



Everyone has a role to play in preventing child exploitation

A Youth Voice report
January 2025

**The
Children's
Society**

We would like to give special thanks to all the young people who participated, and the organisations who supported us in facilitating these consultations.



Introduction

The Prevention programme

The Children's Society's national Prevention programme was established in 2019 and is commissioned by the Home Office. The programme works to drive improvements in the prevention and disruption of child sexual abuse (CSA) and exploitation (CSE), child criminal exploitation (CCE), and modern slavery on a regional and national basis across England and Wales.

With expertise on the lived experiences of children, current and emerging forms of child exploitation, and effective approaches to improve victim identification and support, the programme has built a reputable profile recognised across law enforcement, child protection, healthcare, and the private sector. We work with thousands of professionals across these sectors each year to tackle child exploitation.

The programme also leads the award winning #LookCloser campaign, focused on supporting the public and businesses to spot child exploitation and take action to get them help.

The programme works closely with multi-agency partners across sectors and regions to ensure we are guided by emerging insight and intelligence. Drawing on evidence from direct practice, youth voice consultations, and emerging strategic insight, the programme is an agile resource that enables partners to develop and take ownership of new approaches to preventing child exploitation and abuse.

Consultation strategy

Between April and August 2024, we carried out **11** consultations across England and Wales. **74** young people took part in these sessions. We also consulted with approximately **250** children and young people at the annual Young Carers Festival, hosted by the YMCA and The Children's Society.

We spoke to **324** young people.

Aim

To gain insight from young people on how members of the public, business, and statutory services respond to children and young people who may be at risk of or experiencing child exploitation in a range of settings.

Why are we doing this?

This theme was chosen given its relevance to the #LookCloser campaign and wider initiatives to improve public, private and statutory responses to child exploitation. Furthermore, after conducting an informal literature review it was felt that young people are not commonly consulted on this issue.

How will this information be used?

These insights will feed into our national #LookCloser campaign, which seeks to raise awareness of child exploitation. It will also inform our work to drive improvements in protecting children from exploitation within the night-time economy.¹ It will be shared with a range of professionals across England and Wales to deepen understanding of child exploitation from young people's perspectives.

1. A broad definition of the 'night-time economy' is that it involves economic activities which take place between 6pm and 6am. It involves a wide range of activities including the serving of food in restaurants and 'fast food' outlets, the operation of entertainment venues, and transport to and from these venues. The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) notes high-profile cases of child sexual exploitation, including in Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxford where "many of these cases have involved businesses such as fast-food outlets as meeting places, and offenders have used taxi firms and hotel rooms to facilitate and conduct abuse, often after dark. So workers in the 'night-time economy' have a potentially significant role to play in tackling child sexual abuse more broadly." See: CSA Centre. Responding to child sexual abuse and exploitation in the night-time economy [Internet]. 2017 [accessed 2024 Oct 9]. Available from: csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2023/10/Responding-to-child-sexual-abuse-in-the-night-time-economy.pdf

The Prevention programme carried out consultations online and in person with groups of young people across England and Wales aged from 13 to 19. The opportunity for consultation activity was offered to at least one group in each region across the UK. We consulted with young people engaged in a variety of youth services, school councils, young people's steering groups, and forums. Our approach to these consultations was governed by the Prevention programme's youth voice model, which is included as appendix A at the end of this document. We followed this model's eight youth engagement principles, created for this work and based on The Children's Society's wider youth engagement principles, alongside the influence of the Lundy model of child participation.² All participants were made aware of how their feedback would be used and will be provided with updates as to how their voice has made an impact.

Common themes in our learning

Bias: This section explores the consultees' views on the presence and impact of bias in the interactions and experiences of young people who are at risk of exploitation.

Presentation of young people at risk: Here, we examine the consultees' views on how young people at risk may present in a public setting.

Current responses to young people at risk: Here, we examine the consultees' views on how young people at risk may present in a public setting.

How to safeguard and engage young people: Finally, we discuss consultees' views on how best to safeguard and engage young people who are at risk of or experiencing harm. .

2. Lundy L. Voice is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Educational [Internet]. 2007 [accessed 2024 Nov 30]. Available from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>

Language Considerations

This report uses direct quotes from young people who took part in our consultations. Therefore, some of the language used may not be The Children's Society's preferred language. We have chosen to keep direct quotes in the original language used by participants in order to uphold authenticity and recognise that children and young people are experts in their own lives.

