



- ▶ [Making Noise: Children's Voices for Positive Change after Sexual Abuse - The International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking | University of Bedfordshire \(beds.ac.uk\)](#)

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Journeys through Justice

Children's views on improving police responses to sexual abuse

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For International Research on
Interpersonal Violence and Harm

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Context and focus

- ▶ Drawing on 7 different studies in England, that have elicited over 200 children and young people's views on criminal justice responses to abuse
- ▶ Most on child sexual abuse (HMIC study = wider child protection) but applicable to other experiences of harm
- ▶ Different times & different locations of study BUT consistent themes
- ▶ Absence of sense of justice
- ▶ Need for improvement in police engagements (focus of today)
 - ▶ Police attitudes
 - ▶ Victim wellbeing and support needs
 - ▶ Communication by the police
 - ▶ Victim choice and control
- ▶ What they want & how you might do this (quotes from research participants unless otherwise noted)
- ▶ Not denying good practice that exists, but seeking to extend and mainstream this

"I had faith in the court, the police and everything... and as soon as they turned around and said, 'He's walked', that was it, I was devastated, and ever since then I've just never trusted the law"

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Four key areas for improvement



Professional attitudes:
Respectful, non-judgemental, empathetic



Wellbeing: recognising and responding to support needs



Communication: Timely, transparent and effective



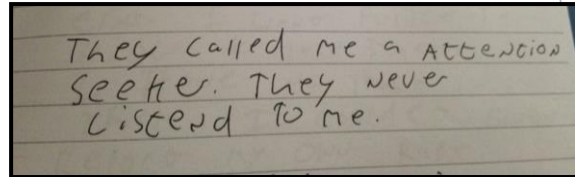
Control: Facilitating choice and control

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Professional attitudes

"I think it's how they present themselves and how they talk to people, not looking down at them, thinking you're just a teenager who has been in trouble or who has issues or whatever"



They called me a Attention Seeker. They never listened to me.

"I could tell from your colleague's body language: their huffing and puffing; their 'not paying attention' faces' – I could tell they wanted to leave" (young people's letter to police, Learning from the Experts project)

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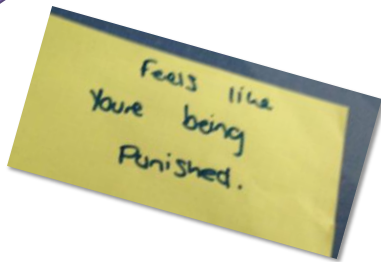
Enhancing professional attitudes

- ▶ Respectful, non-judgmental, empathetic - to all
- ▶ Challenging our own assumptions & exercising professional curiosity – 'troublesome teenager?'
- ▶ Recognising importance of initial engagements – open up or shut down options
- ▶ Understanding impact and manifestations of trauma – 'she's not acting like she has been raped'
- ▶ Sensitive elicitation of accounts (verbal/non verbal cues)
- ▶ Maintaining humanity in the system – want to feel like more than a case to you – what if it was your child?

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Wellbeing and support needs

“They underestimate how hard it is...[you are] nervous and scared...[they should] take the feelings into consideration...try to put themselves in them shoes...ask how the young people’s feeling”



“Sat in that chair with that camera was horrifying – and it took me two tries. To this day it’s still the worse thing I ever had to do... Having to put myself back in that situation – having to think about what happened – having to force myself back into the worst moment – back where I never want to go. I can remember how sometimes my brain just physically stopped me from remembering certain details. And then after the interview that was it. No offer of support. They’d ripped out everything and then just, ‘Okay, you can go home now’” (young people’s letter to police, Learning from the Experts project)

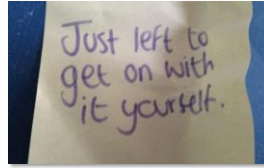
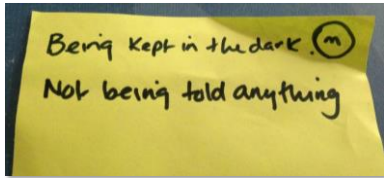
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Prioritising wellbeing and support needs

