The barriers to and opportunities for, hearing the voice of the young person in multi-agency work in cases of Child Sexual Exploitation

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Table of abbreviations used in the study

CSE = Child sexual exploitation

SCIE = Social Care Institute for Excellence

NICE = National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

SERAF = Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework

LA = Local authority

SWP = South Wales Police

RSCB = Regional Children Safeguarding Board

CPCC = Child Protection Case Conference

CPR = Child Practice Review

GDPR = General Data Protection Regulation

CAMHS = Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

STD = Sexually transmitted disease

PPU = Public protection unit

RBP = Risky behaviour panel

DNA = Did not attend

HSB = Harmful sexual behaviour

YOS = The Youth Offending Service

YJS = The Youth Justice Service

Abstract

The thesis examines a social problem currently referred to in the United Kingdom as child sexual exploitation (CSE). This study's broad aim is to understand the extent to which young people who have experienced CSE (hereafter 'CSE-experienced young people') have been listened to and responded to by professionals. The study asks how professionals feel they have listened to young people's wishes and feelings and how these have been included. A further aim is to explore how young people's voices have been represented or heard in decision-making meetings about them and to elicit new data on the issues young people face when trying to assert agency during these decision-making meetings. The study is intended to be highly relevant to my professional practice.

A small qualitative study was carried out in Wales. The research explores the operation of lead multi-agency and collaborative professionals whose role is to safeguard and protect children at risk of, or who have suffered, sexual exploitation. It has focused on young people's experiences and multi-agency cooperation among four statutory agencies: children's social services, police, education, and health. The study also draws on the experience of professionals and young people from two therapeutic third sector projects specifically designed to support CSE-experienced young people. The research methods used are semi-structured interviews and observations of multi-agency meetings. The originality of the study is the combination of three elements of data collection – a) the voice of the young person, b) the voice of the professional, and c) the observation of decision-making multi-agency meetings concerning young people and their input therein. Analysis of the findings suggests that for young people to be heard and have dynamic intentional agency in decision-making meetings, there needs to be systemic and organisational change for more co-production, inclusion and multi-agency training, and multi-agency co-located teams.

The CSE professionals acknowledged that the exchange of sex and CSE could impact other exploitative behaviours and that exploitation met those needs of young people which were not being addressed in other parts of their lives. Young people in this study wanted professionals to understand their choices and the complexity of their decisions. They wanted to be recognised as young people

with agency and voice. The more agency young people have, the more they can advise professionals about what would keep them safe.

In addition, the professional multi-agency default response to CSE-experienced young people was one of protection and safeguarding, which narrows the focus from inclusion and away from the holistic picture of meeting broader needs, thus minimising young people's voice, choice, control, and inclusion. Empowerment and hearing the voice of young people are strongly advocated by multi-agency professionals. On this basis, it is recommended that genuine commitment to hearing the young person's voice must include young people's lived experience, which should be integral to reviewing and shaping Welsh policy and practice, and further research is needed which could strengthen the effectiveness of the inclusion and intentional agency of young people in other multi-agency situations.

Chapter 1: Introduction

When I was heard and believed, I could breathe, I felt free to live my life again, I could be myself.

(Marcus, 16)

1.1 Motivation and rationale for the study

The purpose of this study is to examine how multi-agency professionals hear CSE-experienced young people like Marcus (above). It questions young people's agency and voice in essential conversations with them and decision-making meetings about them. This study asks whether if young people are not heard, is this problematic to them and to the professionals who work with them? Or if they are heard, what does this look and sound like?

This research was borne out of my work as principal officer and head of safeguarding for three local authorities. Previously, I was assistant director for the children and family courts advisory and support service. Thus, hearing and representing the voice of young people in the court arena had been central to my professional role for nearly 40 years and hearing the voices of young people built on my original work as guardian ad litem (now children's guardians) in the court arena.

CSE and hearing the young person's voice therein became a specific area of interest. It became even more relevant when suddenly and almost by default, I found myself heading the only secure unit for young people in Wales and, more recently, being the principal officer for a Youth Offending Service and those leaving care. At the start of my professional doctorate, I published a book chapter (with co-authors) on the subject of managing the secure estate; the chapter touched briefly on CSE (Pates, Davies & Tiddy, 2018). I then became involved with many professional accounts, meetings and strategies concerning teenagers and adolescents and the issues they faced in terms of exploitation. This thesis and research study were underpinned by all of these factors, along with my desire to give something back to a career that has given me so much, and a duty to the young people whose lives are influenced by the professional decisions made.

The topic to which the research questions relate is CSE, now widely recognised in the UK as a multifaceted and complex social problem and a form of sexual abuse. This thesis incorporates a multi-disciplinary qualitative study that examines the voice and agency of the young person therein. The study is supported by theoretical frameworks which are considered as the thesis progresses, including work by Honneth (1996), Firmin (2017), Engeström (1999), Tajfel and Turner (1979) and Hart (2008). By way of introduction, next, I summarise some of the key points.

Honneth's theory of recognition (1995) is based on the human struggle to be recognised. Currently, in a society that is constantly changing, people still seek recognition. Honneth applies a model of socialisation that identifies three spheres of recognition: love, rights, and solidarity. Within this model he explains and justifies the importance of social relationships to the development and maintenance of a person's identity, thus working towards providing a theory for normative and social change. Honneth outlines the conditions of interaction where people can gain confidence by attaining a state of personal dignity and integrity and anchor one's relationship to oneself in the positive modes of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Thus, in this study, the theory of recognition is important when trying to better understand social dynamics and, in particular, involving young people in decision-making processes. For example, in decisions about managing exploitation, do young people feel morally, socially and/or intimately recognised? In my study I apply Honneth's theory by focusing the lens on professionals accepting young people as individuals, with idiosyncratic personal and valid opinions.

Hart's ladder of participation (2008) is a model used when developing and working on projects aimed at youth participation. It seeks to give young people an active voice in both decision-making processes and in society. Originally it was offered as a tool for bringing a critical perspective to the various professional groups who were working with young people directly. These included youth workers, streetworkers, some teachers and health professionals. The model was designed to reframe the professional thinking about engagement and participation with young people, and to systematically look at the current ways of working. In doing so, they developed a common professional language that was more useful

to their own context and professional identities. Hart's 'metaphorical ladder' of children's participation consists of eight individual ascending rungs, each representing increasing levels of child agency, control, or power. The rungs also represent a trajectory of power *participation* (increasing levels of agency).

The eight rungs of Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation are: Manipulation, Decoration, Tokenism, Assigned but Informed, Consulted and Informed, Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Children, Child-Initiated and Directed, and Child-Initiated Shared Decisions with Adults.

Engeström's activity theory is a theoretical framework used for the analysis and understanding of human interaction through their use of tools and artefacts. It is particularly relevant to multi-disciplinary work. It is utilised to support qualitative and interpretivist research via contextual methods of discovery. Activity Theory is particularly relevant in situations that have a significant historical and cultural context and where the participants, their purposes and their tools are in a process of rapid and constant change. The key concept of activity theory arises through an understanding of human consciousness as it has been shaped by experience and the subjectivity of human awareness. Engeström's approach was to explain human thought processes not simply based on the individual, but in the wider context of the individual's interactions within the social world. Multi-agency, multi-disciplinary working is described by Engeström as innovative, organisational and collaborative learning in work organisations, that produces new solutions, procedures, or systemic transformations in organisational practices (1995). His research has significantly advanced our understanding of development and learning in various work settings and made significant contributions to cultural-historical activity theory. In this study I suggest that Engeström's theory shows how implicit knowledge must be made explicit, explaining how and why professionals must find a common language. Engeström (1999) argues that conflict arises as tasks, roles, and responsibilities are redefined; consequently, open debate is essential among professionals, teams, and organisations in order to pursue a common goal while simultaneously acknowledging that multi-agency working is not always problem-free, and that tensions inevitably arise because of communication issues and differing professional agendas. Engeström's activity theory (1999) sheds light on how

young people's lived experience is heard and understood by professionals within this context.

In summary, activity theory is a framework or descriptive tool for a system. Engeström argues that people are socio-culturally embedded actors (not processors or system components). Thus, there exists a hierarchical analysis of motivated human action (levels of activity analysis). In this study, it applies to entire (multi-agency) teams and organisations, beyond a single actor or participant, and engages with team environments, cultures, and the complexity of real-life experiences – in this instance, the management of CSE-experienced young people. The characteristics of multi-agency working in this study are consistent with the predictions made by Engeström's activity theory (1999), which encourages open debate amongst professionals to transcend the complexity of multi-agency practice models.

1.2 The research aims and objectives

This qualitative study involved interviewing 12 young people and 15 multi-agency professionals and observing six multi-agency professional meetings. The study raised several issues about the agency and inclusion of young people, including whether and how their voice was heard in their meetings. To my knowledge, no previous studies have considered in detail and together in one study, the views of CSE-experienced young people, the views of CSE lead professionals in multi-agency organisations, and observations of multi-agency meetings. There have been previous studies about the voice of care-experienced young people or about young people included in social work decision-making; however, conversations with CSE-experienced young people are not well documented. Furthermore, relatively few studies of CSE-experienced young people take their voice and experiences as the focus (see Brodie et al. 2016).

Two of the study's objectives were to examine the barriers and opportunities for young people when engaging with professionals in their conversations about CSE and their inclusion and participation in multi-agency professional meetings. Out of this, I hoped to highlight examples of positive practice and where young people could be more central to those conversations and their meetings, potentially increasing their inclusion and participation.

In this thesis, I argue why it is important to explore CSE from both perspectives: i.e., young people and their experience of CSE and multi-disciplinary working, and professionals carrying out their multi-disciplinary roles. I suggest that young people's inclusion and participation is politically and socially relevant and I argue for the need for young people to have dynamic intentional agency and to be heard alongside professionals, 'to do with, and not to do to' (see Munro 2001) and why this approach is critical to supporting them and keeping them safe.

1.3 Thesis structure

1.3.1 Chapters One to Three: introductory chapters

In Chapter One**,** the study's context, background, and rationale have been introduced. The scope of the research, its objectives and the research questions have been identified. Furthermore, the value of this research is argued.

In Chapter Two, the existing literature will be reviewed in order to explore the emergent evidence and discourse around CSE and to examine academic evidence of whether and how young people were heard, and whether professionals listened to what they said about their CSE experiences. The literature review is divided into three main sections – 1) Society's response to CSE, 2) Who is vulnerable to CSE, and 3) The young person's voice and multi-agency work. The literature review informs the study's central aims and guides the research questions.

Chapter Three, the methodology and methods chapter, presents the theoretical framework and my research questions, which are:

RQ1: When multiple professionals work together in cases of CSE, what does it mean to hear the voice of the young person?

RQ2: How effective is the participation of children and young people in decision-making meetings about them?

RQ3: What are the barriers and opportunities in relation to the child's voice being heard and responded to?

RQ4: What are the professionals' perceptions of how the voices of young people are listened to and responded to?

RQ5: What does 'being listened to' mean to young people?

RQ6: What are the barriers to, or opportunities for, hearing the voice of the young person when working in multi-agency settings?

This chapter provides a comprehensive narrative of the research design and procedures used, setting out a detailed overview of the chosen research methods. I discuss the methods and techniques employed for gathering data. This chapter links the research design with research methods, including an integrated section for interviewing, observation, and a reflexive diary.

1.3.2 Chapters Four to Six: the empirical chapters

Chapter Four draws on research participants' perceptions and experiences. Firstly, I examine young people's views regarding how, why, and when they feel listened to and what factors influence their perception. Secondly, I explore whether the role and type of professional involved influence whether young people felt listened to, focusing on the listening environment and how structural factors can influence young people being heard. Finally, I explore the importance, understanding and interpretation of the language used by professionals to young people.

Chapter Five explores how multi-agency professionals work together and how they believe that they hear the voice and opinions of CSE-experienced young people. The focus is on their understanding of young people's narratives, including the barriers and opportunities to hearing young people and what makes sense. I discuss inter-agency collaboration and the different aspects of multi-agency working (Walker 2018). The participating professionals elicited the key findings and thematic trends in individual one-to-one conversations with young people.

Chapter Six considers the findings and analysis of how young people’s voices are captured in practice via analysis of unstructured observation of six different professional multi-agency meetings concerning CSE, using an interpretivist approach (Pretzlik 1994). It illustrates the different ways in which the young person's voice is presented and with different outcomes, and why when applying the ethos and practice of multi-agency safeguarding in Wales, the young people who are the subjects of those meetings should be central and involved in them. I then further explore and present why observation of multi-agency meetings is a critical and contextual component of this research study.

1.3.3 Chapter Seven: Conclusion

In the final chapter, Chapter Seven, I present my conclusions, bringing together the themes elicited across all three empirical chapters, and a summary of my research findings. Next, I identify potential further areas of research arising from this study. Finally, I set out the limitations of the research and provide the key messages from the study and outline recommendations for future policy and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The starting point for this thesis is that young people exchanging sex for money or material gain is problematic for them and society (as argued by Hallett 2017 and Beckett and Pearce 2015). Consequently, as professionals, we must understand why sometimes they feel that they must make that choice to survive. This chapter will explore the emergent evidence and discourse around CSE, examine academic evidence of whether and how young people are heard, and whether professionals listen to what they say about their CSE experiences, both in multi-agency meetings and multiple professional cohorts. This chapter initially examines the broader topic of CSE and the more distant historical origins of the evidence that shaped the CSE discourse. The literature review is divided into three main sections – a) society's response to CSE, b) who is vulnerable to CSE? and c) the voice of the young person. Before starting these main themes, I explain my search strategy and define the key concept of CSE.

2.2 The search for literature

Database searches began with Google Scholar and Social Care online. Scopus and Assia provided a database of peer-reviewed literature, and the University of Bedfordshire's CSE Research Forum provided a wide selection of contemporary papers. In addition, literature was examined from the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). The extended literature and supplementary searches in journals included *Child and Family Social Work,* the *British Journal of Social Work, Critical Social Policy, Families in Society,* the *British Medical Journal* and the *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. There were papers located in these journals from initial searches, which led to more specific searches, avoiding the omission of other relevant papers; therefore, this list is neither mutually exhaustive nor exclusive. Keywords used in searching were 'participation', 'exploitation', 'multi-agency', 'child protection', 'advocacy', 'CSE', 'prevention', 'criminal exploitation', 'contextual safeguarding', 'resilience', 'the voice of children and young people'.

This study focused on a region in Wales that predominantly involved Welsh young people, hence the consideration of Welsh guidelines. The term 'CSE' was not introduced into Welsh policy until 2009.[1] Therefore, the search for primary texts focused on 2010-2021. This said, while the search was specifically for literature published in the last ten years, it included some older sources referenced in those recent papers and books. The development of CSE concern over time was also researched, considering a broader historical frame from the 19th century onwards. The review includes grey literature on statutory policies, procedures, and guidance. An important element of my empirical research is the lived experience of young people; thus, the review aims to provide a balanced reflection of past and current relevant knowledge on the subject matter.

2.3 The definition of CSE

This chapter opens with a contextual discussion of the definition and meaning of CSE and continues by examining the range of problems CSE encompasses, gathering broader evidence from previous research literature about how and why sex is exchanged. Hallett (2017) states:

> *The language of any definition is related to broader understandings of CSE, and raises further questions about these understandings, and how best to act to safeguard children and young people from this type of abuse.*
>
> *(Hallett 2017, p. 26)*

CSE is a classification of child sexual abuse and an often-debated term with multiple definitions offered by academics and policymakers. Despite the plethora of definitions, there is a consensus that CSE is a reconstruction of what was previously referred to as child prostitution (Hallett 2013; Pearce; 2002; Coy et al. 2017). CSE is heterogeneous and multi-causal, and research suggests that it often encompasses a range of problems: personal, social, and professional (see Hallett 2013 and Beckett and Pearce 2015). Crucially, the exchange of sexual acts for

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[1] The term 'child sexual exploitation' was not introduced into Welsh policy until 2009, following the implementation of the earlier social care legislation for England and Wales, *Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution* (DoH, 2000).

other means, e.g., money or care, is central to CSE and forms an abusive relationship.

Defining CSE in Wales was problematic because the devolved and non-devolved arrangements meant that there was no single definition for CSE across the UK's four constituent countries. Instead, Welsh, English, and Scottish Governments and the Northern Ireland Safeguarding Board each had their own definition and guidance for CSE (Hallett 2017). Recently, policy and guidance have changed in Wales, and this will be discussed later. The following updated definition of CSE is found within new current statutory guidance in Wales:

> *CSE; It is a form of sexual abuse that can include sex or any form of sexual activity with a child, including the production of indecent images and any other indecent material involving children. It occurs to those up to the age of 18 years old and involves some form of exchange. The exchange can include the giving or withdrawal of something, such as the withdrawal of violence or threats to abuse another person. There may be a facilitator who receives something in addition to, or instead of the child who is exploited. Children may not recognise the exploitative nature of the relationship or exchange. Children may feel that they have given consent.*
>
> (*Working Together to Safeguard People Volume 7: Welsh Government 2021)*

As well as responding to the needs or desires of the victim (e.g., shelter, hunger, drugs, alcohol, affection, and or money), CSE can also occur to secure the economic advantage or increased prestige of the perpetrator or enabler. Furthermore, Beckett and Pearce (2015) assert that the victim can have been sexually exploited, even if the sexual interaction(s) appear(s) consensual (see also Coles 2005). These issues are discussed later, but here they contextualise the discussion of the historical context and timeline.

2.4 The historical context of CSE

As referenced above, CSE was initially considered and constructed to be child prostitution (Gillespie 2005). In the late 19th century, reformers began to brand child prostitution as a problem of epidemic proportions (Jesson 1993; Brown 2005). For many children, the reality was to 'choose' prostitution as the only viable

survival strategy to escape the 'less attractive' alternatives of an exploitative economic culture (Gorham 1978), which effectively contributed to marked power imbalances. Brown and Barrett (2002) concluded that these children and young people were undoubtedly victims of abuse, rape, and sexual exploitation, but they quickly became desensitised to the reality of their situation, exchanging sex for money, food, shelter, or material goods as the accepted and only way to meet their survival needs.

By the 1980s and 1990s, it was recognised that a large-scale problem of CSE was emerging. In her study, Brown (2019) articulated the shift in official commentary from social problems and disadvantages to focusing on individual vulnerability, including consent and cultural change issues. As a result, CSE emerged across the UK as problematic for policymakers and statutory agencies. By 2014, police forces across Britain also recognised that CSE was a significant issue (Factor and Ackerley 2019). As a result, many police forces implemented cultural changes within their organisations to tackle the rising number of CSE cases (Coffey 2017). These initiatives broadened the public perspective on CSE, and the increased number of reported cases of CSE was articulated as a sustained rise in public awareness and literature (see Dodsworth and Larson 2014).

Reflection on the historical context of CSE leads now to how professionals heard (or not) the voice of vulnerable young people, thus determining the CSE response.

2.5 Society's response to CSE

2.5.1 A safeguarding response past to present in child protection and CSE

There have been many child abuse inquiries into neglect and physical and emotional abuse.[2] Sexual abuse and CSE inquiries include Cleveland (1987), Orkney (1991), Operation Yew tree (2012), Rochdale (2013) and Rotherham (2014). These inquiries are not all CSE specific, but all of them illustrated the dangers of not adequately understanding children's experiences (Ferguson 2017). Lundberg (2013) argued that the lessons raised by these cases highlighted the

[2] The high-profile physical and fatal child abuse inquiries include Maria Colwell (1973), Jasmine Beckford (1984), Victoria Climbie (2000) and Peter Connelly (2007).

need for change in how social work research and practice with children were driven. These lessons broadly included sharing vital information correctly and on time with relevant professionals, learning from mistakes, and evidence validation. Munro (2019) suggested that, in many cases, the child's voice was not heard and was ignored or skewed, resulting in catastrophic consequences, evidencing systemic public agency failure, in that children were not safeguarded and had not been listened to when it was necessary.

Much of the CSE literature produced and examined has been in reaction to the perceived gross negligence of CSE by professionals (see Coffey 2014 and Hallett 2013). However, the young person's agency and voice in CSE cases are as vital as their agency in physical abuse or neglect cases. CSE inquiry reports, including Jay (2014) and Coffey (2014), and more recent academic research have advocated the multi-agency response that shapes the discourse today (Hallett 2013; Firmin 2017; Radcliffe et al. 2020). Collaboration of care services, safeguarding teams, police, community safety groups, housing teams, youth services, and children's charities formed an allied force against child sexual abuse, CSE and harmful sexual behaviour (Jay 2014; Gilligan 2015). Consequently, multi-agency groups are responsible for delivering coordinated responses to child sexual abuse, CSE, and harmful sexual behaviour (Radcliffe et al. 2020); this includes prioritising the young person's voice.

Post-2008, the young person's voice became a priority when assessing and analysing the scale of the problem, which began with the implementation of the all-Wales CSE protocol (Clutton and Coles 2008). Wales has arguably led the way in the UK in terms of CSE policy following earlier CSE research in England by Pearce (2002) and subsequent research in Wales by Clutton and Cole (2008) and Hallett (2013). In January 2011, the Welsh Government produced the Safeguarding Children and Young People from sexual exploitation guidance, which set out the timeline of CSE policy and practice guidance in Wales since 2000. In addition, the development of the Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (SERAF) by Coles (2005) sought to measure the extent of CSE in Wales, providing the first evidence based CSE risk assessment of its kind. This risk assessment was based on vulnerability signifiers and scored risk factors, enabling, and understanding how the Welsh response to CSE had been shaped and defined via multi-agency operational arrangements.

In her study, Coles (2005) encapsulated four categories of risk, working on the premise that some young people's involvement may not be known. As part of this risk assessment, young people who were at risk of, or had experienced CSE, were asked by professionals about what they thought about this issue and whether CSE was perceived to be an issue for them (see Hallett 2013; 2017 and Warrington 2013). The emergence of CSE as a national problem affected change in both the political and legislative landscape, broadening the scope of what constitutes exploitation. In addition, different factors were identified which could indicate an increased risk of CSE (Barnett et al. 2017). These factors are discussed later; nonetheless, the tide change had begun and expanded the national CSE agenda and discourse.

The review now examines the journey of the policy development and legislation underpinning multi-agency work in CSE cases in Wales, including the rejection of the term 'child prostitution'.

2.5.2 The developments in CSE language, including consent, policy, and practice

During the last two decades, reviews of CSE policy and practice developed rapidly, coupled with a rise in public awareness, research studies and high-profile cases, which explicated our understanding of the issues surrounding CSE (Weston and Mythen 2020). As noted earlier, the term ‘child sexual exploitation’ was formally introduced into UK social policy in 2009, and following years of campaign and research, child prostitution was constructed and understood as CSE (see Coy et al. 1995; Hallett 2013; Pearce 2002). The 2009 statutory guidance dictated that agencies must first recognise the problem of CSE and then ensure that the child identified at risk was primarily treated as a victim of abuse and safeguarded.

There was now a clear legal demarcation between adult prostitution and sex work, and young people under 18 who were sexually exploited. Regulatory provision via the 2003 Sexual Offences Act prevented adults from purchasing or engaging in sexual exchange with children. However, young people still faced criminal prosecution if they were found engaging in sexual activity of their own volition and without force, and until 2009, the age of criminal responsibility was ten years old. Consequently, children were seen as criminally culpable and responsible for their actions in the exchange of money or material items for sex. In any other context, sex with children under consensual age (16 years) was

classed as abuse (Pearce 2019 and Hallett 2017). In 2009, this notion of responsibility and blame was removed; however, Hallett (2013) notes that there was still little reflection on the need to understand the child's voice regarding their situation leading to a discussion regarding consent. The introduction in 2016 of the National Action Plan to Tackle CSE (Wales) (Welsh Government, 2016) was implemented to ensure a coordinated response across multi-agency working to prevent, intervene, and safeguard against CSE in Wales; the plan included four domains – prepare, protect, prevent, and pursue.

The All-Wales Child Protection Procedures (2008) were renamed the Wales Protection Procedures (2019). These incorporate the protection of children and vulnerable people commensurate with the Social Services and Well-being Act Wales (2014) and include six chapters of statutory guidance concerning Part 7 of the Act: Safeguarding children from CSE.[3]

My study was undertaken at a pivotal time in Wales, where the policymakers have recognised the need for young people to be at the centre of the professional response in exploitation cases. In 2017, the Welsh Government commissioned a review of Wales Safeguarding Children and Young People from sexual exploitation (CSE) Statutory Guidance. This review concluded that the existing CSE guidance, embedded definition and the SERAF protocol were no longer fit for purpose, and it was recommended that the guidance and protocol be updated to encompass new learning. The new guidance was published in 2021 under Part 7 of the Social Services and Well-being Act Wales (2014).

Many young people understand the exploitative nature of CSE and their related situations, yet do not feel able to confide or ask for support, suggesting that their acceptance of being exploited is the best option they have because of their limited life choices (see Beckett and Schubotz 2013; Hallett 2015; 2017). In addition, the complexity of sexual activity between young people who feel consensual sex is acceptable to them and society increases their confusion and difficulty. Berelowitz et al. (2012) argue that widespread confusion surrounds the

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[3] The domains of responsibility regarding CSE in the SSWBA 2014: a) definition and understanding of CSE; b) preventing CSE; c) responding to CSE; d) placing the child at the centre of the process to meet care and support needs in cases of CSE, and e) the disruption of perpetrators in cases of CSE (see SSWBA 2014 Part 7 pp. 6-64).

issue of consent among young people and professionals because intoxication, drug use, violence and power imbalances do not inherently indicate a non-consensual relationship, despite being potential indicators of sexual exploitation (Bourke and Loveridge 2014). Therefore, the voice and age of a young person are significant when consent is debated. Berelowitz et al. (2012) describe consent to sexual activity as not only based on the age signifier of 16 years, but also on the young person's ability to consent to sexual activity. Berelowitz et al. argue that consent requires the young person to understand and give and retract consent. Beckett et al. (2017) suggest that the issue of giving consent or 'going along with it' is open to interpretation, resonating with exploitation via technology, which is very prevalent today. Furthermore, violence, coercion, and intimidation are common features in cases of CSE; they are strategies to both silence and isolate emotionally and physically vulnerable young people and are often present in other exploitative relationships (Pearce 2017; Kloess et al. 2014).

The CSE historical timeline, policy and legislation discussions highlight that a young person's voice or agency was not a primary concern until the language around deviancy and child prostitution changed in 2005. However, re-casting a child 'choosing' to be a prostitute as 'this child is being exploited', has the effect of reducing the dynamic intentional agency of a young person (Hallett 2013; Coles 2005). Professionals and academics then began to consider what young people could add to the safeguarding process and how they could exert power and influence within service provision and their relationships, especially when they were being influenced by abuse, control, or coercion. Clark (2005) argued the need to engage on a deeper level with individual children's feelings, beliefs and needs, because, by definition or default, CSE-experienced young people are frequently on the fringe of services and interventions, often invisible to professionals until they reach crisis.

