



**Preventing and
responding to
harmful and
problematic sexual
behaviour strategy**

2022

Foreword

This strategy sets out the commitment by Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire to address the issue of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour (HSB). This is a multi-agency strategy which has the support and contribution of partners including Staffordshire Commissioner's Office, Staffordshire County Council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council, NSPCC, Staffordshire Police, schools and educational placements and Health, along with voluntary services.

What is harmful sexual behaviour?

There are a number of definitions used in relation to harmful sexual behaviour. For this strategy and associated policies and procedures, the following definition has been utilised:

“Sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate may be harmful towards self and others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult.” (Derived from Hackett, 2014)

The boundary between what is problematic or harmful and what is typical childhood sexual exploration/experimentation can be blurred. The NSPCC/Hackett Continuum has been utilised by the authors of this strategy when considering the range of sexualised behaviours, and professionals should be encouraged to consider this tool in their evaluations of sexualised behaviour displayed by children.

This strategy recognises that sexualised behaviour takes place on a continuum and may also be linked to other concerning behaviours such as child sexual exploitation. It is also useful to note that technology-assisted harmful sexualised behaviour is becoming more prevalent and more research is required to help us better understand these behaviours. Technology-assisted HSB is defined as:

“One or more children engaging in sexual discussions or acts – using the internet and/or any image-creating/sharing or communication device – which is considered inappropriate and/or harmful given their age or stage of development. This behaviour falls on a continuum of severity from the use of pornography to online child sexual abuse.”

Our aim

To prevent HSB from happening, with early identification and appropriate and effective response to those who are displaying problematic or harmful sexual behaviour.

By doing this, we will ensure that:

- Professionals have a clear and agreed understanding of what are developmentally typically sexual behaviours, problematic sexual behaviours and harmful sexual behaviours and know how and where to seek support for these children
- Parents and carers know where to seek support for those children and young people who have displayed problematic and harmful sexual behaviour in order that they receive a timely and proportionate response
- Children and young people have access to good quality relationship and sex education to ensure they have and age-appropriate understanding of what are developmentally typically sexual behaviours, problematic sexual behaviours and harmful sexual behaviours
- The strategy and all linked procedures are promoted and understood
- Training and support around harmful sexual behaviour is available for those who need it
- There are information-sharing agreements between agencies when specialist HSB assessments and interventions need to take place

Strategic context

National

- Research has generally indicated that around a third of incidents of sexual abuse involve children committing these offences. Some UK studies have suggested that the proportion may be significantly higher, with one study estimating that up to 65 per cent of sexual abuse experienced by children under 18 is perpetrated by someone under the age of 18. The Office of the Children's Commissioner's report into child sexual abuse in the family environment found that 25 per cent of all cases of child abuse in the family environment involved a perpetrator under the age of 18.
 - The Home Office Tackling Sexual Abuse Strategy 2021 found a proportion of abuse is perpetrated by children and young people themselves, with some prevalence studies suggesting that a third to two thirds of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by under 18s, and the Children's Commissioner estimating that 25 per cent of intra-familial abuse is perpetrated by under 18s. The strategy indicates that children, particularly in younger age groups, may engage in developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour, which can be harmful towards themselves and/or others.
- Harmful sexual behaviour exists on a spectrum from inappropriate through to problematic, abusive and violent.
- National attention regarding children displaying harmful sexual behaviour has been increasing over recent years. In 2016 the parliamentary enquiry published its report, 'Now I know it was wrong: Report of the parliamentary inquiry into support and sanctions for children who display harmful sexual behaviour. This highlighted the prevalence and necessity of prevention services and support for children. Subsequently, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has produced guidance for those working with children displaying problematic and harmful sexual behaviour.
 - In June 2021, Ofsted conducted a review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. Views were gathered of approximately 900 children and young people in focus groups. Just over 800 children and young people aged 13 and above were surveyed about their perceptions of sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse. Girls stated that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse, such as being sent unsolicited explicit sexual material and being pressured to send nude pictures ('nudes'),

are much more prevalent than adults realise. For example, nearly 90 per cent of girls, and nearly 50 per cent of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers. It was evident that sexual harassment occurs so frequently that it has become 'commonplace'. For example, 92 per cent of girls, and 74 per cent of boys, said sexist name-calling happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers. The frequency of these harmful sexual behaviours means that some children and young people consider them normal.