- ▶ Prioritising victim (and witness) welfare alongside investigation needs
- ▶ Abuse (and CJS engagement) impact on multiple areas of young people’s lives, and on wider family/social circles
- ▶ This is your job – but this is one part of their life (that they are trying to move on from)
- ▶ Take time to identify the needs of the child/young person & who can respond to these
- ▶ Continuity of relationship is key: *“each time my case got swapped to a different officer it felt like the previous officer was giving up on me”*
- ▶ Supporting access to (pre-trial) therapeutic support

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Communication



The police said to me, 'don't worry, you don't need to know'. This felt patronising"

"I think it is important for young people to be told about what is going to happen as it is going to be happening to them. The young people should always understand what is going on"

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Enhancing communication

- ▶ Less onus on young people to seek information
- ▶ Need for regular, timely communication – even when 'nothing to report'
- ▶ Not always through a representative – *"they talked to my dad...I'm the one it actually happened to"*
- ▶ This is an alien system – explain simply/avoid jargon/encourage questions – use of RI's to identify communication needs
- ▶ Not just what is happening, but why it is happening
- ▶ Explanation of charging decisions/case outcomes
- ▶ Due consideration to confidentiality and discretion – in info shared & through your presence

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A sense of control

“I was basically a puppet. When they wanted me, I had to do it. When they didn't want me, I heard nothing”

“Looking back, right from the start, not one person ever stopped to ask what I wanted. Nothing happened because I wanted it to. It was all about what other people wanted and decided. From me telling the teacher - to them making me tell my parents - to them deciding to tell the police - to me doing the video interview and nothing coming of it. None of it was what I wanted. It was like it wasn't even my trauma - it was someone else's and I was just watching” (young people's letter to police, Learning from the Experts project)

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Building in choice and control

- Avoid replicating loss of control that characterises abusive experiences
- Build in choice wherever possible – e.g. when and where to meet – ‘but something urgent has come in I need to deal with’?
- Recognise evolving capacity of adolescents & need for different engagement methods to younger children
- Make decisions ‘with’ not ‘for’: *“Ask young people their opinions of what they think should happen and take opinions into consideration.”*
- Provide sufficient information to enable meaningful choice
- Don't assume you know what is best for them

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Moving forward

- ▶ The good news:
 - ▶ Recognition of challenges and desire for change
 - ▶ The majority of young people's 'big asks' are feasible – indeed recommended - within current policy and guidance context
 - ▶ Many committed professionals working to bring about change
 - ▶ New initiatives – e.g. Child House Model; section 28

- ▶ Next steps:
 - ▶ More consistent application of existing policy/guidance - across and within forces/areas
 - ▶ Good practice needs to become less dependent on individuals' knowledge and commitment
 - ▶ More use of system features designed to support child victims
 - ▶ Learning from children and young people themselves

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References/resources

- ▶ Learning from the Experts: letter to the police from young people: [UoB SYLRC LearningFromExperts TrainingResource_ZARA.indd \(beds.ac.uk\)](#)
- ▶ Marginal Gains (co-created resources by police and young people): <https://www.uobcsepolicinghub.org.uk/hub-resources>
- ▶ CSE and policing knowledge hub: <https://www.uobcsepolicinghub.org.uk/>
- ▶ A trauma informed approach to policing: [Short practice films for the police | Police CSE \(uobcsepolicinghub.org.uk\)](#)
- ▶ Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme (2023) [Multi-agency Practice Principles for responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm \(& supporting resources\)](#)

- ▶ Beckett, H. and Warrington, C. (2015) [Making Justice Work](#)
- ▶ Beckett et al (2016) [Children's Voices \(report for HMIC\)](#)
- ▶ Warrington et al.(2017) ['Making noise: children's voices for positive change after sexual abuse'](#) (chapter on policing)
- ▶ Allnock et al (2023) Learning from the Experts: [Understanding the mental health and emotional wellbeing needs of those who experience sexual abuse during adolescence](#) (chapter on policing)
- ▶ Beckett, H (2019) 'Moving beyond discourses of agency, gain and blame: reconceptualising young people's experiences of sexual exploitation' in Pearce, J (ed) *Child Sexual Exploitation: Why theory matters*

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Vulnerability Knowledge & Practice Programme



Voice of the child

Wider study: Victims' Voices and Experiences in Response and Investigation: A Study of Police Personnel in England and Wales