Below are some key terms we use at The Children's Society and how they may appear throughout the document:

■ **Global majority:** The Children's Society uses the term 'people of the global majority' in line with its anti-racist position. This term seeks to decentre whiteness and recognise that people of colour, those who are dual-heritage, and those indigenous to the global south make up over 80% of the world's population and should therefore not be labelled 'minorities'. We use this instead of more commonly used terms such as Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic (BAME).

■ **Minoritised:** The Children's Society uses the term 'minoritised' to describe and recognise communities that experience exclusion and racialisation, perpetrated by institutions and systems of power.

■ **Trans:** The Children's Society uses this term to describe someone who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, or someone who identifies outside of the gender binary. We use this term at times as well as specific labels or identities which young people may have referenced in this report, such as gender neutral, non-binary, or gender diverse. We do this to make sure that we are encompassing all gender identities. Our definition was developed in consultation with the trans specialist charity Gendered Intelligence. You can find out more about their work [here](#).

Bias



Race and ethnicity

What are young people telling us?

- Adults are more likely to intervene to help white young people than young people of the global majority.
- Security guards are more likely to help white young people and view black young people with suspicion, often assuming they are stealing or are a threat.
- There are many incidents of mistaken identity where black young people are held accountable for things they did not do, because of their race.
- White young people are more likely to receive a protective response from the public, while black young people are more often met with no response, or a punitive one. This disparity is frequently rooted in racism and ignorance.

"An adult intervening or not depends on the race of the young person, adults would be more likely to help a white young person."

"There are lots of incidences of mistaken identity, where a black young person gets mistaken for someone else and held accountable for something they didn't do."

"Race may have an impact on the age that young people are perceived as. Some races gain facial hair at a young age which can make them look at lot older especially South Asian communities."

"People don't like helping black people."

"In Middle Eastern cultures 12- or 13-year-old girls are already considered a woman as soon as they have their period, therefore are forced to grow up. Therefore, this may have impact on how the general public perceive you and your decisions your able to make."

Gender and Appearance

What are young people telling us?

- Adults are less likely to intervene if a young person is trans or non-binary because they don't understand the concept of gender diversity.
- Young girls, particularly those of the global majority, are often over-sexualised, leading people to dismiss situations that might be exploitative.
- If a young person is perceived as a girl, people are more likely to help because of stereotypes that women need more protection.
- There is more awareness about risks for girls, so people are more likely to get involved in helping them, whereas boys may not receive the same level of concern.
- People often judge based on appearance and those wearing alternative clothing may receive negative reactions, making them less likely to receive help.
- Adults are more likely to help girls because they are seen as less capable of defending themselves.



"Oversexualisation of young black and brown girls means people wouldn't think anything was wrong if she was with an older man."

"There is more awareness about risk for girls, so people are more likely to get involved."

"When a young person is gender neutral, an adult is less likely to intervene because adults generally don't understand concept of gender identity and gender neutrality."

Neurodiversity

What are young people telling us?

- Young people reflected feeling that their communities do not understand neurodiversity and there is a need for more awareness and education to overcome this.
- People have misconceptions about how neurodivergent young people present, which impacts the response they receive.
- If a young person is both neurodivergent and trans, adults may find it even more difficult to respond appropriately.



Summary of Young People's Feedback

Young people reported feeling that racism, ableism, gender prejudice, and poor understanding of young people who identify as trans are major barriers to intervention, and that they believe many people in society are unwilling to challenge their own prejudices or take the time to learn about the different intersections of identity. They felt that people often make quick judgments based on a young person's appearance, race, or clothing, which impacts whether they are perceived as a victim or not.

These negative interactions with services or members of the public can lead to a lack of trust and fear among young people that they will be falsely accused of committing a crime or treated poorly. The young people we consulted also felt there is a tendency for people to profile or discriminate against young people based on their race, class, gender, or appearance, which affects whether they receive help or are viewed as a threat. They also expressed not feeling that they are taken seriously by adults or the wider community.



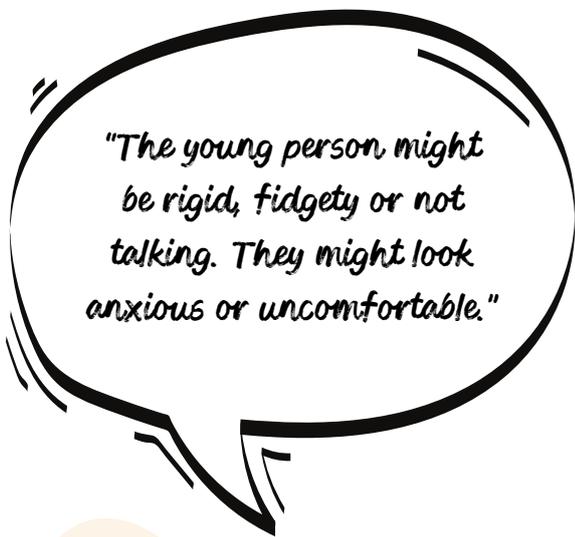
Presentation of young people at risk of exploitation and harm