- Whilst there is still no national strategy for dealing with problematic and harmful sexual behaviour, the NSPCC has produced a harmful sexual behaviour framework. The framework was developed by the NSPCC, Research in Practice and Professor Simon Hackett with input from a large number of national organisations, local authorities and subject experts. The framework aims to:
 - support an integrated understanding of, and response to, harmful sexual behaviour (HSB)
 - identify a continuum of responses to children and young people dependent on levels of risk and need
 - promote effective assessment as
- key to preventing unnecessary use of specialist time and, where appropriate, to support earlier interventions
- ensure children and families are offered the right level of support by suitably trained and skilled workers
- promote the advantage of involving frontline agencies and workers, especially education services, in earlier recognition, assessment and intervention
- encourage inter-agency work designed to reduce feelings of professional isolation and anxiety when making decisions, which may currently lead to under and over estimation of risk
- promote the use of a shared language, skills and training exchange, and development of appropriate local peer support systems
- promote the importance of evaluation and monitoring of outcomes for children and young people.
- This strategy draws on the information and guidance provided within the national literature, including those mentioned above, in order to develop an evidence-based model for Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent.

Local

Within Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, there are a number of agencies, and key personnel, who have shown a strong commitment to addressing the issues surrounding harmful sexual behaviour.

- The NSPCC has delivered training to practitioners across the partnership along with providing one-to-one support for children who display problematic and harmful sexual behaviour.
- The Youth Offending Services in both Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire offer AIM assessments and intervention for those children convicted of a sexual offence. However, it was recognised that, anecdotally, there were some reported gaps in the provision of services across the partnership and therefore an HSB steering group was established.
- The multi-agency steering group identified the need to assess the current level of understanding and services that were available for this area. Therefore, they worked with the NSPCC and, using the NSPCC HSB framework, worked with partners to complete the audit tool and brought partners together to highlight areas of good practice and areas for development. The main findings of the audit were:
 - Ambiguity between the definitions of problematic versus abusive behaviour
 - No shared understanding of HSB
 - CSE and HSB are often used interchangeably and there seems to be confusion about the differences
 - Data about the prevalence of HSB is not routinely collected by the majority of respondents, therefore we are unable to create an accurate picture across the City and County
 - Professionals are more likely to identify and respond to risks, and the needs of children are often overlooked
 - Policies and procedure on HSB may be available but not always utilised
 - The delivery of primary, secondary and tertiary HSB services are often seen as the responsibility of a specialist agency and not everyone's responsibility.
 - There is awareness of some identification/assessment/safeguarding tools (e.g. Brook, My Concern and Good Lives Model) but they are not always routinely used
 - Any type of HSB assessment is limited to AIM (YOS and NSPCC only)
 - Culture around HSB may sometimes be conflicting with some professionals 'downplaying' or 'over reacting' to certain behaviours
 - Limited resources are available or limited knowledge of how to access resources for children and parents/carers.

- The capacity of the NSPCC is very limited and only for the most high-risk children
- There is no dedicated service provision for those children identified as lower risk, and limited expertise among universal services to pick these cases up
- There is little bespoke work around HSB for children with special needs, considering physical development/ speech and language delay, for example
- Training on HSB (identifying risk, assessment and basic interventions) is not routinely available
- There is a lack of clarity about thresholds and pathways for HSB
- There is a lack of support for professionals working with children displaying HSB across universal services
- In January 2021, the Staffordshire Commissioner's Office funded the NSPCC to deliver a two-year prevention programme aiming to achieve the following outcomes:
 - A shared and meaningful consistent definition of HSB to enable clear communication between professionals, and to allow accurate assessment of children, young people and their behaviours
 - An increase in competence and confidence in professionals' identification, and response to HSB and a shared understanding that children and young people's sexual behaviours exist on a wide continuum, from normal and developmentally expected to highly abnormal and abusive
 - An increase in competence and confidence in foster carers' identification, and response to, all sexual behaviors along a continuum of normal, problematic and harmful
 - The early identification of harmful and problematic sexual behaviour
 - The identification of gaps in specialist support
 - The steering group re-convened in January 2021 and the action plan has been updated
- The NSPCC recognised there was a gap in consistent/evidence-based resources for problematic sexual behaviour. In response to this, NSPCC practitioners in Stoke pulled together a working group of local professionals and have developed a resource to support this work area. Stage one of the evaluation of the resource has now been completed, with the test phase beginning in September 2021.