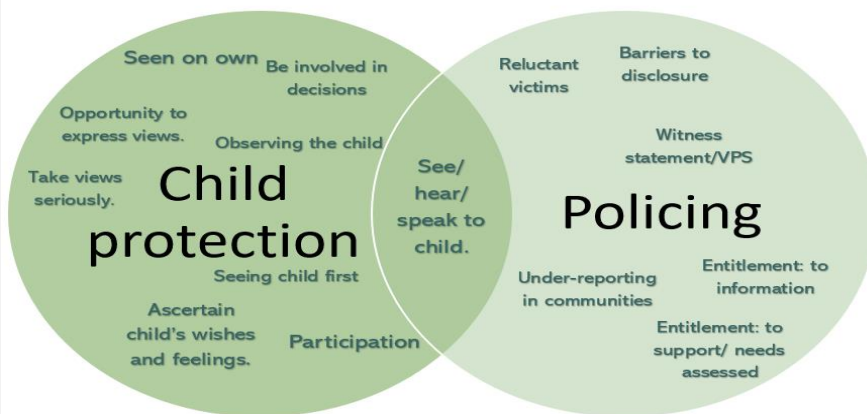
Presented by Dr. Debbie Allnock, Head of Research VKPP
 On behalf of the research team: Dr Kayleigh Denyer, Milena Fernandes-Aguilera and Sian Brown

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Voice of the child



Vulnerability Knowledge & Practice Programme



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Vulnerability Knowledge
& Practice Programme



Phase 1: National Survey ($n = 1342$)

- 42% Male; 53% Female
- 91% White
- 66% Police Officer; 30% Police Staff
- 59% Active role in investigations

Phase 2: Focus Group/Interviews ($n = 33$)

- 46% Male; 55% Female
- 97% White
- 83% Police Officer; 15% Police Staff
- 94% Active role in investigations

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Voice of the child in policing discourse

“Probably the phrase we use more often is voice of the child, which is certainly embedded now into the organization, probably for the last four or five years I would say” (Police Officer)

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Understanding VoV



Participants were asked to state their agreement with the following statements as being synonymous with Voice of the Victim:

- Understanding what victims' want from the police/CJS as a result of reporting a crime.
- Providing victims with choice and control within the investigative process
- Victims having their experiences of the crime listened to and recorded.

'a'
High level
of
agreement

'b'
High level
of
agreement

'c'
Lower
level of
agreement

Child protection specialists showed higher levels of agreement across all of these statements (statistically significant)

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Understanding VoV/C

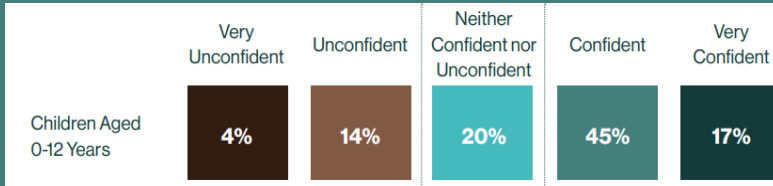


- Crimes heard and recorded - basics of policing?
- Anything else seen to sit outside basic role/ 'something different'
- Specialists more 'attuned' to this ? Significant in light of importance of 'first contact'
- Lack of clarity around this term leads to variations in practice
- Some participants struggled to see how police could enable effective 'voice' and meet the needs of victims
- Is the term causing confusion?

"I take victims' wish[es] [in]to consideration but they should NEVER be given control over an investigation process as I do not expect a victim to have a balanced impartial view of the crime they are a victim of."
(Police Officer)

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Confidence: voice of the child



"I feel like this is a bit of a silly question. Ultimately, I treat everyone equally and equal to their needs and always put in 100% effort with everyone I speak to."
(Police Officer)

- A significant minority of respondents are very unconfident, unconfident or feel ambiguous about capturing the voice of the child (0-12)
- **highest confidence levels reported in working with LGBTQ+ individuals, individuals with physical disabilities, and people from ethnic minoritized groups

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Prioritising voice of the child



Those working with children regularly: a significant minority (~25%) disagree that it should be a priority or apply the same importance to children's voices as adults

Young people felt worried about the 23% who did not agree with this and questioned how those that did not agree would interact with young people and whether they would listen to their voice.

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Prioritising voice of the victim/ child



- Participants largely agree with ‘the basics’ of policing (recording experiences of crime)
- Participants do not feel overly negative about their roles in speaking to victims/witnesses – but over a third do!
- However, there is also high agreement that responding to victim/witness needs that sit outside of the investigation in sit firmly with other agencies to address
- Specialists more likely to agree with this



3 out of **4** personnel agreed/strongly agreed that recording the experiences of victims/witnesses should be a priority for the police (75%).