The emergent language, tone and terminology of policies and guidance also focused on the broader spectrum of exploitation. It introduced contextualised safeguarding which, as a term, became embedded in the government's *Working Together to Safeguard Children (England)* guidance in 2018 (Firmin 2019 a.)

2.5.3 Contextualised safeguarding

In terms of context, risk and environmental factors, contextualised safeguarding is often viewed alongside CSE as inextricably linked. It refers to the context in which young people are at risk of or experiencing harm, rather than focusing on their behaviours or attitudes in those situations. Firmin's study (2016) developed a theoretical and operational framework and addressed some of the broader environmental factors whilst targeting the contexts in which abuse occurred. Furthermore, she examined the extra-familial risk of exploitation through the lens of child welfare, not criminality or protecting the public. Contextualised safeguarding embodies the wider community as a protective resource and utilises soft intelligence as a lens to work with young people deemed at risk of exploitation. Firmin links contextualised risk with group based CSE, which has attracted high media, public, government, and practitioner attention within contextualised safeguarding since 2010 (Arthur and Down 2019). The *Jay Report* (2014) suggested that gangs would sexually exploit children for their own gratification in the past, whereas now gangs do it for career and financial opportunities, making a profit by pimping (Jay 2014). The research evidence indicates that many sexual exploitation cases within gangs are committed by teenage boys and young men in their twenties, crossing the domains of human trafficking, modern slavery and criminal exploitation (see Berelowitz et al. 2012; Knox 2004). Exploitation generates unease and increases public intervention via the media, social media, and statutory agencies, highlighting the relevance of analysing moral panic (Chase and Stratham 2005). The agents and dynamics of moral panics, their causes and consequences are captured by Garland (2008) and Cohen (2011). Moral panic in CSE has framed many high profile CSE cases and is discussed next.

2.5.4 CSE, moral panic, and a shifting agenda

Society is prone to periodic scares and panics, including Rochdale (2013) Rotherham (2014) and Yewtree/Saville (2012-2014). These reports became big media stories and recurrent themes and focused on children and allegations of threats and harm they experienced through sexual coercion; this behaviour leads to moral panic. Those alleged to have harmed children are pilloried in the media and society, while those meant to protect children are blamed for failing to do so.

Social workers were often blamed for doing too much or too little (Clapton et al. 2013). There is increased pressure on statutory agencies and others to 'do something' during moral panic. The response is often punitive and may be disproportionate to the actual harm done (Cohen 2011; McRobbie and Thornton 1995). CSE is perceived and defined as a threat to social norms and the interests of communities and society. Subsequently, this fuelled the argument that there was a potential CSE-induced moral panic, referred to in some research as a rising phenomenon (Hallett 2013; Clapton et al. 2012, 2013). This argument undoubtedly deflects the focus of CSE away from young people. It is evident that CSE is not just a moral panic or a new phenomenon but a deep-seated societal issue that needs to be recognised, prioritised, and addressed for young people to be heard.

At the time of high-profile cases, including Rochdale (2013), Rotherham (2014) and Oxford (2015), much was made of ethnicity. CSE was associated with Asian gangs, human trafficking, and modern slavery (Melrose and Pearce 2013). These high profile CSE cases left a lasting, exaggerated, and inaccurate impression on the public that CSE was predominantly perpetrated by gangs of Asian men sexually abusing vulnerable white girls (Patel 2018). This fundamentally flawed narrative was reinforced by the Quilliam foundation (2017), who asserted that CSE was a Muslim problem, thus framing the discourse, fuelling a moral panic, and narrowing the focus away from the wider issues faced by these children (see Cockbain and Tufail 2020; Tufail 2015). These highlight race and religion and reinforce a stereotypical assumption of young white females being more at risk than others, thus linking gender, race and vulnerability in CSE cases.

The third section of this chapter briefly summarises the vulnerability theme.

2.6 Who is vulnerable to CSE?

2.6.1 Gender

Gender is not a primary focus of this study but is integral to the construction of CSE because the higher prevalence of CSE victimisation in girls can sometimes obscure and minimise the fact that boys are also at risk, thus beginning the discussion on vulnerability. There is an overlap between perpetrators and victims, with some boys who are the subjects of CSE then engaging in harmful sexual behaviour (Beech et al.2017).

Barnardo's also found that for girls, the risk of sexual abuse remains as they enter adulthood. Beckett and Pearce (2015) contend that younger boys are at higher risk of sexual exploitation than men, and Almeida et al. (2009) suggest that LGBTQ boys and girls retain a heightened risk of sexual abuse when entering adulthood (although we do not have data establishing this as a higher risk factor for girls). More recent research from Cockbain and Olver (2019) and Barnardo's (2017) illustrates that CSE victims are not solely defined by gender and that boys experience CSE too, although the risk of being a victim is likely to be higher for girls.

An important consideration is that CSE often manifests differently for boys and girls. This does not make previous studies less relevant, but it highlights the rapid and fluid change in discourse and evidences the need to appraise and apply findings from older literature with particular care in light of these findings. Therefore, boys' and girls' voices must be heard to establish whether previous research findings are as generalisable as they may appear on the surface (Hallett et al. 2020). Radcliffe et al. (2020) suggest that many young men are CSE victims, and female perpetration is likely to be under-reported. Therefore, it could be argued that the gender of an abusing adult is less relevant than the construction of power imbalance, which, when applied to vulnerable young people, can lead to exploitation. Therefore, power imbalance is very relevant for young people controlled by an abusing adult (whatever their gender) who has become familiar to them through control and coercion (Pearce 2017). This is critical to our understanding of CSE today because the issues encompass a more comprehensive and holistic range of exploitations and pools of perpetrators, including peer abusers.

The emergent thematic literature suggests that vulnerability and exploitation are transitional, not gender-specific or confined to children. These vulnerabilities can include criminal exploitation, human trafficking, and modern slavery, which involve a broader range of professionals and organisations, processes, and procedures and, thus, require a multi-agency response. In addition, vulnerability can affect a young person's willingness or ability to engage or share what is happening with their families and professionals. CSE perpetrators often target young people because of vulnerability. Therefore, those vulnerabilities need to be understood and recorded as a risk by professionals. These risks can

then be explored with young people when trying to keep them safe and when hearing their perspectives.

The evidence examined identified specific groups of children thought to be at disproportionate risk and vulnerable to sexual exploitation in cases of CSE. Berelowitz (2012) suggests that regardless of the specific form of CSE or child sexual abuse, the exploiter creates a power imbalance over the child by age, gender, intellect, and physical strength. However, Jones et al. (2012) found that children with additional needs, intellectual or mental impairment or disability, including autistic spectrum conditions, are especially vulnerable, while Franklin and Smeaton (2018) argue that children and young people with poor communication skills are further disadvantaged, owing to the likelihood of their unmet learning needs impeding or preventing disclosure.

Shuker (2013) found a higher prevalence of sexual abuse and CSE in residential placements and other out-of-home care. Beckett et al. (2017) indicated that certain factors such as unmet needs, risk-taking behaviours and lack of resilience all contribute to children's and young people's CSE vulnerability. Franklin et al. (2015) suggested that children with unmet needs and a history of neglect are at a higher risk of significant harm. Hallett et al. (2017) further conclude that economic difficulties and homelessness are factors for young people who view CSE as a survival strategy or a means to an end.

Spicer (2018) highlighted the transitional age of young adulthood as a period of significant vulnerability and argued that transitional young adults with learning disabilities were at heightened risk because of their lack of cognitive ability to understand or predict risk (see also Franklin and Smeaton 2007; 2018). Therefore, this discussion, regarding young people being treated or perceived as vulnerable by professionals, could be more nuanced. Reid and Piquero (2014) suggest that professionals must examine consent, capacity, and transitional age when managing risk, while simultaneously listening to the vulnerable young person (see Brown 2019; Dixon-Mueller 2008).

2.6.2 Youth to adulthood: age is just a number

Adolescence is a critical stage between childhood and adulthood. Different psychological and sociological theories provide different perspectives in understanding the features and processes of adolescent development. These

features and processes include the lifespan perspective, the learning perspective, the humanistic perspective, the ecological perspective, the sociocultural perspective, and the positive youth development perspective (Janet et al., 2020). My study takes a humanistic approach (Beher et al. 2020), in that there is a fluid motivational basis for approaching and understanding the young participants' development and behaviours. This position supports humanistic theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the Trauma Recovery Model (Skcuse and Mathews 2015) and views the formation of self as an ever-changing transient process, thus rejecting defined adolescent stages of development.

The humanistic approaches have developed a model of suboptimal development based on the incompatibility between self-construct and experience, which leads to difficulties with self-worth, mental health issues, and limited capacity for self-exploration. Based on the capacity for post-formal thinking, i.e., where the young people in the study tried to align their thinking to resolve the issues and dilemmas that they were facing, I suggest that adolescents who have agency in the decision-making in relation to these difficulties can engage in a process of self-exploration and self-acceptance, paving the way to greater well-being in adulthood.

In the studies examined, the age signifier influenced how the young person's wishes and feelings were considered, how they were heard, and how engagement was evidenced. This links back to the earlier points about consent and leads us toward the transition from young person to young adult and an exploration of agency.

In this study, the concept of young people's agency can be used to understand how children actively shape their lives. In social work, there is a growing body of research on how children experience meetings that involve collaborating professionals. However, more research is needed to know about how they exert influence on outcomes. Bolin (2014) investigated children's perceptions of their agentic capacity in regulating participation and influencing outcomes in interprofessional collaborative meetings. She found that children and young people perceive professionals talking as restricting their (the young person’s) opportunities for input, but rather than being powerless in such circumstances, the young people evidenced how they carefully assessed situations from a position of apparent subordination (by listening carefully), thus revealing their agentic

capacity. In this study, these insights were important for practitioners and me, as researcher, to look beyond behaviours as first encountered.

In practice, professionals operationalise the legal classification of a child in the UK as an individual whose intercept with authority arises before their 18th birthday. However, Scuse and Mathew (2015) argue that adolescence is a social construction, one which can span from 10 to 25. In addition, Coles (2000) suggests that this distinct phase of life in young adulthood is where young people deal with physical and emotional bodily changes, emerging sexuality and sexual feelings, new forms of relationships, accountability, and new identities as transitional adults. If this argument is accepted, it confirms that young people can transition from youth to adulthood at any time between the ages of 10 and 25.

Consequently, young people's age and understanding of their experiences can have implications for how their voice is heard. In CSE cases, age-defined parameters aim to ensure that professionals recognise that underage sexual activity should always be considered a possible indicator of CSE. However, neither protective legislation nor definitions cover children's vulnerability in transitioning into adulthood in the contemporary English and Welsh legal system. Hickle and Hallett (2016) suggest that regard must be given to the blurred societal boundaries between young people before and after puberty when considering the transition from children into young adults. The views of the cohort of post-pubescent teenagers in Hickle and Hallett's discussion paper (2016) gave a critical understanding of gender and sexuality in occurrences of sexual abuse in the transition from childhood to adulthood (see also Scott and Harper 2006). One must also remember that age does not equate to maturity; a traumatised child may be 17 years old yet emotionally function as a much younger child. A child with learning difficulties can have a low IQ and function as a six-year-old but present physically as an 18-year-old. Spicer (2018) argued that it is now more widely recognised that CSE is a safeguarding issue that also permeates the world of vulnerable young adults, who, according to Scuse and Mathew (2015), are still transitioning adolescents. Academic evidence suggests that hearing the voice of a vulnerable person, whether younger or older, is essential for their inclusion in decision-making about safeguarding (see Caffrey 2013; Warrington 2013).

Having briefly discussed who is vulnerable to CSE, the review now examines how the young person's voice is heard by multi-agency partners.

2.7 The voice of the young person and multi-agency work

This section moves the discussion on from who is vulnerable to CSE to examine the issue of the young person's voice, which is central to the research questions. Roberts et al. (2017) argue that the voices of children and young people need to be given a platform to inform policy and practice. In my study I examine how this is possible, allowing examination of the structural challenges to influence positive outcomes for young people, engaging with a range of multi-modal approaches discussed later in the thesis. The following sub-sections will cover the social construction of the young person's voice, the invisible voice, real voices, and the young person's voice in the multi-agency arena.

2.7.1 The social construction of the young person's voice: problematising the concept of voice in CSE and research

When examining the theoretical perspective in the published evidence, it appears that most existing research and practice looks critically at the concepts of representation and recognition whilst emphasising their importance as a means of providing a voice to disempowered children. The reviewed evidence includes some ethnographic evidence; this is relevant to this study because using ethnography as a qualitative research study can evidence and portray a young person's voice via observation and listening. The concept of 'voice' has further been critiqued in other studies of children and young people, with some commentators choosing to view such 'voice' as being largely a product of experience and social co-construction.

Komulainen (2007) conducted ethnographic research where interaction among and between young children and adult professionals was observed in two settings. She conducted 25 observations over nine months, observing interaction among young (disabled) children and adult professionals. Komulainen specifically drew attention to the epistemology, ontology, and practice of qualitative research and highlighted the 'multifaceted ambiguity of the idea of listening to children' (Komulainen 2007, p. 25). She argued that distinguishing the rhetoric from practice was essential because children can be simultaneously both vulnerable and

competent, and she warned that caution should be exercised against too simplistic use of the term ‘the voice’. Komulainen (2007) recognised and reflected on both adult influence and interpretation when listening to children, suggesting that despite being powerful rhetoric, the idea of listening to children is socially constructed. Consequently, she argues that these ambiguities arise from the ‘socialness of human interaction, discourses, and practice’ which, in turn, will have practical and ethical ambiguities (Komulainen 2007, p. 25).

The implications of this for future research are significant because they imply that those wishing to conduct qualitative and ethnographic research into the experiences of children and young people in social work and social care settings should take the time to consider the ways in which institutional contexts shape 'voice' and the social construction of childhood. This is particularly relevant when examining young people’s voices in CSE cases, as their views and voices have been deemed invisible by both those abusing them and by the policies written by those trying to protect them.

Studies of children's voices in care planning suggest that even the youngest of care-experienced populations (4-7 years) have entrenched feelings about risk, removal from their families, guilt, loss, and feeling devalued (Winter 2010); however, even recognising children's autonomy, their invisibility or at least partial invisibility in practice has continued to affect the validity of social work intentions to protect the interests of vulnerable children (Ferguson 2017). This raises questions about the failure in social work care planning to consider the importance of young people's wishes and feelings in decision-making (Bruce 2014). It could be suggested that failure to hear and represent young people's voices may be due to the quality of interactions between children, their families and social care professionals and the organisational context in which they work. This is supported by several commentators who point out the absence of psycho-social considerations from central social work texts, case reviews and enquiries (Munro 2011; Trevithick 2011). Ferguson's (2017) research into social work practice found that the invisibility of children's voices resulted from complex organisational processes, the dynamics of interactions between social workers and service users, and a tendency for social workers to become overwhelmed (see also James 2007). This resulted in damaging emotional detachment from children in their care (invisibility is explored later). Subsequently, Gibson (2017) argues that outcome-

focused care plans, focusing on meeting children's needs and protecting their interests, were potentially derailed by targets, timescales, and caseloads. O'Reilly and Dolan (2016) found that another issue repeatedly identified in broader elements of social work practice has been communication breakdown between social workers and children; this finding is supported by Winter et al. (2017).

Ethicality and believing that representing the voice of the child may not be the adult or professional view of what is deemed best interest for the young person, overriding their position or choice, prompted research by Clark (2005), eliciting beneficial methods of promoting inclusion, and highlighting the need to engage on a deeper level with the feelings, beliefs, and needs of individual children. The SCIE presents advice on communicating with children to effectively facilitate their care planning, including play, using metaphors or implied comparisons, through body language, relational style, and using paralanguage to imply tone or meaning (SCIE 2018). However, studies exploring social workers' own experiences of their work and caseloads have suggested that several other factors might prevent them from using multi-modal engagement methods when working with children. These include competing demands placed upon them to handle organisational, professional and familial demands, and the lack of confidence to implement new ideas or methods in their way of working (Ferguson 2016). Although studies involving direct observation of social work in practice are limited, existing evidence suggests that the linear nature of social work and the demands and regulations placed upon practitioners are not compatible with the requirements of meeting the needs of children in terms of communication (Winter et al. 2017; Ravalier et al. 2021; Ravalier and Walsh 2017). In general, this would seem to be supported by studies of the emotional impact on social workers of dealing with cases involving children. These studies have reported practitioners feeling weak or unprofessional when raising their concerns about issues communicated to them by children during assessments. Barlow and Hall (2007) suggest that this sensitivity to children's circumstances was considered less favourably than an ability to meet targets and adhere to regulations in practice (Ingram 2012), evidencing that in these circumstances, the voice of the child becomes invisible, a view supported by both Hallett (2013) and Firmin et al. (2016).

2.7.2 The invisible voice

The importance of social work in CSE practice being user-led (by a young person) is integral to good practice. This is supported further by Pates et al. (2018) who say that to tackle the issues, our understanding of what children want, what they say has happened, and how we take that forward must be led by them:

> *The effects of CSE are profound in terms of how a young person values their own body or their right not to be touched or abused; their perception of risk is often very low. Most of our young people are adolescents, and therefore sexual issues are of interest to them, so we (as professionals) must not pathologise an interest in sex, but we must be able to help them separate what is both normal and legal from what is illegal and abusive.*
>
> *(Pates, Davies and Tiddy 2018, p. 151)*

In the child protection arena, the primary role of the children's guardian (always a qualified social worker) is to represent the child's voice, wishes and feelings commensurate with their age and understanding. Therefore, the child's view (whether compatible with that of the children's guardian) will always be an integral and priority feature of the case and the judge's summing up. However, this is not easily translated into field social work, and the highly stressful nature of child protection work is often blamed for the child or the family's emotions being 'reflected' back onto social work practitioners, potentially clouding practitioners' judgement and interfering with their understanding of the child's best interests, resulting in prioritising the mother's or father's voice over the young person's (Ferguson 2016; Brandon et al. 2008).

Ferguson's (2016) notion of 'invisibility' focuses on the potential for social workers to overlook children's needs and desires, even when presented with clear evidence or even testimony from children themselves. Despite a plethora of legislation, policy and guidance on children's participation in safeguarding them, this is still often not achieved. Bruce (2014) considered ways in which social work practitioners struggle to achieve a balance between the child's right to have a 'voice' and their duty to protect children commensurate with regulations, theoretical understandings, and statutory responsibility. Bruce (2014) further discussed the need for workers to understand and clarify the factors which influence their practice with children. For example, what value is placed on

children's participation, on the specialist skills and confidence required to engage with children affected by trauma or complex needs, and on the impact of competing tensions? Making decisions in the best interests of a young person that are not commensurate with what the young person believes or wants is very widespread when working in the field of CSE, because these factors are associated with the young person's voice and choice, and the control they have over their situation. Sanders and Mace (2006) illustrate a different angle of complexity in communicating with young people, and although their research is not CSE specific, the principles can be applied when communicating with young people affected by CSE. They point out the dilemmas that arise in navigating and balancing the inherent dangers of providing children with too much information, not giving them their opinions or voice, and the responsibility of keeping them 'in the loop'.

2.7.3 Real voices

Hearing the young person's voice is an integral part of the academic literature to date, including Miah (2015) and Smeaton (2013). Coffey (2014) affirms the paramount importance of the child's voice as an integral component in multi-agency working in CSE, reflecting this validation in the report title: *Real Voices*. This report was a powerful piece of qualitative research; however, it was not written as academic research for an academic audience, but rather for a public enquiry, whose audience was public sector professionals. Coffey illustrated young people's and professionals' views in various settings, including schools, children's care homes, other care settings, and the courts. Coffey's report began to illustrate CSE as a 'cultural norm', and the report explicitly prioritises the voices of young people, counteracting the criticisms in Rochdale and Rotherham, where young people were both ignored and blamed. At the time, Coffey attempted to reframe the understanding of CSE and what professionals could do about it. She sought to provide a platform for the voices of young people and explicitly address the victim-blaming culture that existed. Coffey's report (2014) drew out a series of recommendations for multi-agency workers in CSE, and the voice of the child was paramount. It was full of hard-hitting realism from young people, for example:

> *I lost my virginity to him, and when my foster parent found out, she said, 'Why are you a slag?' I was 12, and he was 19. Looking back on things, it*

> *should have been the 19-year-old's behaviour that was being looked at and questioned, not the 12-year-old.*
>
> *(Coffey 2014, p. 25)*

Coffey enabled young people to tell their stories with their own voices and on their own terms. Furthermore, each professional agency visited in the study received a set of recommendations relating to their specific area of work. Coffey's report lacked a critique of previous research or literature, a clear methodology, or a feeling of direction. Therefore, it would not be easy to replicate, as it is unclear how it was produced. Nevertheless, it was written as a narrative of that time and gave a powerful account of what, where, why and how, and despite the lack of academic content, it was a report that evidenced and heard the voices of young people.

The shift in the narrative described above impacted the professional understanding of CSE, and multi-agency and interdisciplinary working, because the definitions of exploitation now encompass a broader remit, and the voice of children and young people must be heard in all domains of exploitation; thus, the review turns now to explore CSE research in the multi-agency safeguarding arena.

2.7.4 A young person's voice in the multi-agency safeguarding arena

In social work, the challenge of establishing the 'voice of the child' in child protection cases seems to be exacerbated when considering multi-agency working, because the social worker attempting to advocate for the child has been said to be negatively impacted by the conflicts in interest between agencies (Jelicic et al. 2014; Thomas 2007). This applies to any professional from a multi-agency perspective as they compete with differences in the approaches of various agencies and several organisational agendas, leading to the professional's insight and knowledge about the case becoming lost. The risk is that, potentially, the conflict between professionals is heard louder than the young person's voice. These same issues of professional conflict in social work research and care planning continue to exist in multi-agency professional practice and could warrant further research. The thematic evidence examined (Smeaton 2013; Gilligan 2015; Hallett 2017) advocated that when hearing the voice of young people in CSE cases, and acknowledging their agentic position, communication with young people

should be pivotal to multi-agency or multi-disciplinary practitioners to avoid the repetition of mistakes previously highlighted (see also Rigby et al. 2017).

Radcliffe et al. (2020) presented a qualitative study of multi-disciplinary CSE partnerships across three coastal towns in England. This study was based on focus groups conducted with 36 multi-disciplinary and multi-agency practitioners from a range of professional organisations, including social work, police, education, and statutory and non-statutory children's services. Four focus groups met between September 2017 and January 2018 and were considered the most appropriate way to generate locality data connected with the factors influencing and contributing to CSE. The multi-disciplinary focus group model replicated multi-agency fora where discussion of local policy and practice were already in situ, and CSE practice discussions were a regular feature of multi-disciplinary practice.

The study aimed to review each town's structural response to CSE and examined the issues that impacted and shaped how they worked together as multi-disciplinary professionals. The study did not seek or involve the views of young people, only those of multi-disciplinary teams and professionals. Instead, Radcliffe et al. chose to build on previous studies, including Hallett (2017) and Brown (2019), which combined policy and analysis of interviews with practitioners and young people to inform her findings. The study concentrated on the views of practitioners in terms of their experience of working with CSE. The study concluded that there was often discrepancy between young people's and practitioners' views on exploitation.

Radcliffe et al.'s research has similarities to my study in that it covers three coastal areas, where social deprivation and poverty are prevalent. My research covers three areas, of which two are coastal and one is industrialised, and poverty and social deprivation are prevalent in all three. Radcliffe et al. describe the multi-disciplinary approach to CSE town by town, and despite local funding cuts and lack of resources, she describes innovative, successful professional partnership working, evidence that multi-disciplinary teams can work together well. She concludes that the extra-familial risks to young people that were exposed require a balance of safeguarding and recognising that risk-taking is an inevitable and normal phase of transitioning youth. The apparent lack in her research of direct engagement with young people to hear their voices is an area I address in my study.

Lefevre et al. (2017) undertook a two-year analysis of a child-centered framework for multi-agency CSE practitioners over three sites using a realist evaluation methodology, staff surveys and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, drawn from observations of strategic planning and multi-agency risk assessments of individual children, peer groups, or gangs. They elicited the difficulties in balancing young people's need for protection and safeguarding with their agentic choice and having a voice. They concluded that specific CSE knowledge skills and expertise were essential for developing relationship-based practice, trust, and child-centered relationships with young people. The study revealed intrinsic ontological, ethical, emotional, and intellectual conflict among multi-agency practitioners who found the tensions between protection and participation potentially more divisive than constructive. Consequently, practitioners who intervene protectively, balancing young people's right to a voice, privacy, and autonomy, with their right to safety, guidance, and protection, could increase the young person's risk by alienating them and leaving them at further risk of exploitation. A proposed solution was to involve and engage the young person as a partner in the protection process, thereby reducing the risk of further exploitation. However, young people often feel that professionals cannot always balance their need for protection and guidance with their right to a voice and to make agentic choices about their lives.

Comparing my study with Lefevre et al. (2017), I also included semi-structured interviews with key CSE professionals, and although I did not utilise quantitative data, the qualitative observation and semi-structured interview methods were broadly similar to theirs. However, they did not include young people in their survey or interviews, which distinguishes my study of multi-agency work from theirs as well as from that of Radcliffe et al. (2020).

The following section moves on from multi-agency work and returns to previous comparable studies of CSE, including Hallett (2013) and Firmin (2016). This is distinct from the earlier material on young people's voices, as it summarises the researchers' reflexivity about their studies and the young person's agentic position as an adolescent.

2.7.5 Voice, choice, and the young person's agentic position

This section explores a range of themes and links them to the themes of consent and definition of CSE covered earlier in the chapter. It examines why and how the literature supports (or not) young people gaining agency and voice in cases of CSE and explores the broader context of exploitation.

In their ten-year overview of several studies, Firmin et al. (2016) focused on the protection of young adolescents who are perceived to have a view and agency, in contrast to the child(like) young person described by Hallett (2013), who had little capacity for agency. These adolescents and children were the same age, but it was the difference in how they were socially constructed, whether as a child or as a young adult, that determined whether they had dynamic intentional agency which must be respected by professionals. Firmin et al. (2016) used a mixed methodology, informed by active research and participatory models and principles; however, it is important to note here that there is some ambiguity because the sources and numbers of young people involved are unknown.