Our approach

- An element of child development is sexual and, where children display sexualised behaviour, this is on a continuum from developmentally typical to harmful. It is important that all those working with children have a shared view and understanding of sexualised behaviour and an understanding of how to respond. If the child or children displaying the sexualised behaviour are offered a timely and appropriate response then they are more likely to achieve the positive outcomes which make a repetition of that behaviour less likely.
- It is important that any children impacted by problematic or harmful sexual behaviour are treated sensitively and are protected from any further harm through robust recording, risk management and therapeutic support, where necessary. However, it should also be recognised that those displaying problematic or harmful sexual behaviour are also children and require a non-stigmatising and empathetic approach.

Key principles

When considering the best response to problematic and harmful sexual behaviours, some key principles have been identified and should be enacted by all those who encounter problematic or harmful sexual behaviour:

- All sexualised behaviour requires a response. The type of response required depends on the behaviour itself and the child displaying that behaviour
- Positive early intervention with children who display problematic or sexualised behaviour is likely to achieve the best outcomes
- Professionals who are likely to encounter such behaviour should feel confident to recognise and deal with the behaviour in an appropriate manner and should be well supported
- Children who are impacted by problematic and harmful sexual behaviour should be listened to and protected
- Children who display problematic or harmful sexual behaviour should be listened to and protected. It is likely that they are vulnerable in their own right and their status as a perpetrator should never outweigh their status as a child also in need of protection
- Interventions should be based on evidence and up-to-date knowledge of best practice and be evaluated and reviewed.

Risk factors and vulnerabilities

There are different factors that contribute to problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. These may vary depending on the age, gender and stage of the child and nature of the behaviour. It is important to understand that problematic and harmful sexual behaviours do not happen in isolation. They are usually a symptom of some other concern or issue for a child. Hackett 2014 suggests that two thirds of children have experienced some kind of abuse or trauma, such as physical, emotional and sexual abuse, severe neglect, parental rejection, family breakdown, domestic abuse and parental drug and alcohol abuse. It is estimated that around half of those displaying harmful sexual behaviour experienced sexual abuse.

However, it should be recognised that not all of those children who experience abuse go on to display problematic or harmful sexual behaviour. There are many factors that are identified as increasing resilience, including significant people in their network, positive self-esteem and academic achievement. The connection between contributory risk factors suggests that support should not target merely the sexualised behaviour but also the broader concerns within the child's family along with building on the positive factors for the child, and take into consideration the link to mental health.

Our priorities:

This strategy recognises the negative consequences of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour and demonstrates the partnership's commitment to achieve the following overarching outcomes:

- Children's healthy sexual development is promoted and protected by all
- Children do not display problematic or harmful sexual behaviour
- Children are not impacted by problematic or harmful sexual behaviour

We will:

1

Ensure strong leadership, effective systems and working with partners

Why it is important

It is widely acknowledged and agreed that only a clearly defined, child focussed, proactive and co-ordinated approach will be effective in preventing problematic or harmful sexual behaviour. Safeguarding partners have demonstrated a strong commitment to working collaboratively to meet the strategic aims and principles set out within this strategy.

What we will do

The multi-agency partnership recognised the requirement for leadership and development within the field of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour and therefore a steering group was established. The steering group also acknowledged that a greater understanding was required around current practices, knowledge and services as this appeared somewhat piecemeal.

As a result, the steering group worked with the NSPCC to encourage partners to complete the NSPCC (2019) Harmful sexual behaviour framework: audit tool – an evidence-informed operational framework for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours. The audit was launched at a multi-agency event and was completed by partner agencies. The results were then collated with the support of the Staffordshire Commissioner's Office and the findings were shared at a further multi-agency event. As a result of the audit, it was agreed that there were gaps in provision, understanding and recording and it was agreed that this strategy be developed along with an action plan. The action plan will guide the future commissioning of services, training delivery, protocols and pathways. The multi-agency steering group will retain governance over the completion of the action plan.