Approximately **2** out of **3** personnel disagreed/strongly disagreed that the police are expected to spend too much time speaking to victims and witnesses, beyond taking their statement (64%).



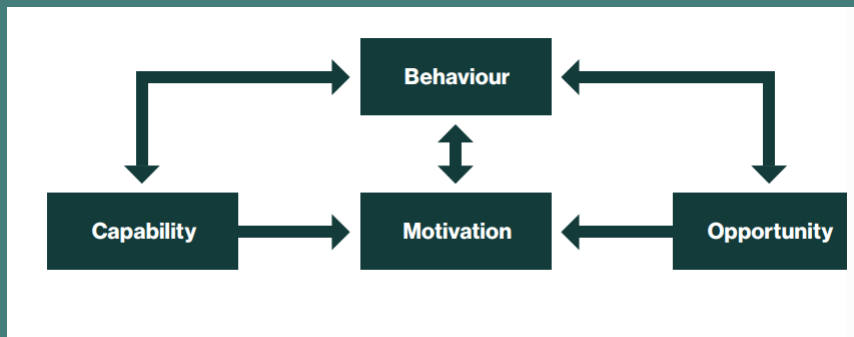
Approximately **2** out of **3** personnel agreed/strongly agreed that it should be the responsibility of other agencies to meet the needs of victims/witnesses that do not relate to the investigation (62%).

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COM-B



CAPABILITY-OPPORTUNITY-MOTIVATION



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Capability: VoC



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Lack of knowledge and a fear about when, and in which contexts, it is appropriate to speak to a child

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Opportunity: VoC



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Some children may not recognise they are victims

Balancing wishes of parents and children

Parents blocking access to children

Making things worse for children

Anxieties about placing responsibility on children

Some children do not trust the police

Resource-intensive; insufficient staffing in child specialist roles; high turnover rates produce inconsistency

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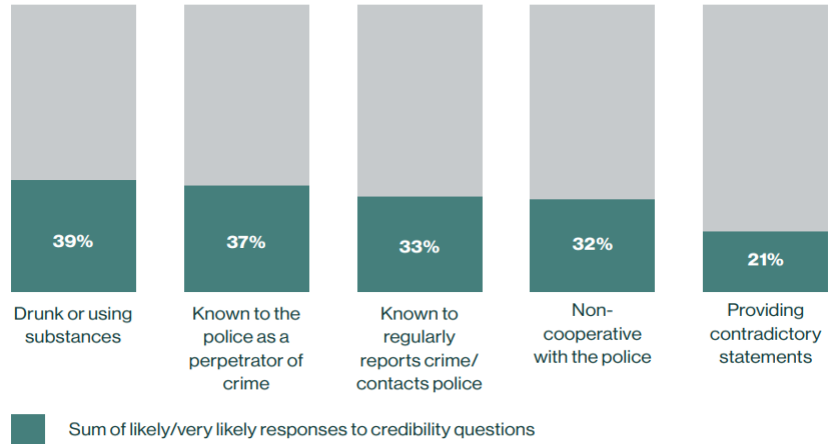
Motivation



Victim credibility and biases

Personnel were less likely to feel responsible for capturing the victim voice when they perceived victims were less credible

A Comparison of Factors influencing Perceptions of Victim Credibility (n=1176)



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Bridging the gap

Communication

Children and young people want to be spoken to. Our findings suggest there are fears and anxieties/ lack of confidence amongst at least a significant minority of police in how to effectively do this.

BUILD CAPACITY AND OPPORTUNITY

Professional attitudes

Children and young people want to be treated with respect and without being judged. Our findings suggest a sub-set of police continue to hold biases relating to victim credibility which may impact on victim engagement.

ADDRESS OFFICER NORMS AND MOTIVATIONS

Wellbeing

Children and young people want their support needs recognised and responded to. Our findings suggest a significant subset of police question their role in this and feel greater responsibility should be placed on other agencies.

BUILD CAPACITY

Facilitating choice and control

Children and young people want to have some sense of choice and control. Our findings suggest some police may view this as 'over and above' the role of police, and that it is at odds with the role and objectives of policing.