In their paper, Firmin et al. examined peer-on-peer abuse and harmful sexual behaviour, and the emphasis was on maximising the care and support agenda rather than the punitive measures often associated with exploitative situations. Firmin elucidates young people's choices when drawn into exploitative situations and their agency when exercising those choices, including the social model of abused consent, which Pearce (2013) describes thus:

> *A 'social model' of consent would enable consent to be contextualised, shedding light on how 'consent' may be distorted through abusive and exploitative relationships or contexts.*
>
> *(Pearce 2013, pp. 52-53)*

Firmin et al. utilised Bourdieu's theory (1992) of the reflexive interplay between structure and agency to highlight the relationship between young people's choices and abusive social environments, investigating CSE and the professional's safeguarding responses, and examining the skills needed for professionals to respond appropriately. Firmin et al. (2016) concludes:

> *When young people develop sexualities and sexual identities in exploitative contexts, their opportunities to consent are constrained, and their agency compromised.*
>
> *(Firmin et al. 2016, pp. 2333-2334)*

Therefore, Firmin et al. (2016) asserts that if professionals were equipped to address and manage contextual risk, this could empower more young people to develop healthy and safe relationships and make safer choices. Moreover, their agency in this decision-making could be a vital strategy for self-protection from sexual exploitation. Hallett's (2013) work is also primarily qualitative, with an interdisciplinary focus. Her research is noticeably young person-centric, but she also led policymakers in the Welsh Government to develop the new statutory guidance and associated practice guides (2017). In Hallett's (2013) study, she undertook a small qualitative interdisciplinary case study enquiry, presenting data from a series of semi-structured interviews with both young people and professionals. The study comprised 34 participants, nine young people aged between 14 and 18, and 25 non-specialist professionals. Hallett immersed herself in her research setting for one day per week for one year. Her thematic analysis provided an influential and comprehensive understanding of CSE and the range of social problems that informed CSE practice and policy response at that time.

Hallett acknowledged that CSE would always be conceptualised within policy frameworks, but she challenged the dominant grooming model, which constructed young people as passive victims of predatory male perpetrators. She concluded that there are multiple forms of sexual exploitation, and that unmet need underpins this exchange of sex for financial, emotional, or material gratification or reward, which constitutes abuse. Hallett suggested that young people are aware of the coercive, controlling, and exploitative relationships that they find themselves in, and in which they often choose to remain. She highlighted the fact that the classification of young people as children (and thus child-like) up to age 18 meant that child protection concerns were prioritised over the young person's voice. Furthermore, young people demonstrated their agency and understanding of their needs being met in exchange for sex, and their desire to be heard (Hallett 2013)). My study aimed to build on Hallett's research and examined young people's voices in multi-agency settings, with multi-agency specialist CSE workers via semi-structured interviews and observation, including reflexive thematic

findings (Braun and Clarke 2016; 2020). Hallett's reflexivity found that future research with professionals and non-professionals would be beneficial because:

> *Further comparative research both within and across non-specialist and specialist workers in this field could yield important transferable knowledge to aid capacity and competence.*
>
> *(Hallett 2013, p. 216)*

My study aims to carry out this comparison with specialist CSE professionals, and other professionals from a range of different agencies, to make a small contribution to the evidence and further fill some of the gaps in the academic literature to date.

2.8 Addressing some of the deficits in the evidence base and expanding the discourse

Since I started working on the study and beginning this literature review, the evidence base has expanded considerably, alongside the awareness and response to CSE by Government and professionals working with young people. Subsequently, political and public interest has shaped the discourse. This review illustrated the problem shift over time, from being defined in terms of policy as that crime committed by young people to a social care issue. Consequently, deficits within the current research must be acknowledged so that future researchers can address these to improve practice and standards. My study aims to address the following areas of deficit based on the analysis below of connections to my research questions introduced in section 3.2.2. [4] Brodie et al. (2016) concluded that there were gaps in the available research in the following areas:

1) Experiences of young people who have been exposed to CSE and have received various services, both statutory and voluntary.

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[4] To recap: **RQ1:** When multiple professionals work together in cases of CSE, what does it mean to hear the voice of the young person? **RQ2:** How effective is the participation of children and young people in decision-making meetings about them? **RQ3**: What are the barriers and opportunities in relation to the child's voice being heard and responded to? **RQ4:** What are the professionals' perceptions of how the voices of young people are listened to and responded to? **RQ5:** What does 'being listened to' mean to young people? **RQ6:** What are the barriers to, or opportunities for, hearing the voice of the young person when working in multi-agency settings?

My research aims to capture at least some of the experiences of young people who have experienced or been exposed to CSE and have received different statutory and voluntary services. (RQ3).

2) Literature relating to the experiences of young people who have received CSE services but have been excluded from formalised 'participation' experiences.

My research provides (partial) information relating to some of the lived experience of young people who have received CSE services but have not taken part in formalised 'participation' experiences. (RQ2).

3) Literature that describes the practice undertaken by professionals working with young people at risk of or experiencing CSE.

My research elicits and describes the views and lived experiences of young people and the professionals who work with them. (RQ4).

4) Literature relating to the experiences of specific groups of young people, including young people from various minority ethnic groups, disabled young people “and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) participating in CSE services”.

Information has been gathered regarding the experiences of specific groups of young people, including young people with additional needs, and a small number of LGBT young people participating in CSE services.

Evidence has also been gathered via observations of professional multi-agency meetings that detail the practice undertaken by professionals working with young people at risk of or experiencing CSE. These observations examine whether the young person's voice is integral to those meetings, discussing that representation. Muench et al. (2017) identified this gap in the academic literature concerning child protection case conferences, which may or may not be CSE specific (research questions 3 & 6). Direct observation of multi-agency professional practice in meetings, combined with asking young people and professionals to describe practice, may help understand any changes in organisational approach towards participation by young people, and influence how young people's views are heard, represented, and acted upon (RQ4).

2.9 Conclusion

The academic literature review suggested a gradual emergent body of evidence that evaluates the historical context and emergence of CSE since the 19th century, redefining child prostitution as CSE. The studies reviewed gave an overview of policy and practice relevant to Wales and the fundamental changes which have shaped the discourse in Wales since 2008.

This chapter cites the young person's agentic position in CSE and provides contemporary evidence and the social construction of the young person's voice. The literature reviewed outlined some aspects of the changing character of CSE, commenting briefly on other forms of exploitative behaviours toward young people, and introduced the concept of contextualised safeguarding. The literature review provides a focus on participation and the child's voice, and studies including Hallett (2013), Coffey (2014) and Firmin et al. (2016) illustrate why participation matters and why inclusion in decision-making by young people can help protect them from exploitation and is crucial in professional decision making about safeguarding (Warrington and Brodie 2017). However, relatively few studies of CSE-experienced young people take their voice and experiences as the focus. Some of the key texts identified in the review which address this topic are Hallett (2013; 2017), Firmin (2017), Lefevre et al. (2017), Gilligan (2015), Warrington and Brodie (2017) and Coffey (2014).

The above section highlights some gaps in the current academic literature and sets out how this study will make a small contribution to addressing them. The next chapter addresses the study design, methodology and methods used in the research process.

Chapter 3: Methodology and methods

The principle aim of this chapter is to explain and rationalise the research process, thus providing a reflexive summary of the study's research design and strategy.

3.1 Introduction and aims of the study

This chapter begins with an outline of the foundational concepts of research and an examination of the study's epistemological and ontological position, before exploring how these positions determined the chosen methodology. Next, my role and responsibilities as a researcher are summarised, and the chosen research design procedures, including access, methods, recording, coding, and transcribing are presented, described, evaluated, and justified.

As a registered social work practitioner and now, more recently, a researcher in the field of safeguarding young people, it is important to acknowledge my insider role. Coffey (1999) argues that it is impossible to be completely neutral within research and that it is essential that the researcher recognises and is clear about their positionality. I am a senior social work manager with many years of frontline safeguarding experience; consequently, my social work value-base and the surrounding professional discourse are integral to my research. It was recognised from the start that my professional background would impact my research design, interpretation, analysis, and findings. As a practitioner, I am familiar with CSE; therefore, I had to apply continuous reflexivity as an insider practitioner-researcher. Put simply, I did not approach this research with a blank canvas (Atkinson and Delamont 2008). I chose to use a predominantly inductive approach and attempted to apply continuous reflection and reflexivity. Consequently, this chapter is more reflexive than other chapters, permeated with my thoughts throughout, providing insight into the reflexive research practice that has taken place.

3.2 Research design, explaining my ontological and epistemological position

It is accepted within social science that ontology logically precedes epistemology, which logically precedes methods (Carter and Little 2007). As a

result, my epistemological choice is critical to determining the research methods (Chowdhury 2019). Before I begin discussing the theoretical positions that supported my research, I need to clarify that this research was not undertaken from any one specific theoretical position and was not theory-led. The topic focus came from practice rather than theory. Nevertheless, I drew on theories as they seemed relevant in making sense of the findings. This study was designed to generate theory examining values and subjectivity, not to test a hypothesis.

Two dominant modes of social science research are split broadly into objective and subjective epistemological approaches. The main difference between these two approaches centres on how we gain knowledge of the world. Positivist epistemologies embody knowledge of the social world that is directly observable or measurable (Hammersley 1995). Thus, positivism adopts a more scientific, deductive, rigid quantitative analysis, while interpretivism adopts a more investigative, flexible inductive approach. This may seem like an oversimplified dichotomy; however, establishing my epistemological position clarifies how it drove the approach to my data collection and analysis.

It is important to clarify why I have adopted a subjective interpretivist approach to the research and how I have used interpretivist epistemology to underpin my methodological approach, which also encompasses social constructionism. The interpretivist epistemological position contends that there are multiple ways of generating theories and examining subjectivity, from which, depending on the researcher's position, conclusions can be vastly different, open to interpretation, and based on personal experience and hindsight.

Interpretivist research should be based on qualitative methods, which incorporate reflexivity, and it is heavily dependent on the information that participants provide. In this study, the questionnaires, discussions, and interviews were all researcher-led, and there was recognition that my underlying beliefs or values may influence information gathered during this qualitative study. The primary goal of reflexivity is to be aware of researcher biases and how they influence the outcome of the study. In some research approaches, the researcher may be looking to reduce bias, whereas, in others, researcher bias may be used as a central tool for deriving knowledge. Despite its potential drawbacks, reflexivity is vital when it comes to qualitative research, as there are countless ways in which researcher bias may affect the study. These include:

- The way that data is collected.
- The choice of data collection methods.
- How the information is analysed.
- How the data is reported.

Using an interpretivist position also permitted a broader range of qualitative methods, which led me towards semi-structured interviews, observations, and a reflexive diary. Finally, using this interpretivist approach also facilitated the application of grounded theory in the analysis, which allowed ideas to emerge as the data were collected; the use of grounded theory is discussed later. The interpretivist position argues that people's realities are socially constructed; that we create meaning within the social worlds in which we exist. Therefore, to attempt to understand another's experience, in this case the voices of young people and professionals a subjective, interpretative mode of enquiry is necessary. Thus, to determine and understand the barriers and opportunities of multi-disciplinary working, active engagement with both sets of research participants was crucial to investigate their views and perspectives and recognise the importance of different and subjective opinions and experiences. This position embodies social constructionism, thus supporting and justifying my decision to include observations of CSE-focused professional meetings within the data.

It is accepted that the voice of the child and the interpretation of that voice by professionals was an area of research that had been underrepresented, and there was a paucity or deficit of data (see Brodie et al. 2016). Therefore, this study was designed to generate theory examining values and subjectivity and not to test a hypothesis. The interpretivist epistemological position contends that there are multiple ways of doing this. Depending on the researcher's position, conclusions can be vastly different, open to interpretation, and based on personal experience and hindsight. Therefore, axiology (Charmaz 2008) was also incorporated in this study, exploring the moral and ethical positions that influence how the research is conducted, i.e., what is meaningful, relevant, or irrelevant, and if personal or ethical values influence or shape the research undertaken.

Charmaz (2008) argues that within the interpretivist position, the terms ‘social constructivism’ and 'constructionism’ are often used interchangeably. However, Chowdhury (2019) suggests the two are different and that

constructivism focuses on the individual and constructionism on the social. Therefore, it was also important to consider different professional practices and professional agendas because this research is interested in the distinction between professional practice and organisational values. In summary, a social constructionist, interpretive approach underpins this study.

3.2.1 Research methodology

When considering the methodology, it was important to understand which methodology would be best suited to eliciting the data and aligned with the needs of my participants. I considered previous CSE studies (Hallett 2013;2017; Lefevre et al. 2018; Firmin 2017), whose methodologies had similar traits which I felt were relevant and could be replicated or built upon. I subsequently chose a qualitative method over a quantitative mode of enquiry. Qualitative methods generally allow for exploration and flexibility and are reliant on text and narrative data; this approach provided a suite of tools to gather rich, meaningful data and presented unique insights into the views and experiences of professionals and young people. The chosen research methods were semi-structured interviews with young people and professionals, observations of key multi-agency meetings, and a reflexive diary; these methods are discussed progressively throughout the chapter.

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews, and the findings from these interviews were triangulated with the observation of meetings with multi-agency professionals about CSE-experienced young people. The study's interpretivist and social constructionist position affected how my data was gathered, interpreted, and constructed; this will be discussed later.

3.2.2 The research questions

To reiterate, this study aims to understand the extent to which young people who have experienced CSE feel that they have been listened to and responded to by professionals. The RQs were chosen based on the aims and objectives of the study and the interpretivist position described above. The study is also informed by the gaps in the reviewed literature set out in the previous chapter. The questions are based on the chosen cohort of research participants and the three sources of data collection and are followed by a discussion about how best to answer them.

RQ1: When multiple professionals work together in cases of CSE, what does it mean to hear the voice of the young person?

RQ2: How effective is the participation of children and young people in decision-making meetings about them?

RQ3: What are the barriers and opportunities in relation to the child's voice being heard and responded to?

RQ4: What are the professionals' perceptions of how the voices of young people are listened to and responded to?

RQ5: What does 'being listened to' mean to young people?

RQ6: What are the barriers to, or opportunities for, hearing the voice of the young person when working in multi-agency settings?

Hallett (2013) suggests that there is little representation of the dual voices of young people and the voice of professionals in academic studies. Firmin et al. (2016) state that the voices of many CSE-experienced young people hold relevance for a professional response to other forms of exploitation and vulnerability. Therefore, I contend that by examining young people and professionals together and by incorporating findings from observed meetings about young people, this research adds a novel layer of analysis. For example, a key aim of this study is to examine the lens of multi-agency working and whether the young person's voice features in it. It aims to elicit what professional interventions and interpretations mean to young people, thus providing a platform for developing and informing future policy and practice by hearing from and including them. Arguably this can only be achieved by researching both groups.

3.3 Qualitative sampling methods

The section begins by discussing the sampling method, which in this case was purposive and non-random, in which specific criteria were used to select the sample. This sampling method was used to gather data from the 'right' and specific cohorts of participants. The key aim was to include young people and professionals and, to achieve this, an opportunistic purposive sample was utilised in this study. The commonalities and characteristics of the data sets are discussed as we move through the chapter.

Two distinct groups of participants featured in this research:

a) CSE-experienced young people, or those believed to be at risk of CSE.

b) A multi-agency cohort of professionals working with CSE-experienced young people or those at risk of CSE, including the police, social services, health, education, and two agencies from the third sector.

This chapter presents data from the geographical area from which these participants were drawn, as well as information about these two distinct groups.

3.3.1 A regional cohort of participants

The geographical area of the study encompassed two children's services, two YOS, and a partnership that supports the interventions of a third sector therapeutic assessment and intervention service. This partnership encompasses a geographical area that is wider than that covered by just the two children's services, covering eight Welsh local authorities, the Welsh secure unit, a whole police force area, and the whole of the regional health board area. This geographical location was fairly typical within South Wales in terms of being a mixture of urban and rural, and in terms of the level of deprivation and poverty.

The professionals who took part in this study were from the same regional safeguarding board area. All were specialist leads or had named agency responsibility for CSE. All professional participants were paid employees and participated in specific decision-making meetings concerning young people.

The participant young people were known to professionals working in this geographical area but were not necessarily young people on current caseloads or currently involved with the participant professionals. More detail on the two distinct groups and the relationships between young people and professionals is provided later in the chapter.

3.3.2 The young people who took part

A non-probability sample was chosen based on the characteristics of the population and the study's objective (Punch 2013; Palinkas 2014). Purposive sampling was used, and inclusion criteria included being classed as a young person at risk of CSE, having a range of professionals working with them, and being within the specified geographical area. However, in the interest of transparency and to clarify, I invited the first young people of whom I was aware, or the young people

who were referred first to take part in the study, rather than selecting young people with specific CSE characteristics. Therefore, there was also an element of convenience sampling. Purposive sampling proved a useful strategy, allowing me to invite the perspectives of those young people who would be able to provide insight into the phenomenon of interest, namely a young person's experiences of multi-disciplinary professionals working in the CSE arena (Abrams 2010). My dual role as researcher and practitioner/manager[5] facilitated the sampling process, enabling efficient identification of individuals and ensuring that only those relevant to the study were invited to participate.

The young people were directly referred or invited via the voluntary sector or local authorities, where they had been asked by their social worker, intervention worker, or named professional from the multi-agency cohort whether they wanted to take part and talk to me. Once referred, the following steps took place to initiate the interview:

1) Information sheets and consent forms were sent (Appendix 1a) to the referrer to share with the young person.
2) Once shared and a positive message was received that the young person was happy to participate, I sent a text message to the young person to explain that I would be contacting them in the next two days.
3) This text message was followed by a phone call to arrange the interview.
4) If the young person did not have access to a phone, the referrer set up an initial introductory meeting for me. (The observation and conclusion chapters discuss the use of social media platforms to communicate with young people, which included reflections on communicating with young people via text and other social media platforms.)

While the original intention was to build relationships over time with the young people, unfortunately this did not happen because of time constraints and their availability. I was extremely fortunate in professionals' willingness to negotiate access to young people. These 'gatekeepers' were able to assess

[5] Please note that at no time during the study were there any young person participants involved who were actively involved with me professionally as current or former clients.

whether the young person could and would potentially engage. More investment in these preliminary processes would have been beneficial, but time and work constraints made that problematic. Therefore, the gatekeeper's role was essential in helping to establish trust and confidence in me as a researcher; it also saved time, prepared the research groundwork, and sought preliminary agreement from the participating young people (see Holloway and Wheeler 2002).

3.3.3 The young people sample

As this was an opportunistic sample, there was no preferred gender or age for the participating young people. The original sample consisted of 15 young people aged between 15.5 and 19.5. Three young people subsequently withdrew from the research; the reasons given were a) unknown, b) illness, c) moved out of the area.

The final sample comprised twelve young people, four boys and eight girls. One young person identified as a transgender girl (transitioning from male to female). Ages ranged from 15.5 to 19.5 with a mean of 16.6. All participants identified as White-British which, although not an ethnically diverse sample, was in fact representative of the geographical area where the Black, Asian and ethnic minority population is close to the Welsh average of 4.8%[6] (Statistics Wales 2021). Seven had received support from specialist voluntary sector services dealing with CSE and the local authority.

All the young participants were identified as at risk on their local authority's CSE register at some point on their CSE journey. The young people would not have been part of the current registration system but were known or had been known to some of the multi-disciplinary cohorts of CSE professionals. These experiences provided a distinct commonality that young people referred to in their interviews. Eleven young people stated that the exchange of sex was central to their experiences, while one said that this was not her experience (although the professionals working with her believed differently).

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[6] Stats Wales (2021) Ethnicity by area and ethnic group https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Equality-and-Diversity/Ethnicity/ethnicity-by-area-ethnicgroup

Information was collected on each young person's background, home life, care experience, or experience of the secure estate.[7] This will be explored later in the thesis. Although care experience was a feature of broader discussions with young people, this study did not intend to draw findings from this aspect. This information was gathered from the young people's own accounts. Therefore, they were retrospective and reflective, but not all were cognitively or emotionally distant from the experiences they described. They were still making sense of and coming to terms with their CSE experiences, thus adding to the authenticity of their accounts. Background information was obtained on all young people who took part from a) their own accounts, b) reports and interviews with professionals involved with them, and c) minutes of the observed meetings. No additional information or data from files or from records was included about the young people who agreed to be interviewed.

[7] There are three types of establishments that make up the secure estate for children and young people: secure children's homes (SCHs), secure training centres (STCs) and young offender institutions (YOIs).

Table 3.3a Demographic information of young people who were interviewed

Name*	**Gender**	**Age when interviewed**	**Local Authority (LA)** N=1-3
Rhys	Male	18	LA1
Jamie	Male	17	LA1
Catherine	Female	16.5	LA1
Elisha	Female	15	LA2
Bella	Female	15	LA2
Jules	Transgender Female	17	LA2
James	Male	18	LA3
Tasha	Female	19.5	LA3
Marcus	Male	16.5	LA2
Leah	Female	17	LA1
Niamh	Female	18	LA2
Rhia	Female	15.5	LA1

*All names of participants in the thesis are pseudonyms

3.3.4 Access to professional participants

The study began with an opportunistic approach, using the regional safeguarding board area and professionals whom I could access through prior insider knowledge (Robson 2017). Some additional snowball sampling gained impetus from my professional respondents, who introduced me to others with a professional interest in CSE. All participants were given information sheets and consent forms (Appendix 2). The cross-section of agencies and participants aimed to capture different stakeholder perspectives on their responses and interactions with young people. Key to this was examining whether there were any differences in priorities and responses, and consequently identifying how practice impacts young people's participation in decisions made about them. All adult participants

were professionally qualified with over two years' experience in frontline CSE work. Eleven of the 15 professionals worked directly with young people; the remaining four were strategic managers. The professional participants included three police officers, three social workers, two local authority safeguarding leads, two therapeutic intervention workers, one seconded missing person worker, two teachers, and two health professionals. The police and missing children's coordinator were geographically co-located. The multi-agency partners' responsibilities were mixed in terms of their professional positions, but they encompassed CSE, harmful sexual behaviour, human trafficking, modern slavery, criminal exploitation, and county lines. The participant professionals' diversity, backgrounds and experience are apparent and recognised, but they are not a homogenous sample. The study's remit excluded any comparative analysis between professionals, and the demographic of the professional participants is tabulated below (Table 3.3b).

Table 3.3b Professional participants

Alias	Participant	Description
1P	SWP	Police Officer: Dave
2PB	SWP	Senior Police Officer Operational and RSCB: Andrew
3PB	PB	Safeguarding Lead: Dominic
4P	LA3	CSE Social Worker: Mark
5P	LA1	Education (teacher): Amanda
6P	LA2	Education (teaching assistant): Anne
7PB	LA2	CSE Social Worker: Neil
8PB	UHB	Safeguarding Lead: Nadia
9P	UHB	Safeguarding Practitioner: Nikki
10PB	LA1	CSE seconded intervention worker: Third Sector: Jayne
11P	LA2	CSE intervention worker Third Sector: Stephen
12P	LA3	Safeguarding intervention worker: Lauren
13P	SWP	Safeguarding Officer PPU: Ruth
14	LA2	Social worker: Jen

P = Professional

B = Board member

LA = Local authority

UHB = University Health Board

SWP =South Wales Police

RSCB =Regional Children Safeguarding Board

3.4 Interviews and interviewing

The following section discusses semi-structured interviews, a primary data collection method. I examine how, where and when the interviews were conducted, their format, purpose, and the topics discussed. There were themed and pre-defined open questions and the use of 'free dialogue', which allowed further sensitive and flexible exploration in a confidential environment, of how young people felt they had been heard and how professionals felt that they heard young people. The interview schedule is contained in Appendix 3.

3.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate and reliable data collection method for all participants. They allowed the professional participants to engage in discussion to construct their views on whether the young person's voice was heard. This provided a clearer insight into practice and further exploration of the participants' knowledge, perceptions, and experiences (see Rubin and Rubin 2011). The semi-structured interview also allowed the young person to be heard in a non-threatening way. This method helped facilitate a more personal relationship with both professionals and young people, allowing a rapport to be established between the participants and the researcher. While this was important for both participant groups, it was particularly important for CSE-experienced young people (Hallett 2013, 2019; Pearce 2013).

The 'what works' approach to data collection was applied within the semi-structured interviews (see Anastas 2014). This flexible approach uses methods with which both the researcher and participant are comfortable. For example, my participants were given a choice between a semi-structured interview or a free dialogue interview. As well as being important for professionals who wanted to expand the questions' parameters, this is a significant consideration for young people who often dislike following a prescribed script, and it ultimately encourages those taking part to be active co-constructors of their own narrative (Thorns 2012).

Particular attention was given to the use of co-construction and other factors when interviewing young people. Trede and Higgs (2010) suggest that dialogues will lead to emancipatory knowledge when free of domination, coercion, and unnecessary constraints, providing the opportunity for young people to direct and control their interview. This approach gave the young people more agency and inclusion when discussing or sharing parts of their lives that previously they felt that they had little control over. However, the implementation of boundaries was needed in the context of free dialogue discussion. Efforts were made to ensure that the 'interview' was young person-led, and in their words, but clearly defined parameters were set in consultation with them. These parameters (also in place for the interviews with professionals) included disclosure of abuse, safeguarding issues, time limits and support for the participants if required, and notably, how they wanted their views recorded.

Murris (2013) suggests that we need to be responsive to young people for good engagement and participation. Therefore, providing practical and alternative methods and allowing young people to contribute to the research in their own words was valuable when gathering data (Hallett 2013; Firmin et al. 2016). Similarly, they were also given the choice of venue and the medium they wished to use. For example, some young people, such as younger research participants or those with additional learning needs or communication difficulties, may prefer to engage in creative activities commensurate with their age and understanding. All the young participants chose to participate via the interview questions and free dialogue. Multi-agency professionals were offered a similar range of options; however, the professionals all chose the traditional interviews over other 'creative' methods and their own offices as the interview venue.

The interviews were face to face, and any factors that might affect the participant's ability to engage effectively were noted and responded to; for example, prior to an interview with one young person, it was discovered that he had argued with his foster carers, impacting on his immediate well-being. He asked and subsequently chose to postpone the interview, and we arranged another interview date. In another example, a professional police participant dealing with a traumatic physical child abuse case felt emotionally unable to proceed with the interview post-shift. As a result, he declined the offer of another interview date, and another participant was recruited.

Semi-structured interviews also enabled me to utilise tried and tested social work skills. I am comfortable and familiar with using open-ended and non-leading questions and was able to make inferences based on perspective, ensuring I had enough data gathered for analysis (Rapley 2001). A further benefit of the semi-structured interview was that flexibility was applied to the interview schedule, allowing additional questions to be posed and meaning that more issues and material could be explored. Wengraf (2001) advocates flexibility in semi-structured interviews, suggesting that the order of questioning is irrelevant provided that all the research questions are covered in each interview.