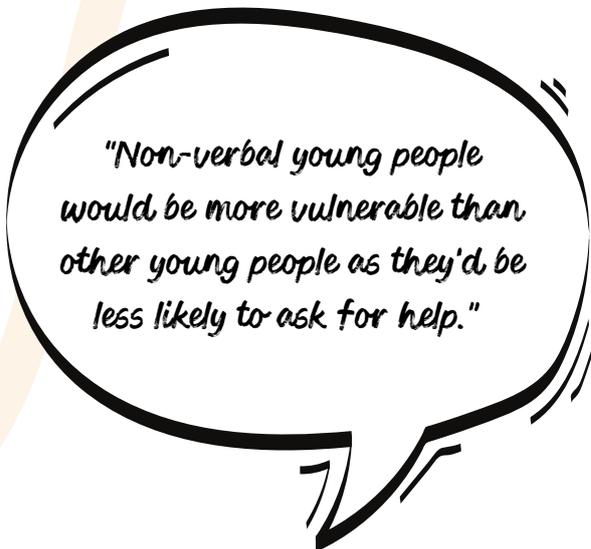
Signs and Indicators

What are young people telling us?

- Neurodiverse young people may present differently in public settings, and it may be less obvious when they need help.
- There are specific indicators to look out for when considering neurodiverse young people, some of which are included in the quotes below.
- Neurodiverse young people are less likely to receive an appropriate response due to adults not always having awareness of how such a young person may present if they are in need of protection.
- If a young person is 'loitering' or looks lost, this could be an indicator that they are at risk and need support.
- Young people may present as tense, fidgety, or nervous. These could all be indicators that a young person is at risk.



"The young person might be rigid, fidgety or not talking. They might look anxious or uncomfortable."



"Non-verbal young people would be more vulnerable than other young people as they'd be less likely to ask for help."

A young person with dark, wavy hair is shown in profile, looking out a window. The image is partially obscured by a jagged, torn-paper-like border. The background is bright and slightly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with a view of the outdoors.

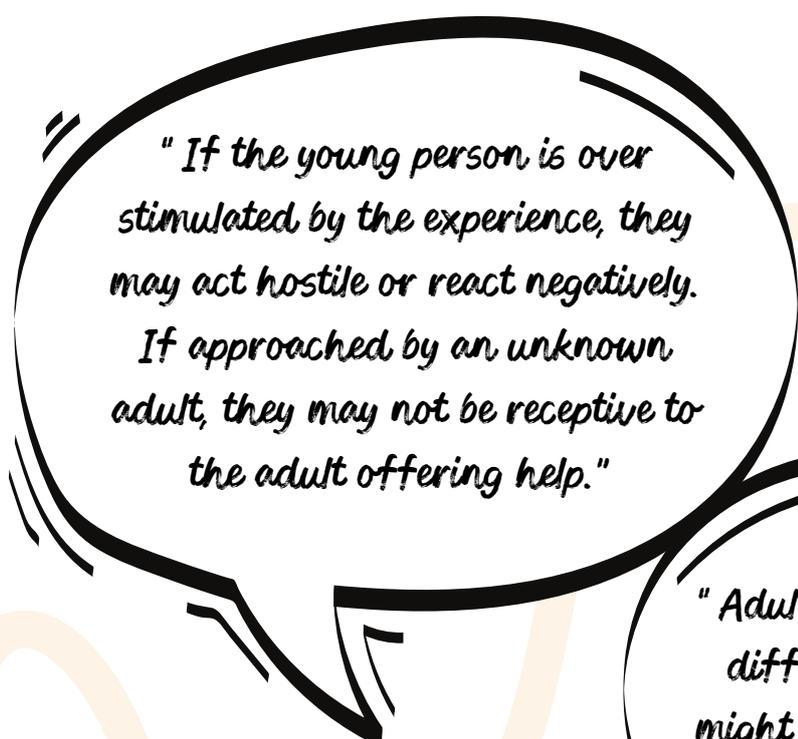
"If [the young person] struggles with communication, they might be overwhelmed and 'freeze' or have stiff body language."

"Adults do pick up on obvious signs but not subtle ones."