BUILD CAPACITY

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Bridging the gap – What young people say



Young people from Leader's Unlocked reflected on how the police can make sure they hear the voice of the child when parents are/need to be around. The group suggested:

- accessing and communicating with children and young people through/at partner agencies (e.g. schools) or trusted support groups;
- speaking to a child alone from the parent;
- the use of technological resources for children and young people to note thoughts and answers down when parents are present in the wider environment (and can overhear conversations);
- considering the impact of police engagement with the child (e.g., the child returning home to that parent after having spoken to the police which may result in that child experiencing negative ramifications from said parent) and continued engagement.

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The Voice of the Victim in Police Service Design

Camille Ilett, VKPP Research Fellow

Presented on behalf of the rest of the research team: Dr. Debbie Allnock, Rachel Hurcombe, Hannah Davis and Adam Sadullah



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Background

- Emphasis on needs of victim-survivors and efforts to sustain and increase their engagement within the criminal justice system (Ministry of Justice, 2020)
- Growing body of knowledge of participatory methods and how to involve people in decision-making
- Little known about how engaging with victim-survivors leads to changes in police service design. Further, tokenistic engagement can damage trust and perceptions of police legitimacy (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2019)



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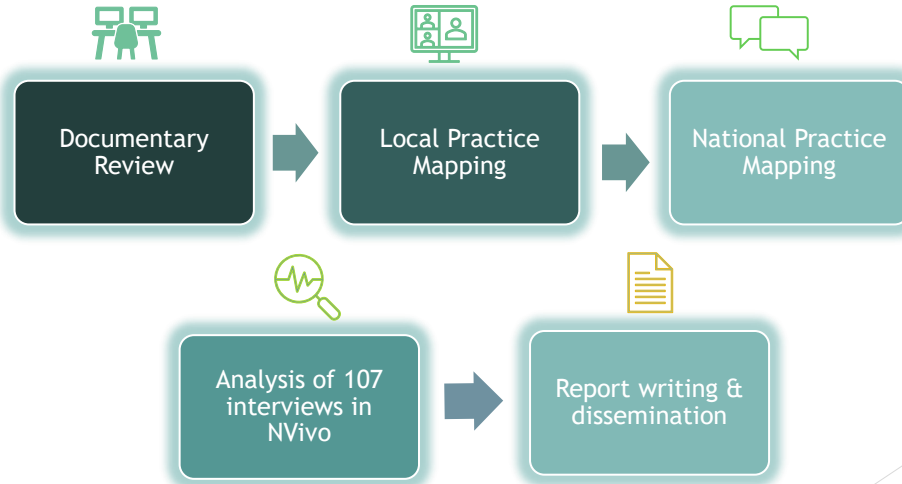
Research Question

How are the **voices** of victim-survivors being used to shape **service design** in policing in England and Wales?



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Methodology



Overview of practices

Youth Engagement groups	Training and conference presentations	Peer research	Interviews and focus groups	Independent Advisory Groups/ advisory boards
Victim voice through third parties	Surveys	Mixed methods	Expert panels	Complaints
Training delivery	Scrutiny panels and oversight	Lived experience advisors	Engagement forums, networks and events	Ad hoc meetings



Participation levels

One-way flow of information, whereby police learn about victims' experiences, directly or through a third party.

Customer Service Approach



No involvement

Exchange of information, often with victims receiving some information and being asked to respond.

Transactional Approach



Police and those with lived experience **working together** to lead to improvement and change.

Collaborative Approach



Co-production



Voice of the Child

- Volunteer Police Cadets (VPC) / Police Youth Volunteers (PYV)
- Youth Commission
- Young People's IAG



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Barriers

- Barriers to engagement:
 - Under 18s automatically excluded
 - **Risk aversion**: fear of re-traumatisation
 - Feedback from parents or guardians = voice of the child or young person
 - Lack of understanding of **what constitutes 'voice of the child'**
 - Perceived **lack of agency** minimises opportunities for engagement
 - Gap in policing's **understanding** of experiences of children and young people



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Reflections

What's needed?

- **Skills and confidence** to work with young people
- Working with **third sector organisations**
- Working closely with **partner agencies**
- ... *Anything else?*
- ... *Any experience?*



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Thank you for listening! Any questions?

If you are interested in discussing these projects,
please get in touch!



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