3.4.2 The craft of interviewing and the different techniques used to hear young people

The interview schedules were devised using themed and grouped questions (Appendix 3). A small group of professionals and young people not involved in the

research piloted the questions in a participation and engagement group for feedback and suggestions. The feedback from the pilot suggested that the questions would make more sense if they were grouped thematically, and young people wanted a choice of free dialogue included. The questionnaires were amended accordingly. Four key topics were developed throughout the questioning for all participants. These topics included information gathering, understanding CSE from a young person's perspective, capturing the young person's voice, and methods of communication. These broader themes then provided overarching governance of the sub-themes in a series of questions.

The questions were adapted according to the young person's experiences and the roles of the professionals. Slightly different interview schedules were used for each group of participants; the young person's account was based on their lived experience. The professional account would be based on their professional involvement and organisational agenda, recognising their experience.

Broad, open-ended preliminary questions introduced and settled the participants into the interview setting. These preliminary questions gave a narrative and overview of the research topic, allowing potential sensitive questions or emergent issues as the interview progressed. Direct questioning was used to explore a specific topic, and probing questions were used to investigate a topic, exploring the understanding, meanings and experiences of the practitioners and young people (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Engagement with the young person was crucial to understanding the language they were using, and the language (jargon) used by professionals that young people may not have understood. The use of language is discussed later in the thesis.

The skills of active listening and narrative distancing are next explored; these also contributed to the success of the interviews and were key to the research aims being met.

3.4.3 The skills of active listening and narrative distancing

As well as the flexible semi-structured interviewing provided, I utilised active listening with both participant groups. Active listening is making a conscious effort to hear what another person is saying and understand the message being communicated. Sometimes it means hearing what is not said by interpreting pauses, body language and nuance, and then validating it with the other person.

An empathetic and sensitive approach is central to active listening (Weger et al. 2014).

This was particularly important for the interviews conducted with young people. As this study examines how the young person's voice is understood and captured and its impact on decision-making by professionals it, therefore, considers what role the young person plays in decision making about themselves, and whether there is evidence of their meaningful participation, rather than just 'lip service' paid to the principle (Brown 2019). The data gathered confirmed that my interviewing expedited and facilitated effective data collection (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

CSE is a sensitive topic for young people, and I was extremely fortunate in their willingness and openness because their engagement and rapport were essential in the interview process. As previously noted, the gatekeeper helped to establish trust to ensure the young person's engagement with the research and 'set the scene' before the interview took place, and further measures were taken within the interview to put the young person at ease, but most importantly, the interview aimed to be non-threatening and as interactive and relaxed as possible.

Just as flexibility, pace and sensitivity are all important features within discussions of the contextual, theoretical, and practical application of the young person's voice being heard, so too were the factors in the interview process. To ensure this acknowledgement of sensitivity and to construct the interview as a positive memory for young people, narrative distancing was another technique utilised to provide a subconscious space separate from some of the sensitive issues discussed. For example, each interview ended with a neutral but fun question to frame being interviewed as a positive experience. This technique was used by Hallett (2013) and Andringa (1996), who studied the effects of narrative distance on emotional involvement and response. The semi-structured interviews took place in four intermittent phases over 20 months, and the data were transcribed and coded.

3.4.4 Coding and analysing the interviews

The method of analysis used in this study applied grounded theory, which according to Charmaz (2008) is a systematic methodology largely applied to qualitative research. Grounded theory involves the application of inductive

reasoning. The methodology contrasts with the deductive model used in quantitative research. A study based on grounded theory is likely to begin with a question, or even just with the collection of qualitative data.

As I reviewed the data collected, ideas or concepts become apparent as my research progressed and the concepts 'emerged' from the data. I then tagged those ideas with codes that succinctly summarised the concepts. As more data are collected and re-reviewed, the codes were grouped into higher-level concepts and then into categories.

This grounded theory approach meant that my study was young person centred and evidenced professional skills and knowledge in relation to working with CSE. Furthermore, I evidenced my ethically grounded approach in the study which in practice meant that I applied the following

- Professional integrity
- Transparency
- Disclosure of the general purpose of my research
- Making sure I acted in the best interests of my research participants
- Obtaining consent before collecting data
- Mindfulness of any potential power imbalances that may exist between you and those you are observing (Creswell et al 2015.)

Whilst software packages have their benefits (Elliott 2018; Gutterman et al. 2015) and my study partially used NVivo, I found manually coding using Microsoft Excel more productive (because more familiar), and I was able to insert the narratives with more accuracy. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) note that which process is chosen, or what works for the researcher, is not as significant as the choices made in how the data is coded. I applied a system of 'layering' to build up codes into overarching themes. The following Venn diagram explains how this was achieved.

Diagram 3.4a Illustrating the coding method via the Venn diagram

This Venn diagram provides a means of illustrating the interconnected relationships within the research data, i.e., that there are common threads found in each data set, and commonalities among the three points of data collection, illustrated by the overlaps. Where the circles overlap, themes presented or corresponding in each data set are clearly highlighted in a different colour. For example, if not being present at the meeting was highlighted by the young person, by the professionals and in the observed meetings, it would be placed in the union intersection, i.e., the intersection where the three data sets overlapped.

As I reviewed the data collected, my ideas or concepts became apparent as my research progressed; the concepts 'emerged' from the data. I then tagged those ideas with codes that succinctly summarised the concepts. As more data were collected and re-reviewed, the codes were grouped into higher-level concepts and then categories. Using the Venn diagram, I was able to highlight the differences as well as similarities between elements of sets. It was a type of layering process that quickly drew out corresponding themes and codes.

Correlated themes that were elicited from young people's interviews, professionals' interviews and observations of meetings are discussed in detail in the empirical chapters; but, in summary, they included: Building relationships, structural factors and the listening environment, agency and the importance of being heard, a culture of responsibility, language, and balancing protection with

participation. The themes may have crossed two data sets or three; this is set out in the concluding chapter. Through my coding, these choices were made, and included separate codes for the two participant groups, professionals and young people. I then identified broader emergent themes and sub-themes based on repeated listening and field notes, and although the system used was time-intensive, it was both effective and rewarding. This method could be compared to axial coding, i.e., breaking down core themes during qualitative data analysis, which subsequently linked correspondent codes, concepts, and categories to each other (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Within my research, the key stages of coding included exploring how key themes connected with my research aims and objectives, and grouping emergent themes under subject headings, thus enabling me to begin the data analysis.

The coding produced an effective filing system. For example, if five young people said that they had not felt listened to, I could interrogate this by looking at the qualitative narrative; or, if five professionals claimed that they always listened to the young person and highlighted how and why in the transcript, then there could be a potential difference in perception and understanding which, again, could be explored. The emergent sub-themes illustrated the barriers that young people felt prevented them from being listened to or heard. Ritchie et al (2014, p. 278) cited in Elliot (2018) assert that:

> *The aim is not to produce a perfectly consistently coded set, because labelling is done to manage data rather than to facilitate enumeration.*

Therefore, coding helped streamline and organise my data by mapping and providing an overview of disparate data.

3.5 The practicalities of observation and the ethnographic element

This next section examines the use and practicalities of observation as a research method, its value and necessity in this research, and why this study incorporates some ethnographic traits.

3.5.1 Generating data through observation

There are two distinct types of observation in qualitative research; the method used depends on the study's paradigm position. For example, research-based in the positivist paradigm (Berkovich 2018) will generally use structured observation, contrasting with the interpretivist paradigm, which favours unstructured observation (Pretzlik 1994). When undertaking my observational role, the issues faced included choosing what mode of observation (unstructured or structured), consent, and subject(s) access. The following from Mulhall (2003) sums up my position when undertaking unstructured observation:

> *Unstructured observation is used to understand and interpret cultural behaviour. It is based within the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm that acknowledges the importance of context and the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and 'researched'. Structured observation is used extensively in psychology.*
>
> *(Mulhall 2003, pp. 307)*

Unstructured observation and immersion in multi-agency settings were used to explore whether the young person's voice was heard in decision making meetings about them. This method was chosen as the primary component of the ethnographic element of the research design. Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) describe the key features of valid ethnographic studies as the researcher being immersed in a social setting for extended and regular periods and making observations of that setting. Ethnography thus involves researchers listening and engaging in conversation and interviewing participants within the setting regarding issues that are not directly evident or need further clarification. However, I was not wholly immersed for prolonged periods within my observational setting, and my interviews did not always involve the observation participants; hence the moderated claim that the study incorporated some ethnographic traits (Black 1994; 1996).

Applying ethnographic principles, I was also receptive to the analysis of any documents presented within the study environment; subsequently, I had access to agenda papers and minutes distributed following the observed meetings, including police data regarding numbers and typology of incidents and perpetrator disruption figures. This additional data informed my broader interpretation of the

general findings later in the thesis and contextualised the study. These documents were cross-referenced and compared with my notes to draw out nuances, themes, and content in the formal accounts of the meetings.

Essentially, I observed behaviours and listened to conversations between the identified groups, and integral to my research was understanding the range of approaches or ethnographic methods that could be usefully and appropriately applied as needed. Therefore, my observations in a multi-agency meeting context could potentially explore more issues. Robson (2017) asserts that when understanding multi-agency environment observations, cross-cultural differences, ethicality, and analysis of inter-agency collaboration, communication and roles and responsibilities can be studied more intensively. Therefore, observation of multi-agency meetings was important for triangulation, alongside individual conversations with both the young person and professional participants. It was also used as evidence to support and enrich data from the semi-structured interviews and highlight examples of professional rhetoric in interviews that were not borne out when observing the same participants in their multi-agency meetings.

3.5.2 Observational settings

Access to my observation settings and its members were all critical considerations. The distinction between closed and open settings is made by Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) and Lofland (1995), who suggest that closed non-public settings are likely to be organisational, and open settings are often likely to involve communities and people on the fringes of society or with specific social issues. In this study, my settings were closed and were not accessible without organisational agreement. Consideration was also given to whether I acted as an active or passive ethnographer. The ethnography involving observations of meetings with professionals leaned towards my becoming an observer as participant (Gold 1958). My professional senior manager status ensured that access to the chosen observational settings was relatively straightforward (Mays and Pope 1995). I was able to telephone and email other professionals directly, so access to these meetings was accepted, providing I complied with ethical protocols. I was aware of my professional privilege and

recognised that access to observational sites could be problematic for others who are not 'insider' researchers.

Nonetheless, formal approval was sought from the directors and heads of services as I needed to be clear about boundaries, roles and expectations in situations to which I would typically have professional access (excluding the observed meetings in this study). I was also mindful of access to a cultural environment that meant seeing and hearing things from which outsiders would be excluded. As a practitioner, once you have this knowledge, you cannot simply delete it; therefore, being reflexive and reinforcing my researcher role was imperative as strategic and operational multi-agency meetings were observed, critically examined, and interpreted from the dual perspectives of young people and professionals. This increased the value of the evidence of young people's experience of being listened to several years on from previous studies, including Allnock and Miller (2013) and Hallett (2016). The following table sets out and describes the type and number of observed meetings and the young person's attendance and explains how the young person’s voice was represented.

3.5.3 Table of observed settings

Name of meeting	Description of meeting	Number of meetings observed	Young persons present	Representation of young person's voice
Child Protection Case Conference	*A child protection conference (CPC) is a formal statutory meeting between family members, the child (where appropriate), and multi-agency professionals involved with the family to address a child's future safety, health, and development. A child protection conference may be held following a child protection investigation under section 47 of the Children Act 1989, and is the formal process of identifying and monitoring children and young people deemed at risk of significant harm.*	1	1	***Via attendance by young person and then letter written by the young person***
CSE Strategy Meeting	*A CSE strategy meeting is called to determine an effective multi-agency operational response to identifying, disrupting, and safeguarding vulnerable people. The purpose of the CSE strategy meetings as the forum for sharing and clarifying information, identifying all risks and agreeing on action and recommendations to address each risk.*	3	0	***Via professional's accounts and case records and statements***
RSCB - Local Safeguarding Children Board strategic meeting	*The SSWBA (Wales) 2014 (part 7) required all local authorities to set up a RSCB to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in their area.*	1	0	***Presentation by reviewers, pictures, and narrative by young person***
Contextualised Risk Meetings	*Contextualised risk meetings can take a variety of formats. They may be referred to as the MASE (multi-agency sexual exploitation) meeting with other local authorities.*	1	*0*	***none***
Total		6	1	5

All organisations included in my professional interview sample were represented at the observed meetings (police, social services, health, education, and the third sector) although not always by the same individuals who took part in the semi-structured interviews. This did not impact the data collection but added to the richness and depth of the response. Although the strategy meetings and contextualised risk panels acknowledged a preference for young people to attend

their meetings (the context of these meetings is explained later), young people or their families were excluded from the invitee list at the time of my observations.

Informed consent was integral to my research (Gallagher et al. 2010; Byrne 2001) and an introduction by the meeting chairperson preceded my overt observations. Consent and information forms were handed to all meeting attendees. However, consent was not obtained from the young people who were being discussed, apart from in the strategic meeting and the child protection case conference, which they attended or at which they presented testimony. I felt confident that the professional meeting participants were fully aware of who I was (researcher) and what I was doing. It is important to note that the young people being discussed at the meetings were not the young people interviewed.

I used various observational methods, including note-taking and checklists, and looked for specific narratives from meeting contributors to identify young people's voices and assess whether these were being portrayed, heard, or understood. Holding meetings with multiple participants meant that observations were time-consuming. My observations were my subjective interpretation of what people were saying. Again, I was aware of my positionality and that I should not contribute to the meeting discussions; I constantly reminded myself of this. My specific focus was whether the young person's voice was being captured in discussions and how it was represented.[8] I noted the discussion content, the management of the meeting, and any behaviours that contributed to the young person’s voice being presented, heard, and understood.

Observations are subjective by nature. Criticisms of observation include the fact that the technique has an inbuilt 'Hawthorne’ or observer effect (Sedgwick and Greenwood 2015), where individuals modify an aspect of their behaviour in response to their awareness of being observed and, in doing so, can undermine research credibility (Chiesa and Hobbs 2008). Mulhall (2003) argues that the Hawthorne effect is overemphasised in participant observation because people quickly revert to type as they forget that they are being observed as they are too busy to maintain radically different behaviour. My experience confirmed Mulhall's

[8] Note that there would not be equal expectations of the young person's voice being captured across meetings. There would be a much higher expectation of this when an individual case was being discussed, as opposed to broader strategy.

argument, as I quickly seemed to become invisible to the attendees during the meeting. An important consideration to remember is that each meeting was different, depending on the agenda and whether a young person formed part of that agenda. Experienced meeting observers can reduce their subjectivity; my observer role was challenging, as I found myself wanting to participate and contribute to the meeting.

Careful attention to the collection of my field notes was needed, and I chose a specific set of criteria for recording them manually and taking contemporaneous notes during the meeting. All the meetings were audio-recorded, and administrators took minutes; having access to both facilitated cross-referencing. However, my field notes were often bullet points, scribbles, anecdotal and reflexive loose texts. As a critically distant observer, my focus was on understanding the philosophies and values behind partner organisations' respective professional roles (Whetten 1998). Working with a range of professional leads and current frontline practitioners in the field can be complex, and these professional complexities can lead to competing agendas and vociferous professional disagreements. Their voices are often louder than that of the young person; they take precedence, and the young person is often overlooked.

3.6 The research diary, reflexivity, and triangulation

Reflexivity is critical for assessing whether the research aims and objectives have been met, hence my use of a reflective journal or diary. This section discusses my diary, and also examines how triangulation pulls the threads of the chapters and data sets together. Triangulation aids the authentication and validation of the findings and supports the architecture and structure of the study; but, importantly, combined with the research diary and reflexivity, it minimises the researcher's bias (Punch 2013).

3.6.1 My reflexive diary

As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) observe:

> *Reflexivity is crucial as a means to continuously and consciously work on becoming a better researcher, and a journal provides a focal point for this activity.*
>
> *(Glesne and Peshkin 1992 cited in Watt 2007, pp. 82-101)*

My diary has two distinct themes – personal reflexivity, i.e., how my personal beliefs, experiences, values, positionality, and professional privilege may impact my critical engagement with the research, and epistemological reflexivity, which involves thinking about how knowledge has been generated and providing information about issues which could potentially cause bias. The diary collated anecdotal evidence and jolts of relevance as I recalled them, which often never get remembered or recorded. In turn, this helped me to review and analyse my methods and data. As the thesis progressed, reflexivity also encouraged a record of my personal thoughts, feelings, and practice.

Typical diary entries:

She saw me as a professional, not a researcher, and was reluctant to talk because I made her nervous.

(Journal entry, June 2018).

Noting that they (professionals) are up against it, and a shared base may help, but all sorts of resource implications.

(Reflections on information sharing in strategy meeting, November 2018).

My research diary reflections are threaded throughout this thesis, demonstrating critical engagement with my participants and my learning from the research process. Arguably, the diary was a useful *aide memoir* that assisted in transcript writing, tracked my fieldwork notes throughout, and added further quality assurance to contemporaneous notes or practical difficulties encountered. Most importantly, it reflected on the emergent themes and made the first measurements of my data judgements. Extracts from the diary are also commented on in the finding's chapters and the concluding chapter.

3.6.2 Data triangulation: pulling it all together

Triangulation was applied within this study because three different data sets were used to help explain the phenomenon of interest, i.e., the voices of young people in CSE cases. It helped in the cases where one data source invalidated the findings of another (Heale and Forbes 2013) and gave more validity to my research. I used these combined methods to cross-validate and explore the real issues for CSE-experienced young people trying to be heard in decision-making meetings. I carried out a thematic analysis to support my findings and evidence

similarities, themes, or trends (Nowell et al. 2017). I compared the observation data with narratives relating the opinions of the professionals and young people in their semi-structured interviews and drew on my research diary to support my interpretations. The final product represented triangulation in that each elicited theme represented data analysis from three data sources, and literature was used to support these conclusions further. The chapter now moves into the realms of ethicality.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Throughout the thesis, ethical considerations were paramount; my SREC number is SREC/2222, Cardiff University, March 2017. Ethical practice applies to all research; however, by definition, young people are deemed more vulnerable and consequently have less power, reinforcing the need for research with vulnerable young people that captures true accounts of their lives to be ethically upheld from inception to the close. Furthermore, the inclusion of young people in research should promote empowerment and enable them to have control over their positions and language, as reflected in their rights under the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child* (2005).

An ongoing consideration for this study was situated ethics, defined as a view of applied ethics in which abstract standards from a culture or theory are far less important than the ongoing process of personal and physical involvement (Simons and Usher 2000). Situated ethics was addressed at each stage of the research by examining ongoing ethical issues experienced in the field. The key issues here involved building relationships but not getting too emotionally close to the participants, standing back, joining in professional debates and being perceived to have professional alliances.

I also took responsibility for ethical, legal, and professional accountability in this study; I became aware that previous studies have theorised accountability as a rational, calculative device, a rhetorical discourse or an ethical obligation arising in an interpersonal encounter (McKernan 2012; Roberts 1991; Shearer 2002). This ethical accountability was a position of which I became acutely aware as my study progressed, specifically in relation to disclosure or safeguarding issues that may arise.

The following section examines the specific ethical considerations relevant to this study, including vulnerability, parental responsibility and consent, reflexivity, positionality, and the familiarity heuristic, all of which contribute to becoming an ethical researcher.

3.7.1 Exposing young people to research; whose voice is it anyway?

Research with young people who are already vulnerable has its own specific set of ethical criteria. For example, as a researcher with young people, I needed an enhanced DBS check, a set of permissions and an approved lanyard photo badge to enter certain buildings and meeting rooms. In addition, consideration had to be given to consent, competency, and whether the research was commensurate with the young person's age and understanding. Another ethical consideration was the principle of non-maleficence (‘do no harm’) which elevated my focus on the welfare of the young people involved, ensuring that any potential for distress was assessed at the beginning of each interaction, observation, or interview (Dolgoff et al. 2012).

A practical example of non-maleficence included the negotiation of support from one of the third sector participant charities in the event of incidents of distress. It included mechanisms for signposting the young person back to the social worker or family, if appropriate. In addition, I made a follow-up telephone call 24 hours after each interview to check on the young person's well-being. I also acknowledged that there might be a conflict of interest if disclosures were made and considered how that situation would be managed if it arose.

3.7.2 Obtaining consent from those taking part

Participant consent is an essential ethical prerequisite for all social science research. The process of seeking consent provided an opportunity to explain the research purpose and clarify my storage, presentation, and use of data to the research participants (Byrne 2001). However, there were critical considerations in relation to seeking and acting on consent from children or young people to being included in this research; I sought and gained approval from the ethics committee at Cardiff University, which was granted in March 2017. The consent for the semi-structured interviews was straightforward. However, for the observed meetings, as I did not know which young person or people were going to be discussed prior

to the meeting, and in some cases, they were not invited to that meeting, I could not gain direct consent.

I was clear and sought consent from the chair and all professional attendees, explaining why I was there and asking if there would be any potential objections from young people. In the strategic meeting, the report was in the public domain, and the young person, Millie, had been told that her views and drawings would be shared. In the case conference, the young person was briefly present, so I obtained verbal consent from her and her mother.

In the contextual risk meetings, the young people did not know that they were being discussed, so I could not gain consent, and their wishes and feelings were represented by professionals who had worked with them, and no direct quotes were obtained.

In the CSE strategy meetings, and often, in child protection and safeguarding meetings, the sharing of information is critical for safety planning, but consent is not always achievable. It was, however, desirable in the light of the reason for this research, i.e., that young people need agency to contribute to their plans. I was careful regarding the issue of consent, given the sensitivity of the subject, and considered whether I had 'enough consent'. I also understood the argument that if consent was not given directly, there would be conflicts about 'hearing' the voices of young people, which, after all, is central to this study. I also asked the professionals at the CSE strategy meetings to check with the young people (who were told about the meetings after they had occurred) if they agreed to me using the words from the reports presented at those meetings, or verbal evidence from their workers. I received no objections to or comments about this post-meeting. Importantly, where the local authority shared parental responsibility, the director conferred consent via the heads of service, who agreed that the research could take place.

To understand the agency of the young people being discussed, it is especially important to illustrate how they were represented, their views articulated, and what could be done to facilitate this. As a professional (albeit researcher in this instance), there is a recognised shared confidentiality in these meetings. The cases were wholly anonymised, which justifies my inclusion of quotations from the young people to illustrate that these meetings take place every day with young people not being told that they are being discussed. This is

something that, wherever possible, should be addressed; however, I conclude that sometimes the reasons for this are equally justifiable, in order to ensure that appropriate information is shared quickly and with the right people to try to safeguard the young person. I also recognise that young people's voices can be heard directly and indirectly and that this is acceptable if their interests, wishes, and feelings are considered paramount in mitigating risk of significant harm.

Information sheets and consent forms were given to participants in advance of the interviews and discussed before commencing the interview, ensuring that all participant cohorts fully understood the implications of participating. Information sheets were produced in two formats; one version for young people and one for professionals (see appendices). Further consideration was given to parental responsibility of the young person, as those with parental responsibility must consent to the interview if the young person is under 16 years old (Duncan et al. 2009). For the semi-structured interviews, parental or LA consent was sought for all young people under age 16. For the observed professionals' meetings, I did not seek consent from the young people (or their parents) who were being discussed.

3.7.3 Reflexivity and ethical issues in research with young people

Reflexivity and positionality are critical components of this chapter, alongside upholding ethical principles. There were noticeable differences between how the research was carried out with young people and with adult participants; there were different ages and levels of understanding of the younger participants, and consideration was given to the impact of emotional, cognitive, and physical difficulties (particularly in the context of trauma) resulting from abuse or exploitation (Levenson and Grady 2016). The effects of trauma may have been masked for some young participants, but others could have openly exhibited its impact, thus further affecting the quality of information gleaned (Goddard and Mudaly 2009).

A possibility existed that in the course of my research I might uncover poor practice or practice that fell below national professional standards (Dolgoff et al. 2012). Ethically, it would be wrong for me to make judgements on the standard of practice during data collection and communicate these judgements within the organisation, as my role was not to evaluate the quality of practice. However, this

would have been overridden if any safeguarding concerns had arisen. The consent forms and information leaflets provided to all participants stipulated this caveat. Furthermore, there was always explicit notification of a right to confidentiality balanced with a duty to disclose (Hiriscau et al. 2014).

3.7.4 Confidentiality, privacy, and data protection

Privacy required respect for limited access to another person or group of participants. Although participants allowed access to their thoughts and feelings when they agreed to participate, they did not agree to unlimited access. Therefore, they had the right to refuse to answer or engage in conversations about specific issues (Hiriscau et al. 2014). Confidentiality is an extension of privacy but was specific to the participants' agreements about what could and could not be done with the information gathered. In most cases, this is determined by the legal constraints outlined in the *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) 2016.

Data protection encompasses ethical considerations, confidentiality and storing information securely. I stored data on the University server. I anonymised and redacted as much data as I could reasonably and practically achieve, and data were recorded and transcribed. However, as professionals across the region may recognise each other or identify young people's cases, there are limits. This was explained to my participants and needed careful management. Moreover, I would try and mitigate against it by excluding the level of detail that would make a case identifiable. I explained that even if participants recognised some cases, there would be little possibility of being identified outside a small professional sphere. Cousin (2010) describes an ethical, reflexive approach to practice-based learning, using social constructionist perspectives, and contends that reflexivity and positionality are increasingly important considerations in qualitative research by professional doctoral students; this approach resonated with my research.

3.7.5 Positionality

Throughout the research process, I identified where potential conflict could arise and the professional boundaries needed in terms of positionality. Therefore, I stipulated clear boundaries about not interviewing young people into whose care plan I had had any previous input or whose meeting I may have chaired in previous professional roles.

From my perspective, there may have been conflict, for example, if I had needed support because of any distress I felt, or if anything had arisen which could potentially compromise my professional position. Jenkins and Baird (2002) identify and discuss conflict due to vicarious trauma, resulting from empathic engagement with traumatised clients and their reports of traumatic experiences. I was, therefore, mindful that some of the information gathered may cause me to internalise distress. However, I have access to professional pastoral support through the University and thus endeavoured to protect and support my mental health and well-being throughout the research process. Further conflict arose when trying to rationalise being a student researcher and not a senior manager. Sometimes this loss of status left me feeling deskilled and like an imposter (Chapman 2017), leading me to examine next the ethical importance of fighting familiarity.

3.8 Fighting familiarity

I needed to be aware of the impact of familiarity on my research study and how data were gathered. The familiarity heuristic in this study meant that I continuously understood and practiced my role as researcher, not practitioner. This was a dilemma when I was accustomed to decision-making powers, care planning, and chairing multi-agency meetings. Furthermore, my professional familiarity with my peer professional research participants was due to my professional role and responsibilities, which are different from those of a doctoral student. When approached as potential respondents, they were positive and welcomed an opportunity to share knowledge about a subject that causes much professional angst. The benefit of being an 'insider', with the professional contacts and seniority that I hold, led me to consider whether the same privileged access to professionals, young people, or documentation and confidential meetings would have been afforded to an unknown doctoral student. This researcher privilege was consistently present throughout this study, and I had to mitigate the risk that, because of my insider position, my participants would tell me what they thought I wanted to hear (Delamont et al. 2010).