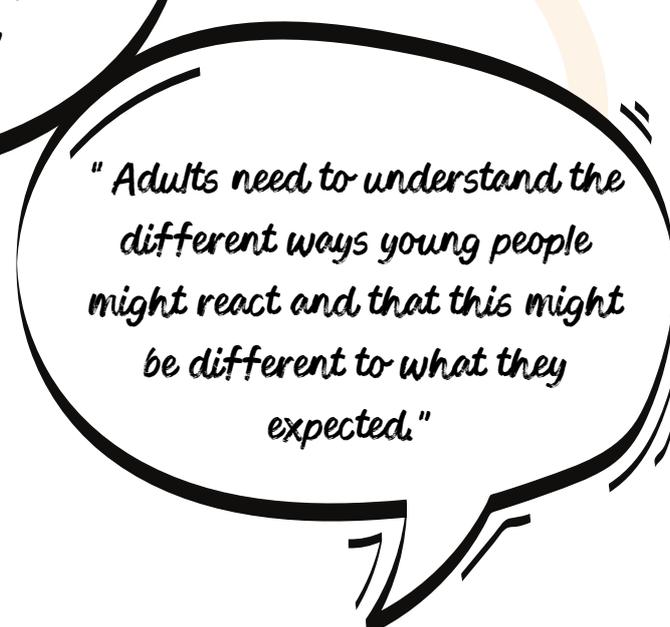
How might young people respond to intervention

What are young people telling us?

- Young people may be defensive or hostile towards an adult offering them help. This could be due to feeling apprehensive about the adults' intentions, or negative interactions with adults in the past.
- Young people may also be apprehensive to accept help, particularly if they are scared or unsure of the adults' intentions, or if they are scared of being put in further danger by either the adult assisting them or by the perpetrator.
- Young people may respond differently to how the adult expected, particularly if they are neurodiverse.



"If the young person is over stimulated by the experience, they may act hostile or react negatively. If approached by an unknown adult, they may not be receptive to the adult offering help."



"Adults need to understand the different ways young people might react and that this might be different to what they expected."

Summary of Young People's Feedback

The young people we consulted emphasised the importance of adults paying attention to body language and behavioural indicators, which may suggest that a young person is at risk. They highlighted that certain cues, such as appearing tense, nervous, or lost, could be indicators of exploitation, while neurodiverse young people experiencing or at risk of exploitation might present differently. Young people also reflected that in their view, limited understanding of neurodiversity may hinder adults' ability to recognise exploitation for this group, potentially leaving neurodiverse young people without the necessary support.



Current responses towards young people at risk of exploitation and harm



Police

What are young people telling us?

- There is disproportionate targeting of young people of the global majority, racial profiling, and discrimination based on class, gender, and race.
- Young people may have distrust in the in the police, partly due to experiences of stop and search that have damaged relationships.
- Minoritised groups are often ignored or neglected, and there's a tendency to overlook or ignore situations, rather than getting involved.
- Young people experiencing exploitation, particularly criminal exploitation, would be unlikely to disclose to a police officer for fear of receiving a punitive response.

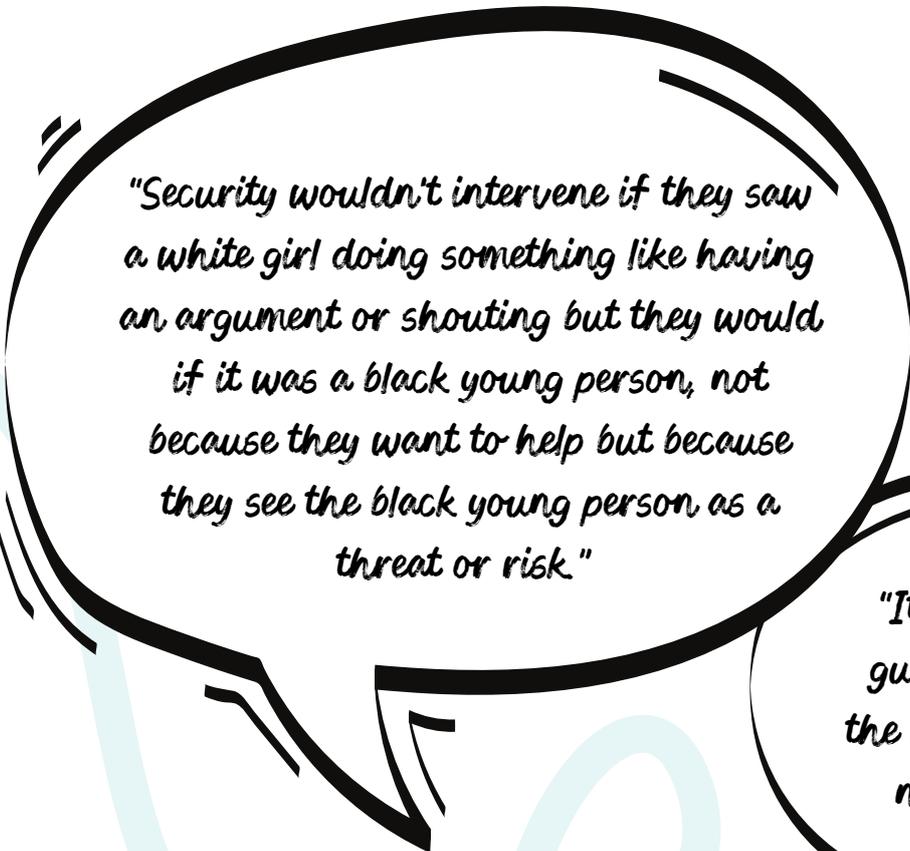
"I have no trust in The Department for Education, police or institutions, I will never trust any of them even if they say they will help me."

