consistency and hope alongside risk management.

5.) Experts By Experience – Fireside Reflections on Practice

Experts with lived experience of care and exploitation emphasised the critical importance of centring the voices and realities of young people. Genuine understanding does not emerge from academic theory, but from firsthand experience of navigating fragmented and often harmful systems. Their insights challenged traditional power dynamics, seeking to ensure that services, policies, and interventions are grounded in authenticity, relevance, and real-world complexity.

Motivated by personal histories of injustice, experts expressed overwhelming commitment to transforming adversity into influence - driving systemic change, informing better practice, and empowering young people and children to believe in the possibility of a different future.

The following key themes and insights emerged from these discussions:

Key Insights from Lived Experience

Theme	Key insights
Personal experience and impact	Lived experience provides a powerful lens on systemic failure. Sharing personal stories of care, exploitation, and criminal justice involvement helps young people recognise their potential for change and supports self-advocacy.
System failures	Care and protection systems often fail to meet young people's emotional, psychological, and practical needs. More responsive, trauma informed, and holistic approaches are required to prevent further harm and disengagement.
Championing experience	Embedding lived experience in service design and policy challenges topdown approaches and better reflects the complex realities of young people's lives.
Emotional conversations in practice	Organisations rooted in lived experience are more willing to engage in difficult and emotional conversations, which are essential for designing services that are both effective and empathetic.
Survivors' knowledge and intersectionality	Survivors hold critical insights into how exploitation occurs and what safety means in practice. Addressing intersecting identities - such as gender, race, neurodiversity, and culture - is essential to meeting diverse needs.
Professional understanding and engagement	Limited exploitation related training among professionals creates gaps in service provision. Improved education and deeper engagement with young peoples lived realities are needed to move beyond surfacelevel assessments.

Meaningful involvement, not tokenism	Lived experience roles should be embedded across organisations, including leadership, training, mentoring, and advisory functions. When properly supported and remunerated, involvement enhances wellbeing, confidence, and impact.
Focus on immediate needs	Practitioners should not overlook immediate needs such as safety, housing, and food. Meeting these needs provides the foundation for longerterm protection and resilience.
Flexible, ongoing, accessible engagement	Engagement must be lowbarrier, flexible, and consistent, allowing young people to engage on their own terms and at their own pace. Multiple entry points and communication options help build trust.
Community based support systems	Strong community networks help young people feel safe and understood, providing vital relational support when institutional systems fall short.
Mentoring and role modelling	Mentoring by individuals with lived experience offers relatable guidance and helps young people envision alternative futures.
Understanding survival mode	Many young people operate in survival mode, where choices may appear risky but are contextually necessary. Recognising this is essential for designing nonjudgemental and effective interventions.
Support for stability	Stable, consistent support enables young people to process information, develop self-awareness, and make informed decisions. Stability underpins progress and growth.
Policy and procedure change	Effective policy and procedural reform must be informed by lived experience, drawing on real stories rather than theoretical models alone.
Nurturing aspirations and celebrating incremental progress	Supporting young people to set realistic goals, recognise their potential, and celebrate incremental progress - including financial independence - strengthens longterm outcomes.
Holistic interventions	Addressing practical, emotional, and psychological needs together ensures interventions support the whole person.
Collaboration and multiagency working	Stronger collaboration, coordination, and shared accountability across services are essential to improving outcomes for young people.

6.) Exploring the Complexities of Early Intervention: What Works and What is Needed?

Early intervention to prevent modern slavery and exploitation among care-experienced children and young people is complex and dynamic. It is not a single intervention, but an ongoing process shaped by the interaction between individual vulnerability, exploitative behaviour, and wider social and environmental factors. Discussions during the Expert Roundtable Day emphasised that prevention efforts often falter not because solutions are unknown, but because systems respond too late or fail to reflect the realities of young people's lives.

Over a number of interactive sessions participants highlighted that effective early intervention requires moving beyond crisis response to address how risk develops over time, across relationships, services, and settings. This final section brings together how risk is understood, what practitioners identify as effective, the role of lived experience, and what is needed to strengthen early intervention responses.

Understanding Risk and Vulnerability in Early Intervention

Care-experienced children face heightened vulnerability to exploitation due to cumulative trauma, instability, and systemic disadvantage. Risk emerges through interactions between victims, perpetrators, and environments, rather than from individual factors alone.

Victim-offender interactions are often shaped by trauma, emotional dependence, and perceived benefits such as belonging, protection, or financial/material support. Fear of retaliation and misplaced loyalty can inhibit disclosure, underscoring the importance of trauma-informed, relationship-based interventions.