Sometimes, believing that I knew more than the professional I was interviewing made me challenge and bracket my response (Tufford and Newman 2012) and so I reflected on my presentation and how I made people feel. These

reflections concerned my parental values and positionality, which instilled caution when listening to young people. Proceeding with caution reduced the risk of instinctive questioning like 'where was your mum?', which could present as intrusive and be interpreted as unprofessional and judgemental as a researcher. This was a position that I made a conscious effort to minimise and exclude from my thought processes by bracketing my responses.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a narrative of the research design and procedures used for this study, which endeavours to explore the young person's voice within inter-agency collaboration, professional agendas, and practical and organisational barriers.

The study does, of course, have limitations. For example, using a small study sample in only one region could affect the reliability, accuracy, and credibility of the research. In addition, as previously noted, there are limitations due to the different ages and cognitive understanding of the participating young people and the requirement for consent to be obtained from those with parental responsibility.

Throughout the chapter, I have raised awareness of potential conflicts due to my knowledge and experience from practice that may influence interpretation, including the salience of themes, interpretation of transcripts, and representation of young people’s and professionals' views. I would recommend that, in future studies, the researcher’s analysis be shown to all participants for discussion and amendment. This will result in several challenges, including time, cost, and views changing over time, but will ensure 'live' opinions.

The following three empirical chapters present the findings of this qualitative study beginning with the voices of young people.

Chapter 4: Hearing the voice of the young person

This chapter draws on interviews conducted with the young people and examines their perceptions and experiences, how they are listened to and what that means to them

4.1 Introduction

Chapter Four presents findings to help answer the following RQs:

RQ3: What are the barriers and opportunities in relation to the child's voice being heard and responded to?

RQ5: What does 'being listened to' mean to young people?

To reiterate, twelve young people were interviewed, including five boys and seven girls, aged between 15 and 19, and one young person who identified as a transitioning transgender girl.

This chapter examines young people's views in terms of how, why, and when they feel listened to. Firstly, I explore whether the role and type of professional involved influenced whether they felt listened to. I discuss the young person's experience when working with professionals. The next section examines the young person's family dynamics and characteristics before exploring the 'listening environment' and how people 'listen'. The final section highlights the young person’s views with regard to the importance of language or dialogue used by professionals and presents these young people’s views on how they felt outcomes could have been different for them. The chapter next discusses the young people’s views on the professionals who work with them.

4.2 Young people's views on the multi-agency professionals

This section looks at the young people’s views on the multi-agency professionals who worked with them. This includes specialist CSE therapeutic intervention professionals, health professionals, the police, social workers and an education worker. It is important to clarify that not all young people experience working with all professional types. This is discussed in the sections below.

4.2.1 Specialist CSE professionals

The first group of professionals considered is those based in specialist therapeutic CSE settings, including two third sector charities, and a seconded missing young person coordinator, responsible for supporting young people who were at risk of going missing. Eight young people had worked with specialist CSE professionals in various guises. Overall, these young people projected positive experiences and found that the workers in the specialist CSE settings were the professionals they trusted most and with whom they found the space to talk with confidence (see McKibben et al. 2017). Seven of the eight young people who had experienced this support felt that it contributed to a more positive outcome for them. This was explained as 'being able to explore and build relationships'. Young people spoke about 'coming out the other side' and 'finding a way out', consequently, the exploitation journey became a process, and being supported to get to the end of the journey meant that they were listened to somewhere along the line. Previous research by Preston-Shoot (2018), Sidebotham et al. (2016) and Shuker (2013) also highlights how relationships and building trust are critical for young people to feel cared about, particularly as CSE involves emotional, psychological, sexual, and often physical abuse. Significant to young people was being kept informed and knowing what was going on, illustrated next by young participants describing what they needed from professionals and how specialist CSE professionals met those needs.

Rhys (18) was initially the victim of sexual exploitation; he was (later) criminalised (at the age of 15) because he became involved in sexual behaviour deemed harmful to other young people. However, in today's climate, Rhys (now aged 18) would probably not have been charged with the same offence and would be more likely to be viewed as a young person needing support and therapeutic intervention, not criminalisation (Ashurst and McAlinden 2015).

Rhys clearly described the turning point for him – who listened, what that process entailed, and how being valued and believed gave him agency and validation. Unfortunately, Rhys initially viewed himself as difficult and troublesome and not worthy of a chance to be heard:

> *I needed someone to talk to and trust. The last three years have made a difference; Sally (CSE specialist intervention worker) did twenty sessions, I did the first six sessions with headphones in, I wouldn't speak to her, but*

> *she kept coming, at least she was trying. So, for the next twenty sessions, I let her talk. Eventually, I answered. What changed? Sally cared about me, not my order. She said, 'Rhys, you are important; you deserve a chance.' Sally made me think that I was worth a punt.*
>
> *(Rhys, 18).*

Jules described how building a relationship was important to her so that she felt valued as a person and not just because professionals were paid to talk to her, and that this was something her CSE specialist support workers did:

> *Professionals need to talk to us in between, not just when they have to. They could call, text, face time, just let us know you care, even when you aren't being paid to see me on that day. They did that in (CSE specialist charity).*
>
> *(Jules, 17)*

Rhys and others who experienced support from CSE specialist professionals found that the focus was more on relationship-based practice. Whilst this was also true in some relationships that young people built with other professionals, it was most marked in the CSE specialist therapeutic setting. When discussing their involvement with these professionals, young people recognised that the professionals had invested time in building a good relationship, which was vital for the intervention to work. All the young participants were vociferous, and some described how they were uncooperative (see Rhys's extract above) or even aggressive with some professionals, including the police and social workers, if they did not trust them or have a relationship with them.

The young people were thus more willing to 'trust' CSE specialist workers whom they felt had invested in building a relationship with them. In contrast, four young people described their frustration at not being trusted enough by (other) professionals to contribute to decisions regarding their own lives. This was evident when the young person discussed having feelings for the people who abused them or exploited them. For example, Rhys's positive experience with the specialist CSE professional was in complete contrast with his experience of police and social workers (discussed later). The interviews with young people regarding CSE specialist therapeutic professionals indicated that if young people feel that they have some agency in decision making and participate in decisions about their lives,

this becomes as essential to successful safeguarding planning as multi-agency collaboration (Reisel 2017) as Rhys illustrates:

> *'I told Sally, (therapeutic intervention worker) that If I had had a real voice, I could have told them how and when I was at risk, or who and what I was at risk from? They should have listened to me first, or at least included me; I was a missing piece of the puzzle, wasn't I?'*

Furthermore, the therapeutic environment also provided critically important safe spaces for young people to talk as Rhys was able to feel safe enough to articulate his frustrations at not being heard and suggests ways in which being heard and having agency was a safer option.

Consideration is now given to the parameters and contexts in which relationships are possible for young people and professionals, recognising that it may not always be possible to remain professionally involved with the young person significantly long enough to build that relationship. This was true of police and social workers, who often had to balance protection and the criminal agenda with support and validation of the young person.

In this regard, Honneth's recognition and humanistic theory (1996), as discussed in Thomas (2012), is relevant. This focuses the lens on professionals accepting young people as individuals, with idiosyncratic personal and valid opinions, whether they (professionals) agree with the opinion or not. Furthermore, Honneth's perspective is based on the human struggle to be recognised, and today, in a constantly changing society, recognition is sought by small groups or minorities. The minority in this study are the young people; applying Honneth's recognition theory would mean that young people must feel that their voice carries equal weight to that of the professionals at their meetings, potentially allowing them to express their views and be consulted in decision-making processes. Young people interviewed spoke of needing affirmative respectful, reciprocal relationships, which, in relation to CSE-experienced young people, emphasises the need to duly recognise them and give them the validation, dignity, and respect that others receive in society. According to Honneth, and supported by the qualitative interviews, any professional conflict could potentially undermine the relationship, resulting in further rejection and more trauma for young people. In contrast, CSE specialist therapeutic professionals were able to build trust due to

the space and time they had to work with young people, which would validate them, as in the previous excerpt from Rhys (p.73). This positive practice supported the key principles which impact on and shape CSE-experienced young people's capacity to engage with others, i.e., self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem (McCafferty 2021, pp. 8-10).

Seven young people said that when they had built a relationship with a professional, the one-to-one approach made them feel listened to and believed. Furthermore, for young people in CSE specialist therapeutic environments, the relationship with their therapist became more meaningful and validating; the environment was considered more flexible because specialist workers did not have to meet young people in formal offices, thus allowing alternative working techniques that encouraged relationship building, enabling young people to relax. Tasha (19) described the context of why she felt safer when there was a one-to-one relationship with a therapist and why and where it was safe to talk.

> *I loved car time with Sally, (CSE specialist worker); I could talk, there didn't have to be no (any) eye contact, it felt safer, it made a difference taking the time out with me.*
>
> *(Tasha, 19).*

Ten young people commented on trust, i.e., not being trusted, or believed, which often equated to not being listened to. Conversely, when young people (later) felt believed or trusted to make safer decisions, this equated to being listened to and heard. As already noted, this trust is most associated with CSE professionals. Elisha described her difficulties in building relationships with professionals because of a lack of trust on both sides, which she felt was a definite barrier to being heard. She highlighted the importance of having had a relationship with professionals and how that made a difference:

> *It's really important having a relationship with us (young people) and that they (the social worker, the police) trust you. I didn't trust anyone, but they never trusted me either; that changed when I had a specialist (CSE) worker.*
>
> *(Elisha, 16).*

Catherine explained who had listened to her and what difference that made. This contrasted with Jules (discussed earlier), whose experience of being unheard devalued her. For Catherine, feeling valued and believed meant that she was

heard. In addition, the CSE therapeutic environment meant that those specialist staff could give young people more time than frontline professionals with large caseloads and competing priorities.

> *(Names charity) and Jayne, she valued my story; she didn't judge me. She told me I was a child and what had happened to me should not have happened. She trusted me and believed me, and no one had ever trusted me before.*
>
> *(Catherine, 16.5)*

Coy et al. (2017) support this and assert that specialist sexual exploitation services can often be more flexible and work with young people for as long as necessary. Coy et al. (2017) also corroborate this and highlight that the voluntary sector is often underrepresented in multi-agency arrangements, yet key to successful working. Specialist CSE services are in high demand across the study's geographical area. A recurring theme was the return home interview (debrief) undertaken by the missing children's coordinator, who was seconded to the police by a third sector charity, and who positively influenced several young participants.

Coy et al. (2017) argue that return or debrief interviews present a unique opportunity for gathering local intelligence on sexual exploitation and asserts that if the young person can speak so soon after returning, the detail of their experience could be more vivid and accurate. However, Pearce (2014) warns that this can also be an extremely vulnerable time for young people, evidencing why specific skill and CSE specialist knowledge was vital for the debriefer. Furthermore, Coy et al.'s (2017) qualitative study found that independent return home interviews for young people who go missing were often not completed, despite guidance advocating that they should be. Therefore, it was reassuring that six young people felt that the debrief was instrumental in being heard and highlighted the fact that safe space was a significant contributor. There were varying stages of the young person's journey where being heard by professionals was more likely, notably in CSE specialist therapeutic environments where professionals were highly skilled and trained to deal with specifics – for example, 'going missing' or substance abuse and where opportunities presented for longer case-involvement to build up trusting relationships, which are critical for young people (Sharp-Jeffs 2016).

4.2.2 Young people and health professionals

The differences between a CSE specialist therapeutic intervention and a health professional in the CSE arena are defined for clarification. There is some overlap because Psychiatry and Psychology services are often incorporated into support and interventions within specialist CSE services. In this research, health professionals include nurses, midwives, and specialist CSE practitioner nurses. However, health professionals were largely absent from the young people's interview narrative. Only one young person described being listened to by health professionals to any extent, but four girls discussed access to pregnancy testing and STD clinics as part of the general professional help received. This is likely, because medical examinations would not have been carried out unless the young person had alleged an assault; therefore, contact with health professionals would probably have been minimal.

Catherine (16.5) became pregnant and was a CSE-experienced young person but was also criminalised for grievous bodily harm and seen as an offender first and CSE victim second by the services to which she was referred. This was a theme identified by Rhys (above). Unlike Rhys, Catherine's offence was not linked to CSE, and the pregnancy was not a result of exploitation. Consequently, Catherine felt that she had more support from health services by virtue of 'getting caught' in criminal activity. Involvement with frontline health workers (midwives and health visitors) became more relevant due to Catherine's pregnancy, and became a protective factor, reducing the risk of CSE by increasing her contact with health professionals. Furthermore, Catherine was consulted and more involved in decision making by virtue of being a new, young, and vulnerable parent, and thus given a voice in meetings with social workers, which she felt was lacking previously; the LA now needed to ensure a safety plan to protect both the unborn baby and Catherine. Therefore, because Catherine became known to professionals because of her involvement with the criminal justice system, this then highlighted her risk and potential involvement in CSE, and how that was recognised and managed throughout her pregnancy contributes to when and how her voice was heard.

> *Being pregnant? Health and social made sure we were both safe, worked together with me, and they listened to me. I wasn't seen as bad anymore.'*
>
> *(Catherine, 16.5)*

Catherine's comments evidence how multiple agencies worked collaboratively as her pregnancy progressed, and thus enabled her voice to be heard. This shows how a change and elevation in her status from needing protection to protecting her unborn child gave her voice power, and an opportunity to contribute to her own safety plan and to that of her unborn child and meant that her need and right to be heard was better met.

The exception to limited health professional support was that there were a few young people who had received some support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). However, mental health support was limited, and being listened to by professionals in those services did not really feature in the young people's responses. Often the threshold for a CAMHS referral or service support was too high, and in the CSE meetings observed and minutes of meetings accessed, CAMHS often refuted the suggestion that the young person had mental health issues, instead advocating an emotional well-being response with minimal resources. Young people, however, recognised that they were suffering from what they described as 'poor mental health' and that they needed these services, and that their use of alcohol and drugs often exacerbated this, as Leah highlights.

> *I was often coming down off something, so I was like, emotional, tearful, I felt battered in my brain. They (CAMHS) weren't there.*
>
> *(Leah, 17)*

Professional participants also acknowledged that CAMHS responses were limited. However, young people involved with Youth Justice Services would qualify for support from substance misuse workers, who understood the impact of substances on mental health in CSE-experienced young people (Case and Haines 2014). This was a positive example of young people labelled as perpetrators receiving some focused interventions, to which others could not have access in mainstream services. Seven young people suggested that difficult home lives and inability to access appointments also impacted their being heard.

> *I waited three months for a CAMHS appointment. I didn't go as I couldn't get a lift; they didn't offer me another appointment …. anyway, it was well past the reason for going in the first place. So, when I asked for help, I needed help then, not three months later.*
>
> *(Jules, 17)*

Jamie also candidly described his mental health struggles suggesting that they directly resulted from his CSE experience. Jamie said that he was classed as a DNA and later found out that it meant 'did not attend' (CAMHS). However, Jamie wanted support and discussed why he was unable to attend:

> *How could I attend? I don't drive, had never been before, I wasn't taken there, didn't even see the letter until after the appointment, or I would have really tried to go; I desperately wanted to talk to someone.*
>
> *(Jamie, 17)*

There was a division in service and service responses for young people needing health professional support. Reasons were complex, often because disclosure in a CSE arena is usually long after abuse has occurred. Medical practitioners were referred to in terms of practical support (STD clinic, pregnancy testing); however, none of the young people had built up any significant relationship with a health professional, which would help them to talk openly, apart from one young person who had become pregnant. Mental health services were identified by five young people as services they needed but which were deemed inaccessible. However, as discussed next, the social worker was pivotal in signposting young people to other support services.

4.2.3 The role of the social worker

Young people discussed the numbers of 'social workers' involved with them, but the data clarified that the number of professionals involved were not, in fact, all social workers. Seven young people referred to having contact with multiple professionals, which was problematic for them, including James (below), blaming themselves for being too difficult to manage.

> *There were so many, and I got mixed up about who was who; social workers never stayed around long, there were always five or six involved, I was just a number, and too hard to manage.*
>
> *(James, 18)*

Social workers got mixed reviews from young people who rated them from 'atrocious' to 'brilliant' in terms of being listened to. Jules described her social worker thus:

In the beginning, she was useless (at listening). I wasn't easy either, then by the end, she was amazing, she learned loads!

(Jules, 17)

Jules described her CSE journey process similarly to Rhys's engagement with CSE specialist professionals (above), acknowledging that she had not engaged initially or cooperated with the social worker, and highlighting her trajectory of rating social workers between 'useless' and 'brilliant'. Young people had pre-conceived expectations about their relationships with social workers and their profession. Sometimes these expectations were unrealistic, and young people described feeling 'let down' – for example, when they had trusted a social worker who had moved on. Their accounts showed that they needed nurturing, and a trauma-informed approach and good practice assert that CSE-affected young people need space and time to rebuild confidence and trust.

I needed a lot of time to trust them, I wanted to believe them, but it took time…. I had to test them first.

(Marcus, 16)

Young people did not want to be talked at or about; they wanted to be seen, heard, believed, and respected. When blamed, held responsible, criminalised, or judged negatively for their behaviours or attitudes, their relationships with social workers were jeopardised, leading to suspicion and mistrust, thus creating barriers to being heard.

Social workers talked at me, kept saying I was putting myself 'out there'. I disagreed, but they said I was at risk and needed protecting. I lost count of them; I didn't know their names, but they all started with 'I'm here to help you', really? Take my stepfather, not me and my brother; they never heard that.

(James, 18)

Marcus discussed being a 'caseload number and a social work-tick box exercise', so that social workers could inform the courts that he had been seen. This would not have been technically correct because Marcus was subject to a full care order, so his case was outside the court arena; but Marcus's social work visits initially (for him) represented exercising a required statutory function rather than a meaningful encounter.

Jamie also felt like a number without an opinion or a voice. He described how he was labelled as ‘trouble’, and that social workers viewed him as the problem, not as someone needing support. Jamie concluded that while he was defined by the label attached to him, he could never be seen or heard as the victim by social workers engaged to work with him.

> *Social workers just did monitoring visits; no one tried to understand why I was behaving that way, they didn't want to listen, they all wanted brownie points, so, they treated the problem, not the cause.*
>
> *(Jamie, 17)*

Hallett et al. (2020) discuss the resources needed for equipping practitioners to undertake the 'non-work' work, described as work with young people driven by the relationship as the goal, supporting their well-being. This informal non-work approach, combined with specialist practitioner knowledge regarding CSE and other exploitation, is the model that young people described without realising it was a model, thus contradicting their view of not being supported by their social worker.

> *Me and Adam? Well, I loved going down the beach with some sandwiches; he talked about us getting fit and his dogs. The weather never mattered; it was about little things I could do for me.*
>
> *(Marcus, 16)*

Hallett et al. (2020) and Gilligan (2015) elicit the importance of appreciating relational interactions, focusing on other things apart from the ‘CSE problem’, and where the practitioner reveals their personality, which is what Marcus's social worker was doing. Hallett and Gilligan’s approach applies Hart’s theory of the ladder of participation (2008), supporting his reflections on that perspective identifying the need to integrate professionals’ thinking on children’s formal participation with what is known about children’s informal participation. Young people often saw social workers and the police as one profession who were sometimes too busy for them, leading to further isolation.

Rhia initially felt that the social worker was not listening, but she had referred Rhia for specialist intervention, evidencing that the social worker had listened and heard her voice.

I thought she didn't care, but then I had an appointment with… (charity); she did that, so she did hear me really.

(Rhia, 15.5)

4.2.4 Working with the police: Trouble not troubled

The police, like social workers, received mixed reviews. Boys were more negative about the police than girls, but several young people regarded the police with suspicion and mistrust, which prevented them from feeling listened to. Again, this should be viewed cautiously, as prior interaction between young people and the police may have been negative, potentially involving domestic violence, familial harm, and police incidents unrelated to exploitation. Six young people felt that their CSE experiences were not a policing priority, citing adverse childhood experiences, sibling concerns, and criminal and family dysfunction preventing them from being seen and heard. Young people suggested that limitations on professional time prevented significant relationships with the police from being nurtured. Jamie (17) consistently said 'I was trouble, not troubled', and referred to 'being invisible' and why this meant not being heard; however, when he became visible, he was seen for all the wrong reasons, i.e., going missing, or being a perceived risk to others, linking back to earlier discussions about the criminalisation of young people and the labels attached to them.

Clarke and Felson (1993) posit that the motivation for CSE relates to Rational Choice Theory, highlighting contextual factors, like financial or material gain, that may provide motivations for sexually exploiting young people, thus making them feel that there is no alternative to exploitation. This was acknowledged by four young people who felt that they had to make those choices. In addition, Clarke and Felson (1993) highlight the link between childhood trauma, psychological issues, and sexual offending later in life.

Hallett et al. (2020, p. 22) explain how the redefinition of sexual exploitation was aimed at stopping young people from being treated as offenders if they are perceived as consenting to exchange sex, but that even after the development of CSE as policy and a legal framework, the perception that young people are 'consenting' to exploitation (and therefore somehow not quite victims of abuse) remain.

All participants identified the importance of having a significant trustworthy professional to talk to. Seven young people explained that they did not initially trust police officers, but eventually, they had all built at least one significant professional relationship. Nine young people stated that having one named professional person who knew them well made 'the difference'; in Marcus's case, this was the police.

> *The police blamed me, so I gave them information; they were on a gathering evidence mission. They weren't horrible; their agenda just wasn't about me. Eventually, I knew Neil's (Police) name, and he would ring me just for a chat; he was ok, he really understood.*
>
> *(Marcus, 16)*

Elisha described the added pressure of a poor home life, where she was taught that police and social workers were not to be trusted. In addition, Elisha's previous traumatising experiences of being taken into care, domestic abuse, and numerous 'stepfathers' contributed to her mistrust of everyone but her peers.

> *Home life was awful, but the street, my family, taught me to be suspicious of the police, teachers, social workers. So home wasn't safe, but apparently, neither were the people in charge.*
>
> *(Elisha, 16)*

Dodsworth and Larson (2014) carried out a qualitative grounded theory methods study which examined the experiences and perspectives of police officers working with young people at risk of or involved in CSE, concluding that officers had an awareness of the vulnerability of CSE-experienced young people and knowledgeably discussed the links between victimisation and offending. This is different from Jamie's experience (above). He said his criminal activity was identified well before he was viewed as a victim; he felt that initially he was not listened to and that his criminalisation was a barrier to his being heard. The young people's experiences did not necessarily mean that the police did not have the attitudes, skills, or understanding they expected. However, in this study, there was a perception that the young people's communication barriers and trust issues initially prevented them from being heard by the police, as Marcus describes.

> *The police never saw me as a person with an opinion, and they never listened, never asked me [for his perspective]. The major issue was that I*

had no relationship with them, but I did in the end; Mike was brilliant once he knew me.

(Marcus, 16)

More boys than girls cited times or situations when they did not feel listened to by the police. Three boys highlighted the police as the professionals who struggled most with hearing them. There is also evidence that the police officers interviewed corroborated some of what the young people said. The examples given were that the police do not tend to stay in the specialist CSE/PPU (public protection unit) post for very long. Furthermore, because investigation of CSE is often a lengthy process, young people can speak to several officers from different departments over a protracted period. Young people suggested that the lack of continuity in police personnel prevented them from being heard or understood properly.

In the small cohort of participant young people, much of the variability in the young person's experiences depended on individual officers. This mirrors findings by Factor and Ackerley (2019), who undertook mixed methods research involving 45 children and young people aged between seven and 19 and elicited the young person’s perspectives on how the police fulfilled their safeguarding role. Factor and Ackerley (2019) identified barriers to being heard and seeking support, which included fear of not being believed and lack of trust between young people and the police. In my study, the participant young people suggested the attributes they used to measure an appropriate or reasonable professional listening response in general, but they were specific about what they would like from the police. These attributes included reassurance, empathy, respect, discretion, continuity, trust, availability, and time spent with them. However, within this, young people also needed to understand that building trust involved clarity regarding limitations of confidentiality; therefore, honesty about potential safeguarding action was crucial during these conversations with young people.

In summary, the key barriers between young people and the police were conflicting agendas (the police balancing protection with criminality), few opportunities for building relationships, communication barriers, issues of trust, and stereotypical images or perceptions of the police held by the young person. For example, three young people discussed how some police officers did not understand that they should be trusted but tried to restrict them further by

monitoring, disrupting, and imposing curfews. Young people viewed this as unhelpful and (at the time) acknowledged that they did not accept that they were at risk of harm or exploitation. Some young people suggested that their criminalised status prejudiced their 'relationship' with the police, driving them 'further underground', which further disempowered them, compounding an abusive experience and leading to further trauma.

Firmin (2016) and Coy et al. (2015) corroborate Rhys' experience and found that if exploited young people are also involved in criminal behaviour, they may be seen only as offenders rather than as victims of exploitation. They highlight the importance of professionals understanding that there is no one way that CSE is perpetrated and no typical victim.

4.2.5 Education and professionals in school settings

Similarly, to police and social workers, mixed responses were given about being listened to in school. Five young people said the school's lack of information prevented them from being heard, as they felt afraid or embarrassed to speak, rendering them invisible because they chose not to be heard in class. School was important to young people because this was where they spent time with their peers. Most young people felt that their CSE knowledge and understanding were more likely to be listened to and learned from by their peers, not teachers. Therefore, young people could negatively influence their peer group, thus glamorising CSE. This could include bragging about material items received in exchange for sex.

> *My mates couldn't believe my new phone, course I couldn't buy it, where the fuck did school think I got it?*
>
> *(Rhys, 18)*

Niamh explains the importance of CSE, meaning (to her) that she was suddenly interesting and popular with her peer group, but that their perceptions lay far from the reality of what was happening.

> *In school suddenly I was 'miss popular' because I had a rich boyfriend with a car who must love me because of the presents I showed them.*
>
> *(Niamh, 18)*

Having a boyfriend with a car and receiving expensive presents was the status and image Niamh wanted to portray, elevating her from poverty and

'nothingness' to 'being loved' (Niamh's words), which was far more attractive to her than understanding and accepting it as exploitation. Furthermore, being afraid of being judged or scapegoated by teachers became a defence mechanism, as Bella explains:

> *Teachers were the adults; why didn't they hear or see what was happening in front of them? My teacher looked straight at me and said, how do you girls think that it's ok to take presents for sex? I was terrified. Why didn't she see that I could never have bought those trainers or that I was drunk not sleeping in class? They were stupid people, not me.*
>
> *(Bella, 16)*

Tasha (19) recalled her school experience, saying that teachers did not really understand CSE, so they could not support her. Tasha suggested that CSE was not the only exploitation, and that other exploitative situations contributed to the full CSE landscape. These exploitative situations included criminal exploitation, county lines and human trafficking. Tasha's recalled experiences were from some five years earlier, when the links between CSE and other exploitative behaviours were in earlier stages of being recognised.