"[Police] stop and search black, Asian, and minority ethnic young people for no reason. It feels targeted and ruins relationships between young people and the police."

Security

What are young people telling us?

- Security guards sometimes stereotype or make assumptions about young people.
- Security guards are largely interested in ensuring the safety of the shop or venue by making sure items are not stolen, as opposed to protecting young people.
- While most young people who shared their views on security guards were critical of their practice, some young people expressed feeling that security guards know how to keep them safe, and act appropriately when someone is in danger.



"Security wouldn't intervene if they saw a white girl doing something like having an argument or shouting but they would if it was a black young person, not because they want to help but because they see the black young person as a threat or risk."



"It feels like [security guards] are there for the security of the shop, not young people."

Members of the public

What are young people telling us?

- Adults are hesitant to get involved in situations where a child or young person is at risk, often due to concerns for their own safety or to avoid trouble.
- Adults tend to judge young people based on appearance, race, or gender, which can prevent members of the public from offering help.
- Some members of the public prefer to ignore potentially dangerous situations. This might be due to feeling that someone else will intervene, or simply not wanting to get involved.
- Some adults might intervene if the victim is perceived as more vulnerable (for example, a girl or younger child). However, there's a sense that help is not guaranteed, and responses can vary depending on the area and individual attitudes.
- Members of the public cannot always be relied on for assistance. Even if young people are in distress, the public might not intervene effectively, or at all.
- In smaller communities where people are familiar with neighbours, adults are more likely to notice if something is wrong and therefore offer guidance and support.



"If you are in a poorer area, or what is considered a rougher part of London, you may be reluctant to intervene because it could compromise your own safety."

"I do not believe members of the public would intervene and help, people are not as nice as they used to be."



Transport (bus drivers, ticket conductors and taxi drivers)

What are young people telling us?

- Bus drivers and taxi drivers would not notice if a young person needed help. Drivers are mostly concerned with getting from A to B and are not always aware what is happening during the journey.
- Passengers on trains or ticket conductors may be more inclined to spot the signs of exploitation if the young person was travelling during school hours, if they were younger than 14 or 15, or if they looked nervous.

Summary of young people's feedback

Some young people expressed not feeling confident that adults would intervene if they were at risk, as they believed adults were more concerned about their own safety. They reflected that this can be a barrier to effective intervention and helping children and young people. Additionally, bus drivers, taxi drivers, and ticket conductors were perceived by those we consulted with as being unaware of young people's needs, especially during travel. Young people often reported to us feeling that responses towards victims of exploitation would vary depending on the area, how obvious the signs were, and the demographic or identity of the young person experiencing harm.

How to safeguard and engage young people at risk of exploitation and harm



What are young people telling us they want from the police?

- Listen to the experiences and perspectives of young people and victims of exploitation to make sure that they feel safe and supported.
- Take immediate and decisive action against those putting children and young people at risk.
- Create supportive environments where young people can seek help without fear of being blamed.
- Make sure that young people feel it's never too late to ask for help, even if they are already involved or at risk of criminal exploitation.
- Respond to the needs of young people, especially those from minoritised communities, and involve them in discussions to ensure their voices are heard.

"Stop profiling black young people, or making assumptions based on race or gender."

"Keep keeping the streets safe and give protection to people who are at risk."