2

Demonstrate strong leadership and achieve effective systems and working together practices between agencies by:

- Having a shared strategy and vision concerning problematic and harmful sexual behaviour
- Having shared HSB governance structures
- Having shared planning and commissioning structures, underpinned by aligned budgets
- Ensuring that there are robust local procedures in place to deal with the range of problematic and harmful sexual behaviours
- Having a shared commitment to identifying problematic and harmful sexual behaviour and addressing it at the earliest opportunity
- Supporting professionals to recognise behaviour and the appropriate response
- Sharing HSB-related information within agreed protocols and encouraging professionals to share information appropriately in accordance with local policy and procedure
- Developing effective transition policies to help ensure service continuity between children, young people and adult services
- Managing the delivery of the strategy and performance against agreed outcomes.

3

Prioritise prevention by raising awareness of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour among young people, parents, carers, professionals and communities

Why it is important

Problematic and harmful sexual behaviour should be seen as behaviour on a continuum. There are also a multitude of factors which may lead to this behaviour including various types of abuse. An adequate, non-stigmatising response is most likely to provide an opportunity for the child to engage with an intervention. Continued access to education, positive activities, a safe home environment and appropriate intervention are considered to be protective factors which make it less likely that the child continues to display problematic or harmful sexual behaviour. Children who have been victims of, or who have displayed, harmful sexual behaviour are more likely to recover when appropriately supported.

What we will do

Our intention is for every child, parent, carer, community member and professional to understand what problematic and harmful sexual behaviour is and know how they can prevent it. We will help to build resilience in children, young people and families and use information to identify vulnerable children who require targeted interventions.

In particular, we will work with schools and other education providers and support them to feel comfortable in identifying, responding and recording incidents of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. Training will be provided to practitioners to enable them to recognise and respond appropriately to HSB.

4

Raise awareness of problematic and harmful sexual behaviour among young people, parents, carers, communities and professionals by:

- Promoting learning with children about healthy relationships and appropriate sexual behaviour, including consent, and to let them know where they can access support
- Providing information for children and young people to help improve their resilience and ability to stay safe
- Providing information to professionals, parents, carers and communities to help them to understand the continuum of problematic and sexualised behaviours and to take appropriate action where needed
- Recognising and responding to the impact of technology assisted harmful sexual behaviour and pornography
- Ensuring there is a shared understanding by practitioners working at all levels of need on how to respond to problematic and harmful sexual behaviour, and ensure that children are provided with appropriate support
- Managing risk at the lowest level to help prevent escalation and achieve improved outcomes for children
- Linking vulnerable children and young people to early intervention services and providing help at the earliest opportunity where vulnerabilities or risk factors are identified, to help build resilience and reduce any potential need and risk factors
- Reviewing and assessing “what works” to respond to emerging needs.

5

Protect and safeguard children and young people and support professionals

Why it is important

Children and young people who have experienced or displayed problematic or harmful sexual behaviour can have feelings of shame and distress. Understanding the behaviours and delivering appropriate responses can reduce the impact of this behaviour and make its repetition less likely.

What we will do

We want to ensure that we continually improve the way we respond to children who experience and display problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. The Local Authority has a statutory responsibility and safeguarding partners have a duty (in accordance with Working Together 2018) to take protective action when a child is at risk. When a child has experienced or displayed problematic or harmful sexual behaviour, they should be treated with compassion and there should be a robust and sensitive process in place to ensure the safety of all children involved.

All partners, particularly schools and educational establishments, should be supported to make decisions to balance the rights for all children. This may require support to develop safety planning for children but the exclusion of a child from education or other provision should be a last resort.

We will listen to and learn from those who have been affected by problematic and

sexual harmful behaviour and improve practice accordingly. We remain committed to involving children, parents and key family members in the assessment and planning process and ensuring that children are central to any decision making. The aim is to support and empower children and their families to find solutions wherever possible.

We will safeguard children and young people by:

- Recognising the child in their own right
- Promoting the use of tools and resources to support practitioners to consider the behaviour and explore possible responses
- Providing professionals with access to training around problematic and harmful sexual behaviour
- Promoting the sharing of evidence-based practice and resources
- Working together to ensure that sanctions for children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour are appropriate and proportionate
- Sharing information between agencies to ensure that children receive the right support
- Ensuring that there are plans of intervention and support in place to address the behaviours of young people
- Decisions to prosecute should be taken collectively in a multi-agency forum.

Measuring our impact

The HSB Steering Group will monitor the implementation of this strategy and the associated action plan, and will ensure this is delivered effectively. It will govern the agenda, align commissioning intentions, challenge and manage performance, share good practice, champion achievements and identify and manage risks.