> *We had a few low-level talks in school, but nothing that would stop anyone. It was all there, vodka, drugs, sex. I don't think teachers knew what to do. I learned very little at school; I learned that my teachers didn't know much about CSE.*
>
> *(Tasha, 19)*

Niamh highlighted her isolation during her journey and the isolation of professionals, in that she had a social worker, a teacher and key worker, but they did not communicate with each other, despite her telling her story to all three; consequently, they neither saw nor heard the whole picture and worked in professional silos.

> *If they can't talk to each other, how could I expect them to talk to me?*
>
> *(Niamh, 18)*

Coy et al. (2017) and Gohir (2013) addressed professional isolation in multi-agency working, specifically highlighting the fact that schools may hesitate to involve external partners in response to CSE through fear of reputational risk, yet paradoxically recognising the importance of multi-agency links to develop

protective community networks. Chakravarty (2016) stated that a 'whole school' approach is necessary to address gender inequality, sexual consent, and relationships built on respect, and as a crucial response to CSE (see Coy et al. 2017). However, young people said that this preventative approach was unavailable in their schools and that there were inconsistent approaches.

> *No one in school ever explained what was normal or what we were supposed to do. Instead, different teachers said different things.*
>
> *(James 18)*

Young people felt that there were missed opportunities for teachers and education workers in school settings, suggesting that some teachers did not listen to them. However, teachers could not hear if the young person did not speak out, while at the same time, young people reported a lack of confidence, feeling stupid, out of control, and frightened, thus preventing them from speaking out. Those issues were raised, alongside their perception of teachers whom they believed did not recognise or were unaware of the signs of CSE.

4.3 Hearing involves more than just listening

The following section examines factors that influenced whether young people were heard or not, and how this impacted their CSE experiences. It starts by exploring the impact of familial life and whether those dynamics influenced decisions made by young people.

4.3.1 Parental influence and family life

The role of the family in hearing CSE-experienced young people is an important consideration, because multi-agency professionals may mistakenly assume that parents are unwilling or unable to protect their children from exploitation, not recognising their own need for remedial support and advice (Smeaton 2013). However positive interaction between families and multi-agency workers could potentially add another protective layer for young people, and in some cases, families could help represent or support young people in multi-agency professional meetings (Thomas and D'arcy 2017).

In this study, only one young person identified a parent (mother) who listened to and advocated for her:

My mam made them (professionals) listen to me; she was there and made them understand. Finally, it got stopped, and we were helped to move house, I was out of it. It affected everyone though, and she cried all the time. Mam said it wasn't my fault, but it was safer to move.

(Bella, 16).

Bella had autism; she explained that her mother had advocated for her. Bella's autism became a protective factor because she was very literal, and she struggled with secrecy when questioned. Moving to a new house, although difficult, became the protective measure and the 'way out'. Bella referred to police and social workers working alongside her mum, who listened to her and protected her.

Elisha also described her experiences:

I had an abusive family; I was in and out of care since I was nine. My family were shit; I was on the register for neglect, joke that was… I had so many foster carers I wouldn't talk. If my family were decent, it would have been different.

(Elisha, 16)

Elisha believed that she would have made better choices with a better family; she described having numerous foster carers but could not build up significant relationships, believing they would inevitably move her on, thus equating to more rejection and mistrust because everyone, including her family, had consistently let her down.

Why would I talk to them? They never talked to me; I hated every new family, just wanted my mam.

(Elisha, 16)

Elisha also (later) explained that the professional focus was on whole family issues, including neglect and substance misuse, which were viewed as safeguarding priorities. Therefore, her CSE became secondary and part of the layering of complex family issues, including being a looked after child and poverty; consequently, Elisha remained silent and unheard throughout her exploitation.

Jules (17) also believed that if she had had a good family background, outcomes would have been different. Her one 'listening' ally was her grandmother;

when she died, Jules felt alone, isolated, not listened to or believed. This made her more vulnerable and unheard.

> *Poor family life is definitely a big problem, If I had great parents, a great home and enough money, I could have talked to them, and maybe that would have stopped it (CSE), but I couldn't and didn't.*
>
> *(Jules, 17)*

A consistent emergent theme was that the participant young people often commented on the outcomes they felt they could have had 'if only' certain variables had been present – good home lives, better peer groups, or if they had felt empowered enough to make better life decisions; they also discussed the difference they thought this would have made.

Hallett et al. (2019) undertook a three-year, mixed-methods enquiry into CSE. Its specific focus was on outcomes, tracking children over ten years. Hallett found that almost 60% of the young people in the sample had a dysfunctional relationship with their parents, and another 6.8% experienced a complete breakdown in the relationship with their parents. Although my study sample was significantly smaller, it also reflected dysfunctional family relationships as a significant barrier to hearing young people. The professional focus was often on the parents and their issues, e.g., poverty, substance misuse or domestic abuse.

The chapter now explores how young people felt listened to, i.e., the distinction between being listened to and heard, and introduces general themes, including body language, the environment and 'real listening', that relate to all professionals.

4.3.2 Body language and the environment

Young people felt that professionals listened to them if certain behaviours were present. These included good eye contact (although, as previously discussed, Tasha and Rhys liked talking in the car without eye contact) and recognition of the importance of being made to feel comfortable. Likewise, if young people were upset, it was important that professionals acknowledged this empathetically and explored the reasons.

During the semi-structured interviews, the young person's body language often gave me key messages. For example, as recorded in my reflexive diary and observations of Bella's behaviour in her interview,

‘Bella looked down and became very agitated when talking about her experience at school; she said she was angry that she hadn’t been believed and started to tap the floor with her foot, obviously uncomfortable with what was being discussed. At one point, she stood up as if to leave, said nothing, but then sat back down, took a deep breath and, in a couple of minutes, we continued. I carefully watched, assessed the situation, and when she indicated that she was ready to go on, I asked if she was okay, and took the cues from her demeanour and facial expressions. ‘

(Research diary entry; July 2018 - Bella’s Interview)

Young people also said that they were aware of a professional's body language, mannerisms, and attitudes, whether they were empathetic or disinterested, and this would often dictate the response the professional received from the young person, explained by Rhia below:

‘*I could see by his stance, the tapping of the pen on the table, looking out of the window and at his watch, all the time he was looking at his watch, like he had to be somewhere else, he didn’t have time for this, or time for me. I think it was nearing the end of his shift. It was obvious he wanted this over and quickly, so I just shut up, the less I said the more it made his mind up about me!’*

(Rhia; 15, talking about her police interview)

Examining the young people's attitudes and understanding was crucial. Their experiential interpretation, core values, and environments were instrumental in giving them the confidence to share their stories. Observation of the young person's body language, gauging their mood, checking out and verifying all contributed to listening to them and shaped whether they, in turn, felt listened to. A key point evidenced by young people was that being listened to involves more than hearing what is said.

Jules (17) had been interviewed many times by different professionals and recalled one occasion.

I was taken into what looked like a cupboard full of boxes and old papers, and I was about to share personal stuff; I didn't feel valued. It was really

demoralising. I told them, then the next time, it was the same cupboard but tidier, and with a plant on a table, I told them to fuck off.

Jules demonstrated that this experience devalued her and prevented her from talking. It illustrated that the environment had to be conducive to enable her to talk freely and confirmed that it influenced her decision not to share and, therefore, whether she would be heard. However, as Jules explains next, it is also crucial to understand what is *not* being said via inference, nuance, or body language.

Sometimes I felt they were afraid of me giving answers that they couldn't cope with! They were sympathetic, but it's not enough; they needed to understand the bigger picture. They didn't dig deeper; all the clues were there, my behaviours, my anxiety, but they cared about the cupboard.

(Jules, 17)

When Jules complained about the 'cupboard', the worker tried to make the environment more attractive, but Jules felt that she was not treated with respect or taken seriously; therefore, she didn't engage.

I was still in a store cupboard and not somewhere comfortable, professional or safe enough to talk, which meant I was not heard.

(Jules, 17)

The professionals were more comfortable addressing Jules's criminal activity (also evidenced by Rhys and Catherine). This distinction between being listened to and being heard overlaps with how young people described working with teachers, who they felt did not recognise the signs of CSE or hear what was being said.

Jules (17) and Catherine (16.5) illustrate the different stages of the journey that they were on when they felt that professionals listened to them or that they had agency. Jules talked about being in a cupboard, which prevented her from talking at the beginning of her journey, but then, much later, she was heard. Catherine spoke about being kept safe and listened to at the end of her journey when she was pregnant, but not at the beginning.

Rhia told me that it was better for her just to shut up because the police officer was concentrating on his watch and looking out of the window, seemingly uninterested during her police interview, which was in the middle of her journey.

However, there was also evidence of young people thinking they hadn't been heard when in fact they had. For example, Rhia initially felt that the social worker was not listening. However, she had referred Rhia for specialist intervention, evidencing that the social worker had listened and heard her voice, as highlighted on page 91, toward the end of her journey.

It is essential that, at every stage of the young person's journey, the language used by professionals is understandable to them, and the language they use is understood by professionals.

4.3.3 Language: What you say is not what we hear

The following section captures direct quotes from six young people regarding professional language and terminology used, which paradoxically accentuated their vulnerability. This provides evidence that what professionals say and what young people hear are often poles apart; therefore, interpretation is critical. Furthermore, it became apparent that some professionals were not seeking confirmation of the young person's understanding, as is evidenced below:

'Yes I was on the CP register – I thought it meant child paedophile.' (Rhys, 18)

'CSE – yes, that's criminal sexual exploitation.' (Bella, 15)

'CSE – I thought it was exams like GCSE, you know.' (Leah, 17)

'I was at risk – didn't know what I was at risk of, was I a risk? I wasn't sure. '(Jules, 17)

'CSE – I didn't know what the C stood for; it was just sexploitation.' (Elisha, 15)

'Grooming? Looking pretty for them… and smelling nice? '(Bella 15)

'RBP – (risky behaviour panel) – didn't know what that was, something about risk and the police?' (Tasha, 19)

'DNA – my fingerprints or something?' (Marcus, 16) (DNA means did not attend).

Professional language must be clear and consistent; the interviews with several young people showed an initial lack of understanding of CSE safeguarding terms used every day by professionals. Young people cannot contribute effectively if there is little understanding of professional terminology and language. It was clear from the above responses, and the evidence presented, that professionals

who do not ensure that young people understand their conversations could be perceived as setting them up to fail, creating more confusion and mistrust. When a young person is afraid of being disbelieved, blamed, or criticised, telling their story becomes even more problematic, compounding their anxieties or feelings of shame or embarrassment. Therefore, a professional commitment to speak in a language that young people understand is essential.

Pennebaker and Stone (2004) illustrate how the translation of traumatic experiences into language has a significant health impact, reinforcing the importance of the young person understanding what has happened and what professionals are saying. Professionals must verify and ensure that young people understand the language used.

4.3.4 Patterns of engagement and young people's characteristics

This chapter has examined how and when young people felt listened to by multi-agency professionals. It has explored whether what we know about young people influenced these findings, including fear of consequences and how age and understanding contributed to being heard. Several young people said they were listened to but only at certain stages of their interactions with professionals. Three young people asserted that they had never been listened to, but as the interview progressed, they acknowledged that they had connected with one or more professionals who had listened to them. There emerged a young person's trajectory of being listened to, ranging from emphatic 'no, not in the beginning', to 'yes they had my back in the end'.

Jules and Catherine also spoke of how they felt excluded from meetings that made decisions about them, and both gave examples of how, when they had attended, it was having someone there who knew them that made the difference in whether they participated in discussions or not.

> '*There were so many meetings; when my keyworker was there, I could talk, but when I knew she wasn't, I felt unable to stand my ground so I would refuse to go.'*
>
> Catherine, 16.

Jules agreed with this position and said that she knew the meetings were important, but didn't quite realise how important until she was older,

'Looking back, if I had my time over, I would have gone to everyone (review child protection conference) just to tell them all what I thought they could do; when my worker was there, they explained it all before and after the meeting, which made a difference, and they seemed to take more notice of me'.

(Jules, 17)

Another consideration was the young person's age. When this study began, the average age of referred young people into specialist CSE intervention services was 12 years. Four years later, this has reduced to 10.5 years. The young people's maturity and understanding of what was happening to them were pivotal. Eight young people admitted that they did not understand what was happening when they first became involved with CSE. As young people matured and had more involvement with professionals, they were given more opportunities to have their voices heard. Four young people discussed understanding their experiences of exploitation only as they gained maturity. Six young people acknowledged that building trust with professionals was vital in being able to talk safely, which took time – time that many frontline workers did not have. Being valued and believed was critical for young people, giving them validation, and encouraging them to say more and consequently have a voice. Three young people feared being blamed and suggested that this was a barrier to talking openly and honestly. One young person was so convinced she would be placed in a secure unit that she lied.

I had to lie when I knew they were going to lock me in secure, so I told them I wasn't being exploited, I had to say that to give them a reason. I am not stupid, I had a good family, but bad friends, I really thought I was cleverer than them.

(Catherine, 16.5)

Rhia highlighted communication barriers between herself, the police, and social workers; she acknowledged she was angry but (later) said this was because she was scared. Rhia's anger was never explored, and she felt that the police and social workers shut her down with a punitive approach.

The police and social said I was angry and would talk to me properly when I talked to them properly; I couldn't be arsed, so nobody talked to anybody fucking properly.

(Rhia, 15.5).

Rhys described his desensitisation to exploitation and how he used it to survive and meet unmet need.

> *It was easier and safer than running drugs, and at least it was a bed for the night and sometimes a meal; it was no big deal.*
>
> *(Rhys, 18)*

This desensitisation was discussed by four young people who used exploitation as a coping mechanism to survive, suggesting that it was an easier option than some of the presenting options they faced and met their unmet needs.

4.4 In conclusion and on reflection

Concluding and reflecting on this chapter, all 12 young people had their individual, complex backstories, but the emerging themes indicated some similarities in how they felt that they were listened to by multi-agency professionals and what factors impacted this. An adapted model of Honneth's recognition theory (1996) in Thomas (2012) is relevant here as discussed on page 80. This model considers young people's rights to participate and be heard within multi-agency decision-making processes, thus situating their agency and right to participation within a theoretical concept. This perspective supports some of the difficulties encountered by previous research by Diaz et al. (2019) and Diaz (2020), who found that young people were not consulted and were unable to express their views in decision-making and child protection processes, raising significant barriers to children’s participation (Thomas 2012).

As this chapter has demonstrated, young people discussed being given the opportunity to talk, for example, on car journeys, not having to make eye contact, and where the young person did most of the talking. Being believed also equated to being listened to, and four of the young people evidenced how they began to trust the professional they were working with, spending 'non-work' time with them or in the therapeutic environment. Overall, participant young people projected positive experiences of working with specialist CSE intervention workers and identified these professionals as those with whom they built up the most trust and found the space to talk with confidence. Furthermore, within therapeutic environments, their relationship with the therapist became meaningful and validating, which enabled them to be heard. Regarding other multi-agency

professionals, young people attached significance to being 'kept in the loop' and being believed and respected; they could also describe what they needed from professionals and how professionals met those needs in terms of time spent with them. Overall, young people said that when they eventually built relationships with either the police or social workers, the one-to-one approach facilitated their voices being heard.

The young people interviewed talked specifically about their preference of one-to-one working and although I understand the reasons for that, their exclusion from their meetings meant that they had limited opportunities to explore inclusion and participation. However, two young people commented that when they had attended meetings previously, the thing that helped them was having someone there who was familiar and had a relationship with them. I also got the impression from talking to Catherine and Jules that it was their lack of experience of attending meetings that made them nervous, and that if they had had more opportunities, some of the barriers they experienced would be overcome. Therefore, I suggest that giving young people a place in decision-making meetings is crucial and builds a broader base of their involvement, creating stronger, more inclusive (and in this case) safer communities. Their participation is necessary in the development of their safeguarding plans because it balances young people's rights with their responsibilities, and with professionals' roles in balancing participation with protection.

While reporting positive experiences, young people also acknowledged that a lack of trust on both sides often prevented building relationships with professionals, which was identified as a barrier to being heard. Overall, they felt the police to be the group that listened to them the least. However, this did not necessarily mean that the police did not have the attitudes or understanding needed, but that communication barriers and trust issues for young people in this study prevented them, initially, from feeling that they were heard by the police until that trust was established. There were also occasions when it was clear that young people would rather know what was going on and the decision made, even if they did not agree with those decisions.as Tasha said;

> *'I would rather know the truth and what to expect from them (police) than be palmed off with bullshit or made-up promises, you can work with the*

truth, you can't trust people who lie to you, even if you don't agree with what they are doing at least you can respect honesty.'

Tasha was specifically talking about the police, but several young people also said that being 'kept in the loop' was important to them in terms of knowing what was going to happen (see above).

In working with multi-agency professionals, particularly in educational settings, it was difficult for young people to speak up until they were older and supported by professionals with whom they had built a relationship. Multi-agency collaboration was a key factor in enabling young people to be heard, explicitly highlighted by one pregnant young person when direct and increased support from multi-agency professionals became a protective factor, thus reducing her risk of exploitation. Some young people recognised poor mental health as significant and valued and recognised the need for CAMHS support, which was often unavailable when needed. For those young people who experienced episodes of 'going missing', return home interviews were instrumental in being heard, and having a safe space to talk contributed significantly to this process.

The language used is key to young people understanding their experiences, and the language used by professionals often reinforces their negative sense of worth. Thus, professional language was a barrier, for example, when young people did not understand terms like 'at risk' and 'CSE'.

Poor homelife and chaotic lifestyles significantly shaped young people's responses and engagement with multi-agency professionals. Some young people viewed issues of neglect and intrafamilial harm as a greater priority for professionals than CSE. The resultant professional meetings that were convened regarding both intrafamilial and extra-familial harm were confusing to young people, who felt that they did not contribute to meetings where key decisions were made and did not fully understand the reasons behind those decisions.

As the research with young people progressed, it was evident that young people's voices were heard eventually, but not initially. For example, eight young people did not believe that they were being exploited at the time but understood later as they became more mature and had more support from multi-agency professionals.

Young people also explained that there were times that professionals could not hear them because they told the professionals what they thought they wanted

to hear. During the interviews, sometimes, the young people expressed their perception that they had not been heard or listened to; in fact, they had been heard, as made clear in the data provided from earlier accounts by Rhia and Rhys.

The participant young people wanted to be seen, heard, believed, and respected. When blamed, criminalised, or judged negatively for their behaviour, their relationships with multi-agency professionals were jeopardised, evoking mistrust, and creating barriers to being heard. Paradoxically, when young people did enter the criminal justice system they would qualify for earlier support, services, and specialist CSE interventions, including support for their mental health from CAMHS, to which others in mainstream services, could not gain rapid access.

When young people felt that they had some agency in decision-making about their lives, this was considered as essential to a successful safeguarding plan as multi-agency collaboration. Mitchell (2020) suggests that outcomes for children and young people often improve when they are actively involved in decision-making and have some agency in professional fora. My findings indicate that in cases of exploitation, there is a need for the increased recognition of children and young people's rights to be heard, have their views taken seriously, and be involved in decisions affecting their lives.

The next empirical chapter discusses the findings concerning the multi-agency professional participants.

Chapter 5: The views of professionals working with CSE-experienced young people

This chapter discusses how the multi-agency professionals interviewed work together and how they believe that they hear the voice and opinions of CSE-experienced young people with whom they have been professionally involved.

5.1 Introduction

The chapter's principal focus is the professionals' understanding of what young people are saying to them. It broadly sets the scene by highlighting inter-agency collaboration and the different aspects of multi-agency working together, giving a brief overview of current practice, and examining the relationships between agencies and their fellow professionals.

The RQs addressed in this chapter are:

RQ1: When multiple professionals work together in cases of CSE, what does it mean to hear the voice of the young person?

RQ3: What are the barriers and opportunities in relation to the young person's voice being heard and responded to?

RQ4: What are the professionals' perceptions of how the voice of young people is listened to and responded to?

RQ6: What are the barriers to, or opportunities for, hearing the voice of the young person when working in multi-agency settings?

The chapter includes a discussion of collaboration and professionalism before examining some more practical factors, including the environment, and how people 'listen'.

5.2 An integrated approach for professionals working with young people

This chapter features several aspects of the complexity of interaction between different professional groups. To contextualise this further, I explain how the multi-agency context works, and then move on to examine how the voices of

young people are heard (or not). Firstly, this section addresses the (multiple) roles, responsibilities, and professional accountabilities, including the complexities entailed in integrated working, whereas later sections address joined-up working or cohesive working (5.3) and the barriers and opportunities to integrated working (5.5).

The terms ‘inter-agency’, ‘multi-agency’, and ‘joined-up’ working are frequently used in the context of working in the CSE arena. They are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive and are interchangeable, when necessary, because the professionals involved often undertake more than one role within their professional agency. There was additional complexity in separating CSE roles and responsibilities from other aspects of their jobs for the professionals who had additional organisational roles. This led to the interruption of joint or multi-agency work because, as professionals, they were obliged to fulfil their commitments elsewhere (Atkinson et al. 2005). There was also the risk of a lack of cohesiveness, as professionals working for different organisations would be line managed by their source organisation. Consequently, differing codes of professional practice meant that there was not one overall line of accountability or supervision for multi-agency collaboration in exploitation cases.

I now examine the participants' views on multi-agency working and the role and perceptions of professionals in CSE cases, taking account of the above complexities. I refer the reader to the demographic and description of the professional participants and their roles and responsibilities in the methods chapter (Chapter Three). The 15 professional participants were situated geographically within the same regional safeguarding board area. All were specialist leads or had named agency responsibility for CSE. Their multi-agency roles and responsibilities included harmful sexual behaviour, human trafficking, modern slavery, criminal exploitation, contextualised risk, and county lines. It was also apparent that CSE as a priority issue was not the single responsibility of any individual agency; this is in line with Beckett (2017), who advocates that the CSE response and responsibility should be collective and multi-agency. For clarification, although the participants were not technically an established team or teams, they viewed themselves as a multi-agency collective when working together in CSE cases (Sloper 2004).

The police and missing children's coordinator were co-located in the same unit, as were the social workers and intervention workers in the Youth Justice Services (classified as social workers in the professionals' sample). There was a consensus among the professionals interviewed that working as a multi-agency team (albeit some in different geographical locations) was a safer professional approach, because it allowed them to develop their CSE remit and knowledge together. For example, the clinical nurse specialist would still be working for and accountable to the health board, and the police officer would still be working for and accountable to the regional police force. Furthermore, although there were often differing organisational agendas, multi-agency professionals found that this inter-agency approach was the most successful because they were co-located. This multi-agency model was highlighted by eight participants as an example of good practice, and CSE was an area where multi-agency collaborative practice was viewed as the norm. It is also common for the CSE professionals to have previous experience in inter-agency and multi-agency working, and five of the 15 participants had done both, holding interchangeable roles. This model is similar to that studied by Radcliffe et al. (2020), who studied three coastal towns in England that have long-established CSE multi-agency teams located together, where this approach was considered the norm and an exemplar of good practice.

5.2.1 The good, the bad, and the reality of a multi-disciplinary approach

The professional participants acknowledged that supporting, listening to, and understanding young people who were at risk of sexual exploitation was a hugely complex and sensitive process that required and involved a range of interventions from various stakeholders. This CSE focus and the multi-agency CSE approach were integral to developing shared actions and a protection plan for young people through the coordination and contribution of the professionals involved. Two participants described the benefits of working together to create a safety plan and an integrated CSE response.

> *It's like a jigsaw, all of us come together and identify which part of the plan is our responsibility to support. So, my name could be against checking the police data; the social worker would understand how many visits she would need to make. The school would know when to liaise with the intervention*

worker if Jonny hadn't turned up for school; then we bring all that together in one meeting, which makes it clear and hopefully workable.

(Jayne: Missing person coordinator, police-based)

Another participant talked about having named responsibility for the young person in the safety plan and acknowledged that this was even more important when the plan was not going well.

It's about trying to get the best outcome, and knowing who is responsible for what and when, and being professionally accountable for actions that have your name against them. It's about coordination and an immediate and written contingency when things are not going so well for them.

(Nicki: Health)

An integrated multi-agency CSE plan meant identifying key professionals who knew or had a significant professional relationship with the young person. Multi-agency plans identified which professional had spoken to or would be speaking to the young person and what those conversations (and their subsequent interpretation) had entailed (Lefevre et al. 2018). Notably, professionals would not just be undertaking direct interviews or interventions; they would also represent their organisation in multi-agency meetings about the young person. This was against the backdrop of dual roles (commented on later), and the resultant theme was that inter-agency collaboration was primarily regarded as both positive and necessary.

It's great to get around the table and brief each other about what is going on in each partner area about a young person. For example, I may have police intelligence that the social worker doesn't, or the young person may have said something to the social worker which would raise a concern for the police. Sometimes part of a missing jigsaw will come to light in a strategy meeting. However, what is conspicuous by their absence in these meetings are often the young people themselves.

(Andrew: Police)

A senior social worker spoke of the advantages and disadvantages of being part of a multi-disciplinary team, including professional agendas, and the crossover of agendas to which each professional must work.

Multi-disciplinary teams have pros and cons. For example, you believe that you are listening to young people in one-to-one situations, but when you enter a multi-agency environment, your organisational agenda sometimes becomes more important. Sometimes, against your better judgement, their voice becomes lost, and the professional agenda in which you must immerse yourself takes precedence.

(Mark: Social worker)

Here, acknowledged by Mark, the concept of a multi-disciplinary approach was positive, but sometimes competing professional agendas took precedence over the young person's voice. Both professionals quoted above identified the young person as being 'lost' in the process, Andrew, by noting the omission of young people at multi-agency meetings, and Mark, by noting professional agendas being prioritised over young people's voices. Both (later) commented on professionals needing joint training and shared and accessible systems. They also discussed their multiple roles and responsibilities alongside dealing with CSE cases: as described below.

I am often thrown in at the deep end; we need joint training and access to joint systems to share information effectively. CSE cases are transient, often crossing police forces and LA areas when victims and perpetrators move around. My police priority is solving crime, but I'm often social working these youngsters. I'm a cop, not a soft-centred leftie (or maybe I am!); I keep thinking, what if they were my child? I would want to hear what they had to say; I may not necessarily agree with them, though!

(Andrew: Police)

A social worker described the level of trust needed between multi-agency professionals and young people, and like Andrew (above), said that blurred role-boundaries and listening to a young person may produce a situation such as having to break confidentiality to keep the young person safe, thus potentially jeopardising the relationship that he is trying to nurture (Hughes and Thomas 2016).