Victim-environment interactions further shape vulnerability. Poverty, stigma, unsafe housing, unsuitable placements, and exclusion can normalise harm and increase exposure to exploitation. Online environments pose significant and growing risk to children and young people. Services often intervene too late, responding once harm had escalated rather than addressing risk earlier.

Offender-environment interactions are the least well understood. Grooming frequently occurs in settings where young people are already marginalised, including care placements and online spaces. Limited public awareness and a lack of early intervention with individuals at risk of offending allow exploitation to persist, pointing to a significant evidence gap.

What Works in Early Intervention?

Against this backdrop, practitioners and individuals with lived experience identified approaches that show promise when delivered early, consistently, and over time.

Theme	Key insights
Embedded staff in key settings	Outreach staff in hospitals, custody suites, schools, and community settings can identify risk early and provide timely, tailored support.
Holistic work in schools	Sustained engagement in schools (rather than one-off sessions) helps address exclusion, attendance, and behaviour while building trusted relationships.
Whole-family engagement	Involving parents, siblings, and caregivers strengthens interventions, addresses home dynamics, and supports sustained change.
Understanding attachment and abandonment	Awareness of attachment styles and past experiences supports trust-building and informs appropriate responses.
Domestic violence as a risk factor	Addressing the impact of domestic abuse on children's understanding of relationships is critical to reducing vulnerability.
Community perception and social isolation	Reducing stigma and strengthening positive community connections helps mitigate risk.
Role of fathers and gendered needs	Emotional availability from fathers supports young women, while consistent practical support often benefits young men.
Addressing intrafamilial exploitation	Recognising and responding to exploitation by family members is essential for effective safeguarding.
Celebrating small wins	Recognising incremental progress sustains engagement and builds confidence.
Understanding exploitative relationships from the young person's perspective	Acknowledging the emotional and psychological complexity of exploitative relationships helps avoid alienation and disengagement.

Effective approaches were characterised by relational continuity, flexibility, and sustained engagement. Participants emphasised that short-term or one-off interventions are unlikely to be effective for care-experienced children, particularly where trust in services has been eroded.

The Role of Lived Experience

Lived experience was consistently identified throughout the day as a key enabler of effective early intervention. Lived experience can build trust, challenge assumptions, and provide insights that are often absent from other professional assessments. Involvement helps bridge gaps between services and young people, particularly where statutory systems are mistrusted.

Participants stressed that lived experience should be meaningfully embedded across service design, delivery, training, and leadership, with appropriate support and remuneration. When integrated effectively, lived experience strengthens engagement and improves the relevance and impact of early intervention.

What Is Needed for Better Early Intervention

Despite examples of promising practice, participants identified persistent gaps. Systems remain overly reactive, with limited investment in prevention and early help. Earlier identification of risk, clearer referral pathways, and stronger multiagency coordination were seen as essential.

There was also a clear need for flexible, long-term support that reflects young people's lives, particularly during transitions out of care. Short-term funding models and weak evaluation frameworks were viewed as significant barriers to sustaining early intervention and demonstrating impact.

Key Findings

- Early intervention is an ongoing, complex process shaped by victim-offender-environment interactions (not individual risk alone).
- What works is relationship-based, trauma-informed, flexible support delivered consistently over time.
- Lived experience significantly improves trust, relevance and engagement, and should be embedded ethically across design and delivery.
- Key gaps include late identification, unclear pathways, weak multi-agency coordination, funding, and limited understanding/evidence on offender-environment dynamics.
- Strengthening early intervention needs sustained investment, stronger evaluation/evidence, and a shift from reactive safeguarding to also include enhanced prevention.

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Annex 1 – Organisations Represented at the Expert Roundtable Day

- Anna Freud
- Barnardo's - National Counter Trafficking Service
- Cambian - Caretech
- Catch22
- Craig Barlow Consultancy
- Daddyless Daughters Project
- ECPAT
- Enfield Council
- Human Trafficking Foundation
- Ivison Trust
- Justice & Care
- Link to Change
- London Borough of Merton
- London Borough of Sutton
- London Borough of Tower Hamlets
- Metropolitan Police Service
- National Care Leavers Benchmarking Forum / Manchester Children Services
- National County Lines Coordination Centre
- Oasis Community Learning
- Office of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner
- Peterborough Youth Justice Team
- Royal Holloway, University of London
- Sheffield Hallam University
- St Giles Trust
- Surrey County Council Children's Services
- The Care Leavers Association



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Expert Roundtable Day Report

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