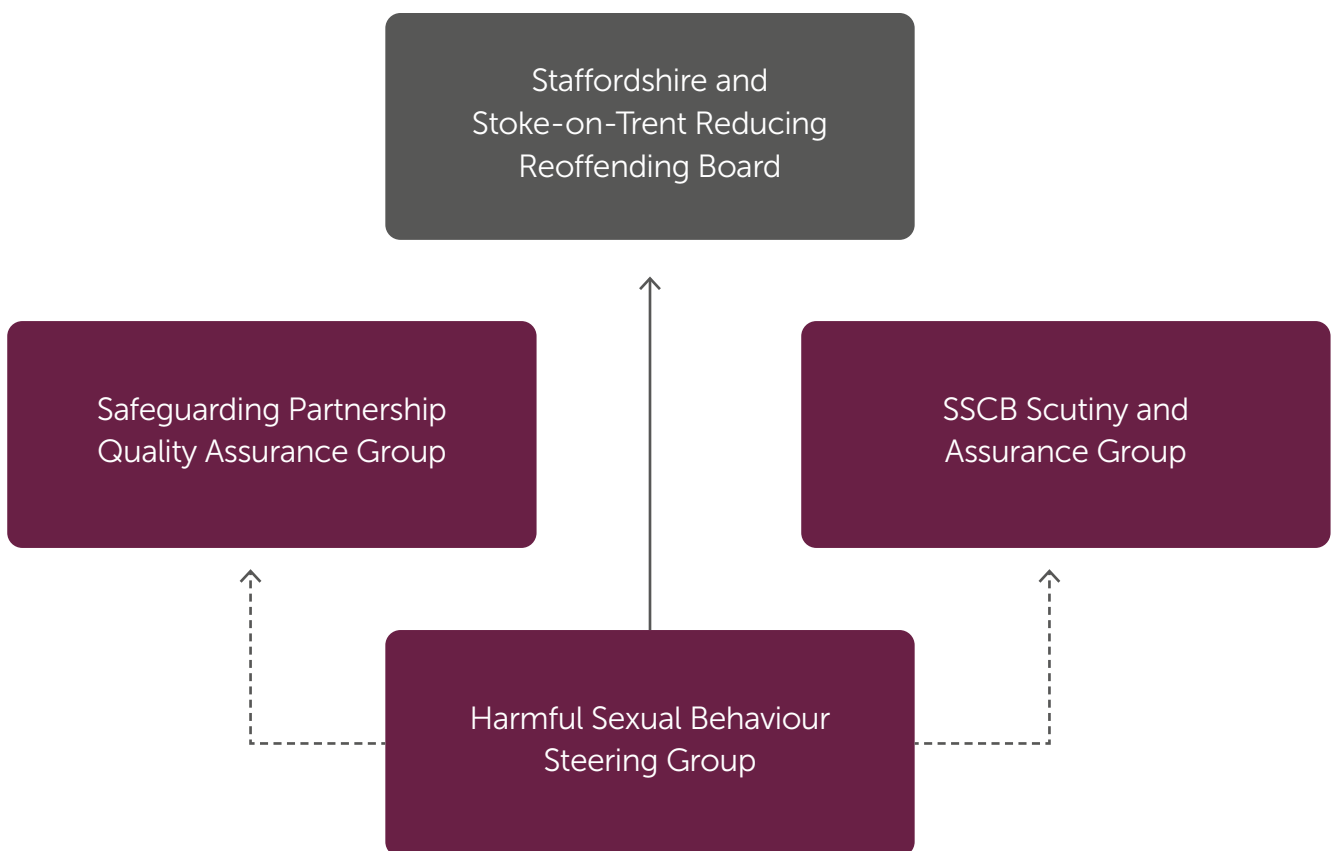
The audit completed by partners will be repeated 12 months from the commencement of this strategy. This will measure the progress made collectively and by individual agencies. Following this, the action plan and strategy will be updated to ensure that it reflects the current situation.

Working in partnership

We recognise that some of the actions taken to prevent and address HSB may overlap with other related agendas and strategies (Mental Health, Child Exploitation, Child Sexual Assault and Abuse etc). As such, we will seek to coordinate, support and complement, rather than duplicate, existing activity.

Governance

The implementation of this strategy and ongoing development will be overseen by the HSB Steering Group, and will report on a regular basis into the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Reducing Reoffending Board. It will have robust links with the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Safeguarding Children and Adults Boards and other strategic forums as necessary.





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