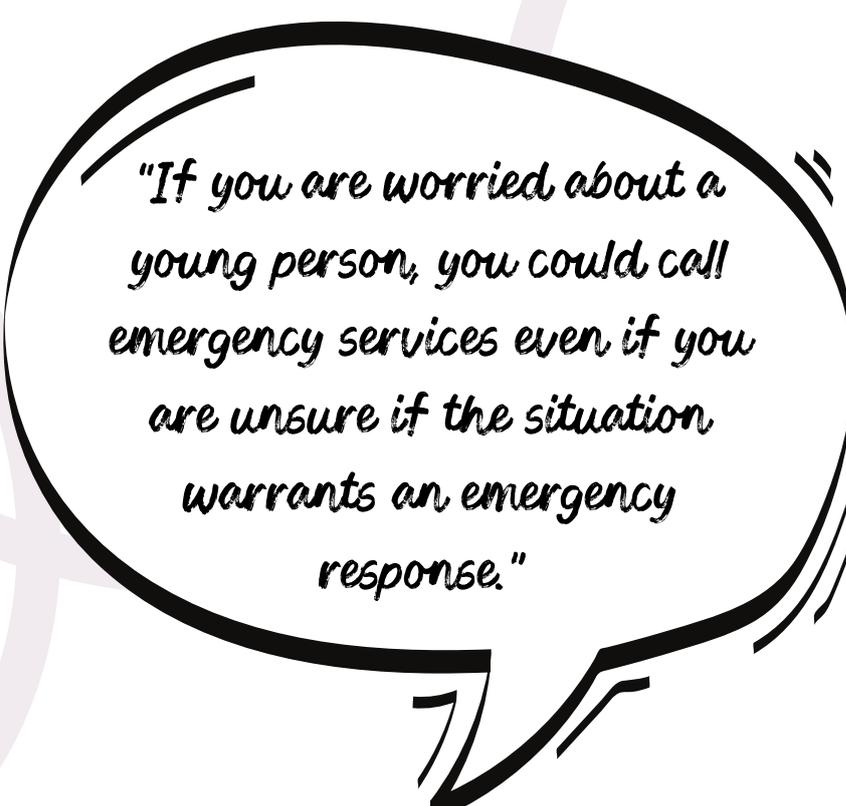
"Schools should have designated police officers who young people can build relationships with and talk to if they are at risk. At the moment the designated police officers for schools never come."



*"Listen to minorities
and allow minoritised
kids to speak on their
experience."*

What are young people telling us they want from members of the public?

- Take immediate and proactive steps to ensure young people's safety, such as calling the police, challenging perpetrators, or directly intervening in situations where a young person appears distressed or unsafe.
- Treat young people with respect, listen to them, and make them feel safe.
- Approach young people in a friendly way, and speak out when something seems wrong.
- Create an environment where people feel comfortable asking for help.
- Be aware of both obvious and subtle signs that a young person might be in danger and take steps to safeguard them.
- Use schemes that indicate through an agreed code word that a young person is in danger, such as 'Ask for Angela'.³
- Call emergency services when concerned, even if you are unsure that it is necessary.

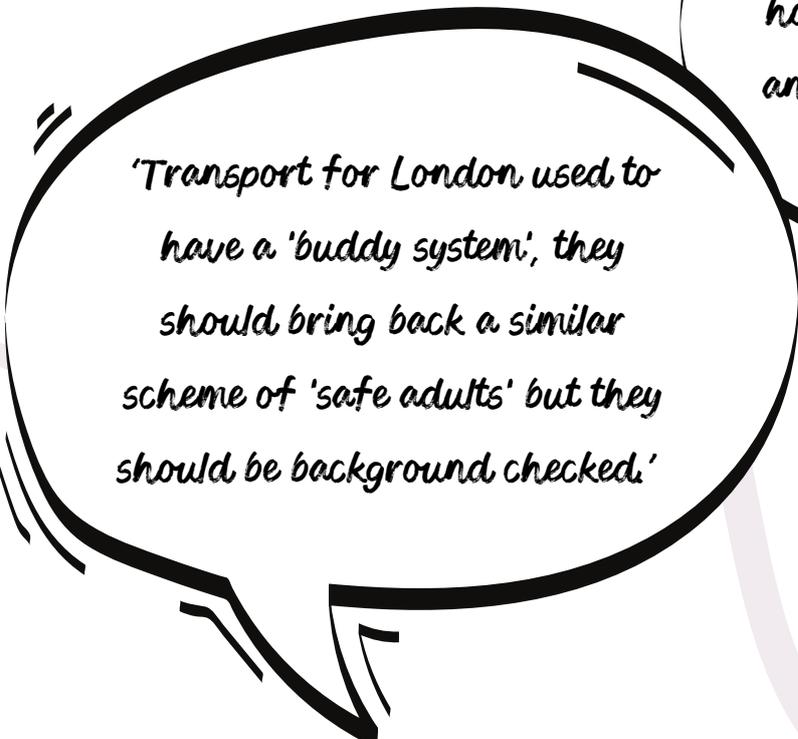


"If you are worried about a young person, you could call emergency services even if you are unsure if the situation warrants an emergency response."