Young people need to feel valued and respected, and they need to trust you. As a professional, I must earn that trust. From a multi-agency perspective, we also must trust each other. I often feel like I am policing

> *these kids, monitoring, reporting back, taking away their freedoms to safeguard them, but worse, after they have confided in me. That does not sit comfortably; we need each other as professionals to rationalise all of that, and sometimes young people's voices are overshadowed by all these competitors.*
>
> *(Mark: Social worker)*

These police and social worker participants were statutory agency representatives. They identified important themes, including the impact of multi-agency teamwork on their professional knowledge and how this affected their way of working. They highlighted blurred professional boundaries and described professional identities being challenged and changed, with the police officer feeling as though he undertakes a social work role and the social worker feeling as though he undertakes a policing role. These challenges can generate anxiety and uncertainty in professionals who struggle to morph into identities, roles, and responsibilities they did not anticipate (Solomon 2019; Richardson 2005). Working in the field of CSE also raised personal dilemmas, for example:

> *What if this was my child?' or 'I had to act on something they told me in confidence.*
>
> *(Andrew: Police)*

Andrew demonstrated awareness of why his reflexivity was critical in challenging his observations because of his pre-determined principles, knowledge, and values. These included his police background and role as a dad, highlighting how these and other factors may influence his decisions about sharing information. Furthermore, the 'what if' question suggested Andrew was seeking validation, and he had to bracket his own bias regarding personal feelings to remain child-focused when addressing the emotional impact of CSE cases. This validation justified Andrew's position about breaking a young person's confidence to safeguard them.

Mark (later) questioned whether young people's trust was enough, and his reflexivity allowed critical questioning regarding the service structure for multi-agency working, the environment, and current policy and practice guidelines. Mark also advocated for multi-agency practitioners to build enough professional resilience to sustain positive relationships (both with young people and colleagues)

in emotionally visceral circumstances, going on to highlight the difficulties in multi-agency working and trying to keep young people central to it.

> *On the ground, roles and responsibilities are blurred, multi-agency line management is not embedded or aspired to. Statutory environments (police stations, social work offices) don't cater for hearing or empowering young people. We do the best we can and do it well, but young people need to be central, not peripheral.*
>
> *(Mark: Social worker)*

This section has discussed some of the strengths and challenges of multi-agency working. Multiple roles for CSE professionals emerged as a theme and elicited professional perceptions of how and where the young person's voice was heard and when or why it became lost or peripheral.

The validity and value of a multi-agency collaborative and coordinated response are discussed next, and I refer briefly to Engeström's (1999) activity theory, returning to the theoretical frameworks later. The following section discusses organisational partnerships and collaboration between agencies, including the journey, historical issues and the dual professional roles which have become commonplace as CSE practice has been assimilated into everyday professional roles and responsibilities.

5.3 A collaborative and coordinated response and a common professional language

There is no single or unilateral approach to how local areas respond to CSE on a multi-agency basis. All geographical areas covered in this study reported to the same regional safeguarding board. Therefore, there was much consistency in the practices and processes described. Safeguarding arrangements, sharing information, and highlighting concerns were discussed at various fora, including contextualised risk panels, CSE strategy meetings, and MASE meetings, which initially covered CSE as a stand-alone risk. More recently, they have been renamed contextualised risk panels and consider other forms of exploitation; MASE meetings include any identified emergent extra-familial risk to the young person (Firmin 2017).

Practitioners stressed that even more could be done to unify CSE response, and Lefevre et al. (2017; 2018) further advocate transformational learning across multi-agency practice systems to achieve more integrated and child-focused practice.

Professionals in this study often considered inter-agency work to be the most successful in terms of integration. Many areas in the UK are moving toward this model. For example, in Wales, all YOS have multi-agency teams where a cohort of young people on caseloads are CSE cases. In addition, multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASH) are established in large parts of the UK (see Dunne and Finalay 2016), although they were not in place in my study location. In the two administrative areas covered by the study, the Youth Justice teams operated on an inter-agency and multi-professional basis.

Dave was a CSE public protection unit officer and understood both inter-agency and multi-agency approaches. He suggested that a collaborative agency approach enabled the provision of education, training, and information for young people and professionals, enabling young people to make safer choices. He gave examples including the health professional who provided contraception advice and sexually transmitted disease support, and the police who provided information about CSE, trafficking, county lines, and exploitation, including perpetrator disruption (techniques for managing the disruption of perpetrator activity rather than the behaviour of the exploited victim) and the legalities around CSE consent and 'grooming'. Several participants suggested that a multi-agency approach involved increased collaboration and cohesiveness, a subsequent understanding of each other's worlds by those in multi-agency teams or cohorts, and increased CSE awareness for professionals operating outside the world of exploitation. Neil, the senior practitioner in a social work team but with previous responsibility for CSE, felt that the secret to successful multi-agency working was the ability to understand each other's points of view and differing professional agendas.

> *I daresay the only way to survive the dichotomy is to adopt a kind of schizophrenia where both viewpoints have validity; I guess the worry is that maintaining such conflicts eventually tear you apart.*
>
> *(Neil: Social worker)*

Dave and his social work colleague recognised the need to find a common language and perspective and to share each other's knowledge processes and procedures, including their professional views of the world. More importantly, Dave implies that this was an essential prerequisite for hearing and understanding the young person.

> *'I feel that when we understand each other's multi-agency worlds, and understand mutual professional agendas, only then can we begin to understand and hear what young people are up against when they meet us. If we don't understand what we do and why, how will they begin to be heard?'*
>
> *(Dave: Police)*

Engeström (1999) relates experiences like Dave's to activity theory and describes how implicit knowledge must be made explicit, explaining how and why professionals must find a common language. Engeström (1999) argues that conflict arises as tasks, roles, and responsibilities are redefined; consequently, open debate is essential among professionals, teams, and organisations to merge to pursue a common goal. All professional participants stated that working together on a multi-agency and multi-disciplinary basis was more advantageous and safer for young people than working unilaterally and encouraged opportunities for young people's voices to be heard and responded to (Lupton et al. 2002). However, and concurring with Engeström, there was an acknowledgement that multi-agency working was not always problem-free and that tensions would inevitably arise because of communication issues and differing professional agendas. There was also recognition of the need to work together, even if in different agencies (referring to open debate and acknowledgement of professional differences as outlined by Engeström), and that professionals outside of CSE cohorts often do not understand the difficulties faced.

> *CSE young people are usually victims, so it's easier to think about what they are saying and why, and easier to get their voice over if your colleague understands and supports your position. Sometimes colleagues outside the CSE cohort aren't receptive to (for example) disruption techniques. They think it's easy to go and get them out of there. Then they complain when*

the young person goes straight back in and says, 'you are not listening to me about what I want!' I am often between a rock and a hard place.'

(Ruth: Police)

Several professionals highlighted a common understanding within the circle of CSE professionals but recognised that this had not always been the case. Many conversations became retrospective as professionals talked about the complexity of their professional CSE journey.

5.3.1 An evolving story

Two participants relayed historical difficulties regarding previous referrals that they suggested were dismissed or not acted upon. One explanation was offered that previously, children's services systems were not set up to address extra-familial abuse. In addition, referrals were measured in terms of risk inside the home versus risk outside the home, and social workers were unfamiliar with assessing risk outside the home. Therefore, as CSE emerged as a significant risk of harm, referrals may not have been deemed as meeting the threshold for section 47 (child protection) investigations. Two professional participants had left previous roles because of their perceptions of the dangers of silo working. They suggested that at that time, young people's voices were not prioritised in practice and were an afterthought. Two professionals suggested that in their previous roles (several years before), a lack of multi-agency coordination was a missed opportunity and a weakness in practice and policy, because it was believed that young people were protected by professionals following due process and procedure; however, difficulties were encountered ensuring that they were heard.

I would refer to children services. I was walking the streets day and night and could see (and hear) what was happening but rarely received a follow-up call; when I did, it would be no further action [NFA]. There was a culture of blaming young people for putting themselves 'out there' and asking for trouble. It was risky and isolating for me, but how isolated and vulnerable were the young people? The third sector was the poor relation of safeguarding; if we didn't have a voice then, how could young people be heard?

(Lauren: currently a CSE Intervention worker)

Lauren relayed that over time, there was gradual improvement in being heard as a professional and thus hearing the voices of young people. Lauren suggested that the current focus on sharing information and joint risk assessment meant easier engagement with young people because more information was available about them. The caveat was the notion of invisibility:

> *I feel now that we are in a much better place. Young people's voices are acknowledged, but more needs to be done to actively involve them when making crucial decisions about them. Sometimes they are invisible, and there is too much talking about them, and not enough talking with them.*
>
> *(Lauren: currently a CSE Intervention worker)*

Lauren's views support those of Jayne (below), who, as the missing young person coordinator, was often the first person to engage with young people after episodes of going missing and potential exploitation.

Jayne was seconded into the public protection unit by a CSE specialist intervention charity. She argued that the overriding contributor to successful multi-agency working was an ability to view the young person's life in different and variable contexts. Jayne suggested that the most productive way of working was child-focused, involving multiple agencies who could professionally challenge and learn from each other. Jayne also highlighted multiple challenges presented as she joined a statutory agency as a secondee from a non-statutory agency:

> *Being a secondee, I was an outsider, with different strengths and weaknesses. I wasn't there to get a 'result' or conviction. The dilemma was initial inclusion in that police culture while simultaneously maintaining my position. I had to navigate that and still hear what the kids were saying, act on it and own it. It was challenging; admittedly, we weren't used to each other, but now they recognise me as a major contributor and always ask for my opinion, which validates me.*
>
> *(Jayne: Missing children's coordinator)*

The CSE/missing young person coordinator, CSE intervention worker, two police officers, and senior social work practitioner clearly felt that they heard and prioritised young people's voices, but they often had to work through professional differences and competing arguments or agendas first. However, while

professional differences or conflicts were highlighted, they felt that their similarities, common ground, and professional practice were valued.

In summary, the key concept of joined-up working permeated all through the professional narrative in this section, and the ability to view the young person's life in different and variable contexts was crucial and often challenging when trying to hear the young person's voice. This sometimes leads to the conflict of knowing when to act and when not to, and when to trust the judgement of the young person to manage their own risk.

5.4 Current practice: a balancing act between risk and danger and participation and protection

The chapter next examines professional dilemmas regarding balancing the young person’s voice with risk management, taking into consideration competing priorities, and highlighting the conflict that this often evokes. It is worth noting here that dilemmas about overriding a young person’s voice with protective action would be there even in the absence of inter-agency collaboration, because they are inherent to CSE work.

All professional participants clearly understood the referral processes from an outside agency perspective; how, where, and why the information was shared was not problematic for participants in their current roles.

Professionals noted that legislation, supporting frameworks, and governmental guidance, including the *Social Services and Well-being Act Wales* (2014) and the new *Wales Safeguarding Procedures* (2019), were clearly defined, including procedural guidelines and exemplar pointers for practice, aiming to standardise inter-agency practice across Wales. However, the issues for professionals when working with young people were more nuanced and subtle.

Following a written procedure or process was considered relatively straightforward but balancing professional judgement with common sense or justification of professionals' decision-making to young people was more sensitive and complex. Professionals outside of the police and social services described the balancing act of managing risk against the competing priorities of child protection and safeguarding young people – for example, knowing when referrals had to be made into the police or children's services and when information was too risky to be kept in isolation from other professionals. Nine professional participants

highlighted this dichotomy and the demanding situations they faced when managing these conversations, and how these judgement calls could potentially jeopardise their relationships with young people.

> *When a young person tells me something that I know must be shared, I must be honest and say, 'Ellie, I can't keep this to myself; it's too risky for you; my priority is keeping you safe'. Their values and behaviours may not be compatible with mine but saying you may need to break their confidence following something they have chosen to disclose means that you have heard the risks but not necessarily their voice. As a result, you risk losing their trust. The whole foundation of safeguarding young people is building strong relationships with them.*

Asked to give an example of listening but not hearing young people, Nadia continued:

> *On reflection, Ellie was clearly telling me how important the relationship (with the perpetrator) had been to her how, with support she felt that she would walk away eventually. What I heard (and acted on) was unprotected sex, exploitation, make the referral. Inevitably, I lost her trust anyway.*
>
> *(Nadia: Specialist nurse)*

One social worker discussed why social inequality issues made her afraid of missing and not hearing the CSE dialogue due to the structural societal disadvantages with which the young people are already shackled, which often silences them further.

> *I am always afraid that I will miss what they are saying and not hear their CSE story because there are so many pull-push factors to consider, which can suggest that there are multiple forms of exploitation.*
>
> *(Jen: Social worker)*

Thus, professionals recognised young people's need to survive and the choices they felt they had to make to survive (Firmin 2020; Firmin et al. 2016). This further confirmed that professionals were aware that CSE is linked to other forms of exploitation which could mean that the CSE thread and the young people's voices are inaudible if masked by other safeguarding concerns.

The chapter next discusses how professionals engage with each other while engaging with young people; Engeström's activity theory (1999) can shed light on how young people's lived experience is heard and understood by professionals within this context. In summary, activity theory is a framework or descriptive tool for a system. Engeström argues that people are socio-culturally embedded actors (not processors or system components). Thus, there exists a hierarchical analysis of motivated human action (levels of activity analysis). In this study, it applies to entire (multi-agency) teams and organisations, beyond a single actor or participant, and engages with team environments, cultures, and the complexity of real-life experiences; in this instance, the management of CSE-experienced young people.

5.4.1 The characteristics of multi-agency working and shared experiences

To recap, multi-agency working together is already embedded in Wales, building on many years of safeguarding and lessons learned from Serious Case Reviews (Brandon et al. 2008) and child practice reviews (see Rees et al. 2019). Furthermore, a functional multi-agency team may not be an actual physical team but a collective group of professionals each specialising in one area, e.g., safeguarding (including CSE). The characteristics of multi-agency working in this study are consistent with the predictions made by Engeström's activity theory (1999), which encourages open debate amongst professionals to transcend the complexity of multi-agency practice models. Applications of activity theory in previous research, including Daniels et al. (2007) and Stuart (2014), suggest that there are complex and diverse models of practice in multi-agency situations, often with competing priorities and organisational agendas. These multi-agency characteristics result in issues concerning professional status, kudos, and power.

In this study, further complexity arose in multi-agency settings when there were different (Welsh) legal frameworks and guidelines that contributed to silo working, blurred lines of confidentiality, concern around the legitimate sharing of information, and inter-organisational relationships (Frost 2017). The professionals

addressed some of these issues as virtual[9] team players, sometimes using common ground to engage and build trust and rapport; this was expanded further when they explored young people's lives and experiences via positive teamwork and collaboration. Five participants commented on young people's lived experience versus professional experience when talking about their own resilience and the coping mechanisms they used to manage the traumatic stories they heard daily, which often amplified the experiences and voices of young people (Hallett 2017; van der Watt 2019).

> *Professionals understand that if you work in a multi-agency situation, there are shared agendas, shared experiences, and even shared mistakes. I gain confidence when there is more collective knowledge to draw on. Sometimes I am overwhelmed by what young people say, and sometimes I don't want to hear them because their reality is so emotional. That safety net from colleagues with similar experience and who recognise things that maybe you have missed keeps you going and makes you more vigilant. Being open and honest with each other breaks down barriers and is where trust begins, and hearing young people becomes embedded.*
>
> *(Ruth: Police)*

5.4.2 When two heads are better than one

All the participants agreed that the experience of professional collaboration and multi-agency approaches increased both trust and rapport, and twelve professional participants indicated that this added to the opportunities for hearing young people (Jeyasingham 2017; Garrett 2004); furthermore, a sub-theme emerged regarding inter-reliability of colleagues in difficult situations and a recognition that multiple professional meetings were convened with differing agendas but regarding the same young person (see Easen et al. 2006).

> *The police say we need to look at this; Mollie is very vulnerable. At the strategy meeting, you agree together that this drug-taking, alcohol-*

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[9] Virtual: this does not refer to the virtual world of online 'Teams and Zoom' meetings that have become the norm in the COVID world of 2020 (see Waizenegger et al. 2020), but the indirect structure of the 'teams' who worked together in CSE cases, but for separate organisations (Sloper 2004).

bingeing, stroppy but vulnerable teenager needs support. There has already been a case conference and a child who is looked after review. You do another joint visit with another professional, and both come out saying, she's just a child. Going in together, you will either agree or disagree, but you both know Mollie saying she will be 'off her face by 5 p.m.' means that transactional unprotected sex is the inevitable truth. Your wingman may be the police, social worker, health, or education, but you are so glad they are there. When there are two of you, there is a better chance that you will see more, hear more and maybe understand more because they bring another perspective to the table.

(Jayne: Missing children coordinator)

Jayne appeared to value the additional perspective of multi-agency co-workers and acknowledged the young person's emotional and chronological age (for example, in child protection case conferences) when the term child not young person was used, which reinforced their vulnerability. Jayne highlighted that the support of co-workers increased the likelihood of hearing young people and understanding the risks. Two of the strategic managers commented on the previous Welsh guidelines,[10] suggesting that they inadvertently diluted young people's voices, meaning that their views became lost in translation and several variations of essentially the same plan:

There is guidance for CSE, Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB), missing children, and more recently county lines and criminal exploitation, resulting in individual meetings and plans per exploitation incident. Harry is the same young person going missing, at risk of CSE, and running drugs, one meeting one plan and one voice make more sense.

(James: Strategic safeguarding lead)

Maggie also commented on numerous multi-agency meetings concerning the same young person being held under different agendas or titles, often highlighting the consistent risks, but without the young person present or contributing.

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[10] It is worth noting that the guidelines have since changed and have addressed some of the historical issues raised here. http://orca.cf.ac.uk/id/eprint/136903

These are the same youngsters being discussed in many different meetings, usually by the same professionals. Unfortunately, the IT systems do not tally; therefore, information sharing may be jeopardised. The biggest barrier to hearing young people is that they are not present in most meetings. We always spend time discussing what the young person wants or has said, but who is checking that out?

(Nadia: Health strategic lead)

Strategic leads typically have limited contact with young people due to their role definition; however, operational professionals consistently commented that young people are excluded from multi-agency meetings. Consequently, professionals were reliant on third-party representation in meetings to hear young people's voices. Conversely, all professional participants stated that they believed they heard and understood young people in one-to-one settings.

5.4.3 Multiple voices, professional values, and dual professional roles

Jayne (missing children coordinator) describes the benefits of multi-agency and collaborative working as 'often a light bulb moment', her allegorical interpretation for professionals (including herself) who had previously been used to working in isolation. She said that collaborative working meant that she was more informed and understood young people's views by understanding others' multi-agency roles and responsibilities and, in turn, her advocative commitment to young people.

I was used to feeling excluded from the bigger picture. [Referring to her better understanding of her new multi-agency identity].
That was another revelation, knowing my role was to speak up for young people at meetings as they were usually excluded; therefore, my voice became their voice.

(Jayne: Missing children coordinator)

This was indicative of other moments of emphatic positive engagement during multi-agency meetings, which are explored in the next chapter, signifying that Jayne's experience was representative of young people's voices in multi-agency meetings. Thus, understanding multi-agency roles and responsibilities facilitated understanding of the next steps, discussed by Stephen.

As an intervention worker, I would take calls from the social worker, or the police, which explained what they needed from me. Then, in risky behaviour panels, we would undertake mapping to locate young people, whom they were bothering with, and who was doing what. I was a signpost; CSE kids needed direction and support, hopefully leading them into safer places. Working together clarified the other professionals' expectations of my role and presented the reality of what I could deliver.

(Stephen: Intervention worker)

Stephen discusses the realities of providing 'direction', highlighting the important collaborative aspects of multi-agency working relevant to him, including validating young people via listening to them. Seven of the professional participants discussed having different values in terms of priority from other professional groups when working with young people. These values often emanated from the professional agendas of the organisations of origin (see Edwards et al. 2009).

Stephen's (CSE intervention worker) priority values included hearing young people, building empowerment and resilience; Jane's (missing children coordinator) priority values were hearing young people and safeguarding and advocating for them; Ruth's (police) priority values were safeguarding young people, identifying perpetrators, and reducing crime. All highlighted the importance of connectedness while acknowledging differing professional agendas and the collaborative value of joint and multi-agency working, thus building on previous themes of dual roles, including advocating for absent young people in professional meetings, while simultaneously upholding their professional positions within their organisational agendas (see White and Featherstone 2005; Percy-Smith 2006).

The remainder of this section addresses professional identity and shared experiences of working with the issue of CSE. It also briefly touches on gender, specifically working with boys.

5.4.4 Insider and outsider professional frameworks, priorities, and peer support

A sub-theme emerged of differences between professionals in statutory and non-statutory settings. Professionals further categorised themselves and others

into groups defined by professional membership, e.g., police versus social worker (which also corresponded with the amount of time spent with young people). These group divisions may present barriers to inter-agency or multi-agency working. This is consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) which predicts that in-group members seek the negative aspects of out-group members to protect their self-image and status. Perceptions of professional identity and interprofessional relationships within child protection have been highlighted by Eason et al. (2006), but not within CSE working. This division of 'us versus them' could be heard occasionally in the interviews when professionals spoke about each other's work practices and interactions.

> *When your colleague next to you says, oh, you know what the police are like, or education; they are always the same, portraying the 'us and them' mentality, this is divisive.*

Additionally, Nadia drew attention to young people who viewed professionals as a collective outsider group (them) and did not differentiate between the professional organisations that they represented.

> *Young people often refer to me as one of them (workers) but don't always separate us into differing professions.*
>
> *(Nikki: specialist nurse)*

Some professional participants recognised that young people sometimes viewed multi-agency work as cohesive or with similarities, but ineffective; Debbie (social worker) discussed a young person who had said:

> *You are all the same, you all say the same things to me, nothing changes, I know you are trying to help, but you don't understand what I need.*

Debbie compared this with comments from a police officer colleague.

> *You are children's services, without the same pressures. We are on the frontline, first responders; I know you are trying to help, but without the same understanding or police training.*

The 'you are all the same' quotation from the young person supports the earlier data where Nadia described the young people as viewing the professionals as a collective. Again, this is indicative of elements of social identity theory (see Tajfel and Turner 1979) attempting to explain intergroup behaviour and

specifically addressing the perceived conflict between two or more individuals (young people versus professionals) and their reactions, while acknowledging their respective membership in their identified groups.

Applying social identity theory suggests that there are cognitive processes relevant to a person's being part of an in-group or an out-group. Such group membership is, depending upon circumstances, possibly associable with the appearance of prejudice and discrimination related to such perceived group membership, thus explaining why the police officer talking to Debbie felt that she was an 'out-group member' and peripheral to the in-group of first responders, and why the young person talking to Nadia felt marginalised by being outside of the 'in-group'.

Sometimes, competing priorities and organisational constraints were viewed negatively by young people and professionals, and as discussed, tensions were noted. The distinction made here is how professionals felt that these tensions could be reduced or addressed, notably through multi-agency settings, with the provision of opportunities to discuss experiences, emotions, practice constraints, and different roles and responsibilities.

Not having safe spaces to talk appeared to perpetuate some of the anxieties felt by young people and professionals, especially when young people wanted or needed to talk about their experiences or were on the verge of disclosing an exploitative situation. In addition, sometimes timescales of the young person’s immediate need to talk and the availability of the right place to facilitate were mismatched and often influenced by competing practicalities, including shift work, school timetables, and working hours.

Gender issues were raised thematically throughout conversations with professionals, who were mindful of its influence, although gender was not a primary research focus of this study. Its relevance to the RQs is now examined; how professionals perceive gender can influence a young person's response to them.

5.4.5 Boys will be boys

Professional participants also discussed gender stereotypes and had clear guidelines for youth interviews. All professional participants understood that the cohort of CSE young people may have experienced multiple breaches of trust, thus

many forms of abuse, making it difficult to talk about their experiences, which resulted in professional frustration and resignation regarding a perceived barrier to hearing the voices of young people.

> *How do you listen when they don't want to talk, or hear when they give you the silent treatment? Girls will usually talk more than boys.*
>
> *(Jen: Social worker)*

Two participants suggested that masculinity can create an additional barrier to discussing CSE with young males, for whom discussing emotions were 'totally alien and almost another language' (see also Hill and Diaz 2021). Core to this communication with young males was hearing and understanding what is said or interpreting what is not said via body language, nuances, and sometimes instinct (Josenhans et al. 2020).

> *We have to be so careful; the boys will act hard and untouchable, but just because they don't behave as if they are vulnerable, this doesn't mean that they aren't.*
>
> *(Andrew: Police)*

Andrew described one young person who kept vaguely referring to CSE as 'stuff' and describing his experiences as 'dunno' or 'shit happened'. Andrew suggested that the young person's vague use of 'stuff' was deliberately ambiguous and related more to his uncomfortableness with discussing his young male emotions. Andrew concluded that professionals find it challenging to hear young people if they cannot discuss their emotions. Seven professionals mentioned girls being more comfortable discussing emotions with their female colleagues. Andrew's 'young man' demonstrated his need to appear more masculine and 'one of the boys' in front of the police, thus creating an additional barrier to him being heard. Thus, Andrew highlighted the importance of raising the profile of young men as victims of CSE, mirrored in research by Barnardo's (2018), finding that boys are less likely to be classed as victims in CSE cases. Cockbain et al. (2017) highlight contributory factors, including the invisibility of boys and young men affected by CSE, the under-reporting of male victims of CSE, and the classification of boys as both victims and perpetrators. Therefore, when young males are not viewed as victims of CSE but labelled perpetrators, hearing them is often problematic and deprioritised.

Stephen (CSE intervention worker) described one young person (Jac) who consistently referred to feeling embarrassed and ashamed because of his CSE experiences. Stephen undertook joint work with the police officer, the missing children coordinator and Jac, and they reframed Jac's 'CSE shame' into Jac being believed and listened to, resulting in him understanding that exploitation was not his fault. Stephen suggested that this led to an identity shift for Jac, from CSE defining him as a victim to being empowered to talk. Furthermore, Jac had self-revised that position with the professionals' support. Stephen suggested that providing a multi-agency professional response that *can talk* about CSE empowered Jac *to talk* about CSE. This empowerment demonstrates the validity of providing space and time where young people can talk about their experiences and emotions as a valid and vital means of finding a way out, focusing on the strengths of the young person as a counterbalance to the pull of exploiters (Coy et al. 2017), also meaning that the professionals hear the young person's voice and act on it together.