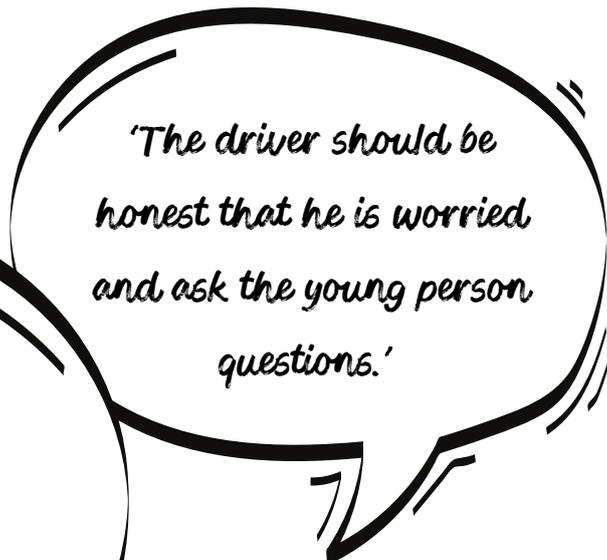
3. Ask for Angela is the national scheme that helps anyone who is feeling vulnerable on a night out to get the support they need. See <https://askforangela.co.uk/>

What are young people telling us they want from taxi drivers, bus drivers, or ticket conductors?

- Taxi drivers should remain vigilant to potential exploitation risks and act promptly to keep young people safe.
- Suggestions included driving a potential victim to a police station, asking the young person if they are safe, and being honest about their concerns.
- Ticket conductors should ask young people questions if they are concerned about their wellbeing. They should do this in a non-invasive way, by not asking intrusive questions or being judgmental, but by being clear about their concerns.
- Transport professionals should introduce a scheme of safe adults for young people to talk to if needed.



'Transport for London used to have a 'buddy system', they should bring back a similar scheme of 'safe adults' but they should be background checked.'



'The driver should be honest that he is worried and ask the young person questions.'

How to engage young people?

What are young people telling us?

- Be attentive to the needs of young people and offer support in a non-invasive, considerate manner, while maintaining a kind tone of voice. This involves listening carefully, accommodating their needs, and being proactive in ensuring their wellbeing.
- If a young person appears uncomfortable or at risk, adults should discreetly offer assistance without causing embarrassment or alarm. This could involve chatting to a young person as if you know them so as to avoid suspicion from the person they are with.
- Approaching young people with empathy and without judgment helps them to feel more comfortable and able to engage with the adult. This includes avoiding direct or confrontational questioning and instead engaging in natural, caring conversations.
- Adults should be proactive and intervene or offer help when a young person seems in distress. Some young people felt that adults could directly intervene by approaching them, while others felt that indirect intervention would be more helpful. They could do this by contacting parents or carers (where appropriate) or by involving security or emergency services in a supportive way.

Note: The Children's Society advises that members of the public, business staff, and anyone else encountering children outside of a professional context should only communicate or intervene directly when they are confident that they are safe to do so. Otherwise, we recommend they call the police on 101 or 999 in an emergency or the NSPCC helpline for advice on 0808 800 5000. At the time of writing this report, the NSPCC helpline was open between 10am and 8pm, Monday to Friday. Please visit their website [here](#) for further information. If travelling by rail you can text the British Transport Police on 61016 for issues that don't require an emergency response.



"Staff in food courts should reassure young people that they aren't trying to get him into trouble they just want to help."

"It's important when engaging with young people to make them feel safe and comfortable."

Summary of young people's feedback

Young people reflected wanting the police and other adults to listen to their experiences and to take decisive action to ensure their safety. They also raised wanting environments where they can seek help without fear of blame and where their voices are heard. Further reflections included wanting adults, including members of the public, to be proactive in taking action to safeguard children, treating them with respect, and approaching them in a friendly, non-judgemental manner. Overall, the young people we consulted seek empathetic, supportive, and proactive responses which prioritise their wellbeing.

The ideal member of the public...



- is respectful
- is non-judgmental
- is helpful
- is aware of surroundings or young people that might be at risk
- is proactive
- is friendly

The ideal police officer...



- listens to young people
- has good relationships with the community
- treats people fairly

The ideal security guard...



- does not make assumptions
- prioritises young people's welfare and not just the safety of the store or setting they are there to guard
- is compassionate and understanding
- is protective

The ideal bus driver or ticket conductor...



- is aware of how a young person might present if they are at risk
- is compassionate
- is upfront with young people about their concerns
- asks young people questions if they are concerned about their safety.

The ideal hotel receptionist...



- calls the police if they're concerned
- is aware of exploitation risks

Summary



Summary

We consulted with young people across England and Wales to understand how adults, including the public, security staff, and police respond to children at risk of exploitation. Many young people noted that adults often fail to recognise or appropriately address signs of distress, especially when the young person does not fit their typical expectations of victimhood.

Young people discussed the role of bias, noting that race, gender, and appearance can affect whether an adult chooses to intervene. Some reported that white children are more likely to receive help, while others observed that gender stereotypes play a role in responses towards both girls and boys. Additionally, we were told that neurodiverse young people may present differently, leading to them being overlooked or misunderstood when they need help.

Young people also discussed the importance of adults being proactive, empathetic, and non-judgemental when engaging with young people. They suggested that adults should approach young people with care, listen without preconceived notions, and take immediate action when a child appears to be at risk, regardless of their background or how they present. This approach, the young people believed, would foster a safer and more supportive environment for all.

How will these insights from young people be used?

The young people who took part in these consultations have had a significant impact on how we conduct our work. Youth voice is at the heart of our approach to engaging with the public, professionals, and businesses, and we will continue to seek their input on what works best.

The insights gathered throughout our consultations will be used internally; for example, within our national #LookCloser campaign, which seeks to raise awareness of child exploitation and abuse across society and in our work focused on driving improvements in the prevention of child exploitation within the night-time economy. We will also share these findings externally with the wide range of stakeholders and professionals the Prevention programme works with including the police, social care, healthcare, education, and the voluntary sector. When doing so, we will encourage professionals to incorporate these young people's perspectives into their responses for tackling child exploitation and abuse, to make sure that they meet the wants and needs of young people.

Appendix

Protection

Our engagement with children and young people will not introduce unnecessary risks to their safety and wellbeing. We will always seek to ensure that they are protected from harm and they can be anonymous and not exposed to public scrutiny when it may harm their interests. Any engagement activity will operate to the standards set in The Children's Society Safeguarding Policy and contribute to our understanding of how best to safeguard young people and protect them from harm.

Belonging and Sharing:

We will seek ways of enabling young people to share their experiences with each other and develop skills and knowledge that enhance their wellbeing. This recognises the friendship and kinship that develops amongst young people when they participate in collective activity.

Recognition

We will always acknowledge and celebrate the contributions made by children and young people and will give them information and feedback on how their contribution is used and makes a difference.

That recognition includes providing accreditation and awards for developing skills.

Choice and Influence:

We will always ensure that children and young people make an informed decision to participate and that the influence of their contribution is clear. We also want to make sure that a wide range of young people are offered a multitude of opportunities to participate and engage in.

Provision:

We will always ensure that young people are able to participate in activities without cost to them or their families.

Our engagement with them will provide a tangible benefit to them that otherwise would not have been available.

Mutual gain:

There needs to be a tangible benefit to the adults involved for the engagement activity to have meaning and credibility. Where possible, the benefit being sought should be made known to young people from the beginning.

Professionalism:

We will engage with children and young people in ways that shows our respect for them and our aspiration to take account of their needs and wishes in all circumstances.

We will be honest and transparent at all times. Our confident and competent approach to engagement means we are ready and willing to share power with young people.

Inclusive:

We will ensure the opportunity to participate is extended to all and any regardless of personal circumstances, background or perceived competence and ability. We acknowledge that young people can grow in their capacity to participate and start their journey at different levels.

Our Principles

Based on The Children's Society's Youth Engagement Principles

Across the country, young people are suffering unseen and unheard – struggling with their mental health, living in poverty, and in danger from exploitation and abuse.

At The Children's Society, we know a brighter future is possible. That's why we've been working for more than 140 years to protect every childhood. We make sure young people can access vital support when they need it most and campaign for a world where every child can grow up safe, happy, and hopeful.

Together, we can build a society for all children: a society where children can thrive, not just survive.

Email: prevention@childrensociety.org.uk

Bluesky: [@TCSPolicy.bsky.official](https://bsky.app/profile/TCSPolicy.bsky.social)

X: [@childrensociety](https://twitter.com/childrensociety)

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