5.4.6 Shared understandings, peer support and learning from young people

A shared understanding and experience of (professional) peer support were believed to develop professional confidence, enabling young people's voices to be heard. Peer support was gained from being an 'insider' member of an 'in-group' based on shared experience, which afforded 'automatic understanding' of what is important and what works within prescribed professional agendas and frameworks. Peer support was also essential for 'checking out' what young people had said. Nadia (clinical nurse specialist) described peer support as validating feelings of hope, connectedness and trust with her colleagues, and explained how learning her multi-agency role was therefore phenomenologically experienced as more meaningful. As CSE evolved as a practice focus for multi-agency professionals, expertise was developed alongside professional awareness and understanding. Subsequently, experience and understanding of the broader issues faced by young people evolved too; once these broader issues were recognised by multi-agency professionals, hearing the young person's voice became a priority.

> *Listening, believing, and understanding young people is central to everything. We cannot work unilaterally; we all have different roles, which must be cohesive, joined-up and supportive; sometimes, as peer professionals, we agree to disagree, but that's O.K.*
>
> *(Ruth: Police)*

Nikki (health) continues, emphasising learning from young people's lived experience.

> *I've never experienced a role like this, maybe because it's tackled from young people's lived experience. They are leading from a place of trauma at an age when my kids were skateboarding in the park. Hearing them taught me more about CSE than any course or any law. As multi-agency professionals, we acknowledge this in meetings, and when we meet for coffee occasionally, it all contributes to working together.*
>
> *(Nikki: Health)*

The education worker also highlighted the differences between professionals' experiences and young people's lived experiences.

> *Many of the multi-agency professionals I work with will not have lived experience of CSE. So, young people's experiences, understanding, and processing are different from where professionals learned experience comes from, honestly? They teach us professionals so much.*
>
> *(Amanda: Education)*

Multi-agency professionals commented on how they 'grew' as hearing young people enabled them to understand their experiential knowledge, creating helpful and meaningful exchanges for professionals and young people. The professionals also acknowledged the privileged position of trust they were afforded by young people when given access to their lives and the precious information they shared.

In summary, this section explores peer support as an enabler for hearing and understanding young people. Furthermore, it explored the differences between young people's lived experiences, and the professionals' learned experiences and the contribution those experiences made to working together.

5.5 Barriers or opportunities: infrastructures and environments

The following section summarises the infrastructure and organisational factors which contributed to the barriers and opportunities faced by professionals when working with young people and includes the issues relating to Information Technology (IT).

Unilateral, fragmented, or incompatible IT systems were concerning and prevented important information from being received by professionals in a timely manner. For example, the police, social services, YOS, and health boards each have different and restricted-access databases. While there are obvious data protection issues about opening databases outside of the organisation they work for, professionals felt that joint systems with watertight governance would be the best way forward. The different software packages and databases meant that inaccessibility was a significant sticking point (Frost et al. 2017). Professionals asked why systems were not in place which could facilitate immediate information sharing with each other's agencies, as Ruth and Deb illustrate.

> *'Why is there no universal IT system so access can be across all agencies with appropriate access permissions given?'*
>
> *(Ruth: Police)*

Deb (below) highlights the different systems that are not compatible even within the same organisations.

> *'So, in Youth Justice, we use Childview; in Children Services ICS (integrated children's systems), the police use Niche. None of these systems talk to each other. Information needs to be shared seamlessly and quickly; this is a basic and necessary remedy; surely, merging IT systems must be possible.'*
>
> *(Deb: Social Worker*)

Professionals advocated integrated IT systems and shared databases to provide opportunities and possibilities for sharing information, improving knowledge, and hearing more about young people, building up a holistic picture, giving better access to their 'backstories', case recordings, and family history (see Alfandari and Taylor 2022).

Three social work practitioners and two CSE intervention workers were positive about manageable caseloads and regular supervision. Three police officers highlighted the tenure of post in the public protection unit and regarded public protection work as an essential prerequisite for promotion in the police hierarchy. Building relationships with young people and gaining their trust was considered important by police participants, and when they left their specialist roles, which impacted the time they could spend with young people at risk of CSE and hear their voices, despite competing priorities, they voiced concern at the young people feeling let down.

The environment in which a young person was spoken with was considered critical by all participants and seen as a major contributor to enabling young people to speak. This was consistent with the views expressed by young people in the previous chapter. Safe spaces and building trust were vital to hearing the young people, as described below.

> *School is never the right place; I visited (charity), they had a teenager well-being room, sensory equipment, bean bags, colouring pads, I-pads. Youngsters could relax, no pressure, nothing formal. It was appropriate, and young people felt safe, valued and validated.*
>
> *(Anne: Education)*

Anne highlights the importance of young people feeling valued and safe (gaining validity), which, in her opinion, made talking to professionals easier. Environmental factors are linked to both trauma recovery and empowerment. Young people demonstrate that when their primary needs are met, the effects of trauma can be reduced, and empowerment can amplify their absent voices, placing young people as experts in their own right because of their lived experience (Wyatt and Oliver 2016).

5.6 Conclusion

When undertaking research with professionals in a multi-agency context, I was aware that they most often represented their agency's perspective (Frost 2017). I would suggest that the young people to whom the multi-agency professionals were listening were viewed through different lenses, according to the agency perspective. Therefore, for example, the police would be trying to

address crime and potential perpetrators; social workers would be looking at care, support, and safeguarding; health professionals would be coming from a medical needs perspective. Hicks and Tite (1998) note that each perspective (or lens) has its own way of understanding or evaluating what is going on, thus informing, or influencing the choice of professional pathways of action. Consequently, the social construction of the lens through which the young person was being viewed, and the interpretation of the professional agendas of the various agencies in this study were important, because they could influence outcomes for young people, both positively and negatively.

Multi-agency professional participants felt that, overall, they hear the young person's voice. However, they acknowledged strategic and operational difficulties that sometimes prevented this, including systemic deficits, incompatible systems and competing organisational agendas (as highlighted in this chapter and in Chapter Seven) which they suggested could lose or silence young people's voices. Nevertheless, all professionals were committed to and believed that multi-agency working was essential in order to hear young people. They acknowledged the difficulties and positives, strengths, and weaknesses.

In addition, the findings could suggest the need for multi-agency training in trauma-informed practice and in communicating with CSE-experienced young people, as indicated by professionals on pages 101 and 104. Multi-agency training was in fact considered, by 11 professional participants, the best way to make a positive impact on practice. Another possible implication of the findings might be the need for a shared geographical base – eight professionals advocated this, thinking it could help generate a more cohesive and shared approach, see also 5.2. I lead now into the final empirical chapter regarding observations of professional meetings.

Chapter 6: Observation of professional meetings, and how the voice of young people is heard therein

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides evidence of how young people's voices are captured in practice, based on unstructured observation of six different professional multi-agency meetings concerning CSE, including one extraordinary RSCB, three CSE strategy meetings, one child protection case conference, and one contextualised risk panel meeting. The chapter analyses data drawn from those observations, and commensurate with the qualitative research model in the study utilised the interpretivist paradigm (Pretzlik 1994). The focus of the observed meetings is notionally always on the young person; however, multiple perspectives (from the different people presenting these meetings) result in a collective articulation of a formal singular 'voice', thus, reminding the reader that the young person's voice will look (and sound) different for every person present (e.g., it is based on their subjective sense-making). The process of arriving at an agreed voice is complex and indicative of how practitioners work in complex, multifaceted worlds (e.g., multi-agency, interdisciplinary, legal and policy frameworks, interpersonal relationships) and reflects Munro's interpretation of group/team thinking (Turney and Ruch 2016). This process(es) of navigating the complex world around us is essential to see what constitutes the 'child's voice'. Therefore, this observation chapter constitutes understanding layers of interpretation from the point of the individuals and as a collective whole. The chapter, in fact, involves deriving a narrative from many narratives, echoing Ferguson's work (2020). I next present a table giving a broad overarching description of each meetings' structure, purpose, composition, general aims and objectives, attendees, and the specific meeting context.

Name of meeting	Description of meeting	Number of meetings observed	Young persons present	Representation of young person's voice
Child Protection Case Conference	*A child protection conference (CPC) is a formal statutory meeting between family members, the child (where appropriate), and multi-agency professionals involved with the family about a child's future safety, health, and development. A child protection conference may be held following a child protection investigation under Section 47 Children Act 1989, and is the formal process of identifying and monitoring children and young people deemed at risk of significant harm.* *Attendees: 10 plus multi-agency professionals, chaired by independent case conference chair* *Parents/carers invited* *Young person invited.*	1	1	***Via attendance by young person and then letter written by the young person***
CSE Strategy Meeting	*A CSE strategy meeting is called to determine an effective multi-agency operational response to identifying, disrupting, and safeguarding vulnerable people. The purpose of the CSE strategy meetings as the forum for sharing and clarifying information, identifying all risks and agreeing on action and recommendations to address each risk.* *Attendees: safeguarding leads, key child protection multi-agency workers, with involvement with young person or family.* *Police present.* *Parents/carers typically not invited* *Chaired by LA team manager.* *Young person typically not invited.*	3	0	***Via professional's accounts and case records and statements***
RSCB: Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) strategic meeting	*The SSWBA (Wales) 2014 (part 7) required all local authorities to set up a RSCB to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in their area.* *Composition:* *22 plus lead strategic multi-agency senior officers* *Includes third sector.* *Chaired by the director of social services.* *Vice chaired by Chief superintendent police.* *Parents/ carers not invited.* *Young person not invited.* *Highly unusual to discuss individual cases.* *Usually strategic and policy-led meeting.*	1	0	***Presentation by reviewers, pictures, and narrative by young person***
Contextualised Risk Meetings	*Contextualised risk meetings can take a variety of formats. They may be referred to as the MASE meeting in other local authorities.* *10 plus multi-agency partner agencies, including housing and licencing, parks and gardens.* *Chaired by LA safeguarding lead.* *Parents/ carers not invited.* *Young people not usually invited.*	1	*0*	***none***
Total		6	1	5

Table 6.1a: Meeting structure, purpose / invitees.

The chapter next discusses how young people's voices are presented, evidenced, interpreted, and analysed by professionals, highlighting similarities and differences in how this is achieved. I summarise case studies of young people

involved in the meetings, thus identifying relevant themes, building on or contradicting the themes presented in the previous chapters (explained throughout). This chapter also discusses young people's participation, specifically their omission or inclusion in their observed meetings. Generally, young people rarely attend a professional multi-agency meeting, but they are central to the meeting process. I examine how this has been facilitated, and what importance is placed on listening to young people; for example, do they have to be present to be heard, or are there any other ways in which their voices can be heard?

The chapter examines the potential conflict that arises when professionals undertake dual roles and simultaneously represent the voice of their organisation and that of the young person, illustrating tensions between protection versus participation and information sharing. The findings and themes from this chapter build on previous research, including Hallett (2013;2017), Ferguson (2016), and Lefevre et al. (2017;2018), and aim to answer the following RQs:

RQ1: When multiple professionals work together in CSE cases, what does it mean to hear the voice of the young person?
RQ2: How effective is the participation of children and young people in decision-making meetings about them?
RQ6: What are the barriers to, or opportunities for, hearing the voice of the young person when working in multi-agency settings?

6.2 The observed meetings

The observed meetings were chosen on the basis that they were the most typical operational meeting settings in which professionals discuss or make decisions about young people who are believed to be at risk of harm or exploitation. I wanted to explore where and how young people's voices were heard in those meetings, and whether they had agency or not. I also included an atypical high-level strategic meeting to ascertain how a young person's voice could potentially be heard in that forum.

6.2.1 The RSCB strategic meeting (n=1; see Table 6.1a)

The only RSCB strategic meeting observed in this study was an extended Child Practice Review[11] of a CSE case presented to the board; the reviewer was from a third sector charity. Child practice reviews became a statutory requirement in Wales in 2013, replacing Serious Case Reviews, and were introduced to remove the language and nuance of blame (which was how previous Serious Case Reviews were experienced) to promote positive multi-agency learning. All 22 RSCB multi-agency representatives were senior officers within their organisations. Usually, and because of the macro-safeguarding systems, including the National Safeguarding Board and regional safeguarding boards, there is almost a complete lack of input from children and young people at strategic RSCB meetings (Rees and Williams 2016). However, this was an extraordinary meeting, with one agenda item – the presentation of a Child Practice Review (described above) including the young person's voice, consequently creating an unusual strategic RSCB meeting focusing on the young person, which arguably provides unique insight into how senior-level multi-agency strategists could hear the young person's voice and how that voice can be represented through multi-modal representation. This also provided further insight into the issues that multi-agency professionals face when trying to hear the young person's voice, including what that looks and sounds like.

At this RSCB meeting, the multi-agency partners were introduced to Millie, aged 15. Millie's voice was represented and heard via her drawings collected by the Child Practice Reviewer, who had directly worked with Millie to narrate her story. Millie was thus made aware that her story and her voice would be represented at the RSCB in this way. Later in the meeting, further analysis of her 'absent' voice evoked discussion regarding Millie's inclusion or omission and the barriers and opportunities presented.

6.2.2 The CSE strategy meeting (n=3; see Table 6.1a)

The chairperson explained why each CSE strategy meeting was called, and which relevant legislation was applicable, defining the purpose of meetings as the forum for sharing and clarifying information, identifying all CSE risks (including

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11 Contemporary guidance on CPRs can be found in *Working together to safeguard people – Volume 2 Child Practice Reviews* (WG 2016) SSWBA (Wales) 2014, sec 145.

those in the SERAF[12]) and then agreeing on action and recommendations to address each risk. The consideration of the prosecution of relevant adults is a standing agenda item. In meetings where prosecution is not likely, the professional attendees consider a range of alternative and disruptive measures against the (alleged) perpetrators. A written safeguarding plan is developed at the strategy meeting, and within that plan, the decision is taken as to who is best placed to undertake direct work with the young person to enable recovery. A date three months later is set to review the plan, monitor progress, and establish individual professional and organisational responsibilities. Notably, all three CSE strategy meetings were frontline, operational, and task centred. A young person is the primary subject of the meeting; however, young people or their families are usually neither invited nor legally represented. Within the three meetings observed, the young people being considered were Olivia (17), Lloyd (16), and Ellie (15); their case studies are summarised later. In CSE strategy meetings, protection and welfare are always the overriding principles.

6.2.3 The child protection case conference (n=1; see Table 6.1a)

A child protection conference (CPC) is the formal process of identifying and monitoring children and young people deemed at risk of significant harm; ultimately, it is the vehicle that could effectively begin legal proceedings to remove the child from the care of the family. The observed CPC was independently chaired by a case conference chair, who directed the meeting and obtained the vote on registration or deregistration for the child protection register. Previous studies suggest that young people are generally marginalised with regard to their child protection process participation (Barford and Wattam 1991; Holland and O'Neill 2006). The observed review case conference was called based on concerns regarding neglect and emotional abuse, and as per protocol, the young person (Kayleigh 15) and her parent/carer were invited to attend. This was the only observed multi-disciplinary meeting where a young person was invited and

[12] The statutory guidance for Wales *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation* (CSE) has been reviewed (Hallett et al. 2020), and although the SERAF (Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework) is now considered outdated (see Franklin et al. 2018; Hallett 2017; 2021), the three observed CSE strategy meetings were inclusive of and reliant on the SERAF assessment.

attended, although she only stayed for 10 minutes. A young person's attendance at case conference is also qualified in legislation by needing sufficient understanding and maturity to contribute (Littlechild 2000). Furthermore, Sanders and Mace (2006) suggest that case conferences are often intimidating for professionals and, therefore, maybe even more harrowing for young people.

6.2.4 Contextualised safeguarding panel (n=1; see Table 6.1a)

Contextualised risk meetings are relatively new across the region and take a variety of formats. A key feature is that there are no contributions from the young people discussed. There are no limits on the number of young people referred into the panel, usually up to six young people, but this can vary. More importantly, these young people were unaware that they were subjects of referral or discussion. The only contextualised risk meeting observed discussed Elise (15), Lilly (16), and Zac (15), who were also linked via a contextualised risk mapping exercise. Contextualised risk is described by Firmin et al. (2016) as an approach to practice and system design that varies in operational approach.[13] The contextualised risk panel differed from the previous observed meetings in that this meeting was concerned with a bigger picture of the context and community protection, not individual young people (although individuals were identified). The contextualised risk meeting information fed into the CSE strategy meeting and the child protection case conference, once concrete information, concerns and potential risk were identified and collated.

Firmin et al. (2016) argue that the risk of exploitation is reduced by addressing some of the broader environmental factors, targeting the contexts in which that abuse occurred. Contextualised risk panels examine extra-familial risk of exploitation through the lens of child welfare, not criminality or protecting the public. The panel embodied the wider community as a protective resource, including officials from licencing, school transport, LA parks and leisure departments, as well as police community support officers, providing soft intelligence and a lens to work with young people deemed at risk of exploitation.

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[13] Contextualised risk mapping is explained by Firmin (2019), who advocates the use of genograms and peer group mapping in social work assessments and interventions to manage the risk of exploitation and peer on peer abuse.

6.2.5 Young person participation and professionals' expectations

The six meetings described above have prescribed formats, attendees, and terms of reference. Within this, the range of expected participation by young people is on a continuum from typical to exceptional in terms of the different ways in which the young person's voice is represented, facilitated, and heard.

The strategic RSCB meeting (n=1) observed was an extraordinary LSCB meeting and abandoned the usual policy and process-driven agenda. Consequently, the professionals' approach differed because of the meeting status and Child Practice Review focus; therefore, it was an atypical strategic meeting. In addition, the usual practice would dictate no expectation of any input or representation from children and young people (Rees and Williams 2016).

Protocol for child protection case conferences dictates that young people and their parents or carers are invited to attend. Significantly, this was the only observed meeting of the six which invited the young person to attend. Kayleigh (15) attended but chose to leave after 10 minutes. The chairperson, on examining the minutes of the previous conference, acknowledged that:

> *Teenagers are always invited unless there is justification for their exclusion, but they rarely attend in my experience. Conferences can be intimidating and overwhelming environments and cause more trauma if professionals are negative about young people's parents or express concerns about a young person's life choices in front of them.*
>
> *(Sally: conference chair)*

As stated previously, and supported by the narrative in this chapter, some studies suggest that young people are generally marginalised regarding their child protection process participation (see Barford and Wattam 1991; Holland and O'Neill 2006). The conference chairperson met with Kayleigh before the meeting to gather her views. Kayleigh did not speak or offer a view in the meeting, and clearly, her attendance did not equate to participation. However, Kayleigh's carer argued that her exclusion would have been more detrimental (see Boylan and Ing 2005). I could not establish whether Kayleigh felt marginalised, but she was uncomfortable and agitated and, understandably, left after 10 minutes, thus confirming the chairperson's view that case conferences are potentially more harrowing for young people than for professionals (Sanders and Mace 2006).

The observation of the CPC differed from the CSE strategy meeting (discussed next). Kayleigh was 15 and consistently referred to as a child, not a young person (in contrast with the young people discussed at the CSE strategy meetings). The case conference was larger, more formal, and more structured in comparison with the CSE strategy meeting, which was smaller, less formal, and less intimidating. It is unsurprising that young people neither want to talk nor stay for long periods at case conferences, where they appear to have little agency or voice in influencing what would happen to them. According to the conference chair, Kayleigh's attendance and contribution by way of a letter (to be discussed later) was better than what would usually be expected because, while parents sometimes (but not always) participated, teenagers rarely did.

There was no professional expectation for young people to participate in the CSE strategy meetings (n=3) or the contextualised risk panel (n=1). There was also no specific reference to young people's views, wishes and feelings and how these were captured or how their voice was or would be heard. Saying this, a CSE strategy meeting considers the balance of protection with participation, although young people are not present. However, it was observed here that practitioners struggled with the concept of balancing protection with participation (Daley 2015). This was because balancing statutory responsibilities in keeping young people safe, alongside their right to privacy, autonomy, choice, and voice, will always be contentious and evoke professional debate and challenge. However, it was clear that some felt that the risks and the need to safeguard one young person (Ellie, discussed later) outweighed her right to contribute to effective safeguarding.

In summary, apart from the child protection case conference, it is not usual practice for young people to attend their CSE meetings, but it is fair to say that they should be central to the process. In all meetings, the focus is the young person, but each presents their voice in a different way and with different outcomes. Next, the chapter examines the data from observing these multi-agency meetings and summarises the five case studies. It moves beyond the physical presence of the young people and explores the different ways in which a young person can be heard in their absence, discussing individual voices, analysing their contributions to their meetings, and identifying the barriers or opportunities presented for them to be heard. I begin with Millie at the RSCB, then Olivia, Lloyd, and Ellie at the CSE strategy meetings, Kayleigh at the CPC, and

finish with the collective voices of young people discussed at the contextualised risk panel (Elise, Lilly, and Zac).

6.3 Millie: A picture paints a thousand words

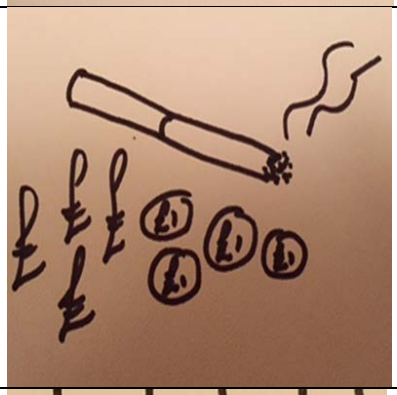
The information that the RSCB was given about Millie was that she was 15, had a troubled home life and was highly vulnerable. The safeguarding board commissioned an extended Child Practice Review because Millie's behaviour made her increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. These behaviours included over 40 episodes of absconding from her home or placement to towns and cities where she was at serious risk of significant harm, including exploitation. In addition, Millie admitted to sexual activity with numerous men aged between late teens and 40s. Millie had an extensive history of drug and alcohol use and had regularly perpetrated violence against care staff. Notably, Millie's vulnerabilities were increased because she did not perceive herself as a victim but rather as a person in control making informed behavioural choices.

During the RSCB meeting, a report was presented by the Child Practice Reviewers via PowerPoint, including Millie's drawings which depicted her CSE experience. Millie's contribution and her 'visibility' concerning her wishes and feelings were acknowledged and endorsed within this presentation and throughout the meeting.

> *We met with Millie in her placement to ensure that her voice was heard in this Child Practice Review.*
>
> *(Rosemary: Child Practice Reviewer)*

The presentation highlighted a thought-provoking reflection of the challenges faced by professionals dealing with CSE-experienced young people, presenting a clear account of Millie's agency in the process. The following images are taken from the presentation and capture Millie's story, adding authenticity and evidence of the trauma of Millie's CSE experience. The simple impactive narrative consists of one or two sentences per drawing, illustrating how her voice was heard in her own words, reflecting her experience.

6.3.1 Figure 1b: Millie's drawings: images 1-4

Image 1: ***Here I am, are you listening?***		***'I agree to meet a 19-year-old man from London who says he will give me money to buy another phone. I end up overdosing.'***
Image 2: **My hospital visit** 😊		***'Mum visits me in hospital, and I think this is the nicest thing she has ever done for me.'***
Image 3: **The price I paid.**		**'I have sex with boys and men to get money and cigarettes.'**
Image 4: **Please don't lock me up**		**The SERAF score is now 80 (noted as extremely high and concerning).** ***'I am sent to a secure placement in the North of England. Everyone wants to keep me safe, but I just want to do what I want to.'***

6.3.2 The impact on board members: barriers and opportunities

The board members' conversations indicated that Millie's drawings clearly made some of them feel that Millie was present in the room, as highlighted below.

I feel that this presentation brought Millie into the room with us; it was very powerful, totally real.

(Sue: health representative)

Board members and reviewers acknowledged the power of Millie's (absent) voice, and they reflected this by commenting that young people who are not present at strategic meetings could be represented via pictures, videos, or other multi-modal means. Discussions followed, focusing on the impact of Millie's story, which considered the value and necessity of hearing young people's stories in strategic meetings. It could be argued that a theoretical lens of foreground and background is utilised here and indeed generally throughout this chapter. This dramaturgy extends Goffman's framework (1999) by presenting Millie's account as a performance by other actors and via multi-modal means, aimed at eliciting moral sentiments and collective action by the board members (Columbano et al. 2020). However, if used regularly, there is a risk that such methods could result in the young person moving from the foreground or centre stage (where their voice is deemed audible and powerful) to the background, and then, professionals' voices and opinions are given more authority and relevance, because the novelty is lost and the interactions between young people and professionals become diluted in their effect.

Two board members commented on alternative methods of engagement as essential for working with children who may have difficulty in articulating their views', thus taking the pressure off 'hearing their voice' and focusing on seeing, working with, and engaging with young people:

I like this; we aren't totally relying on physically hearing her voice or needing her to speak. Imagine being constantly asked to tell us what has happened; I wouldn't. Sometimes, a picture speaks a thousand words.

(Dave: Education, presentation feedback)

Furthermore, it was noted that a young person's physical presence in a meeting is not always necessary or conducive to hearing their voices. When discussing participation, the safeguarding officer highlighted the difficulty in hearing young people's voices in CPRs because of the amount of information received, and because that information needs analysis. In addition, while CPRs are not about apportioning blame but acquiring learning, professional

accountability induces genuine fear about things going wrong, which may inhibit engagement (Pearce 2014).

> *Today's focus is hearing Millie. It is normally difficult to examine case circumstances across different timelines, chronologies, and organisations, access the young person, hear them, and represent them properly. However, understanding Millie's experience and perspective using this method takes us away from 'leading' the young person and getting into difficulty.*
>
> *(Dominic: Safeguarding lead, presentation feedback)*

Dominic and Dave acknowledged these differences and saw value in convening the meeting in this way. Although Millie was not physically present, the review evidenced that she had been central to the review process.

As reported, Millie had some degree of agency in telling her story. Therefore, this method of participation became conducive and powerful for her, and it was important to note that this method could be replicated for effective participation by young people in other strategic meetings. Millie's pictures spoke louder and were more impactful than the 26-page written report that was circulated. The pictures included Millie's voice, opinion, interaction, reasoning, and feelings. However, the written report evidenced how Millie was spoken to, why her voice mattered, and why it should not be referred to as 'the voice of the young person', but as that of a young person with lived experience (see also Rees et al. 2021, p.12). The reviewers remarked that Millie, despite her communication issues, was articulate, resourceful, and able to express herself. The RSCB members recognised Millie's power and agency in contributing, which helped them understand her situation and the choices she made.

> *Even when it was not what we wanted to hear (Millie was both demanding of professional time and selective about her demands) she made us sit up and listen…. Millie could influence outcomes for many others if we listen.*
>
> *(Rosemary: reviewer)*

6.3.3 What difference did it make?

Considering the positives, negatives, and lessons learned, I explore what, if any, difference it made to Millie. Millie's pictures clearly articulate what she

wanted; for example, her mum visiting her in hospital was something she valued, furthermore, she did not want to be put in a secure unit. In addition, Millie wanted a new phone, so exchanging sex was a feasible solution for her. However, it is important to say that I have not met any young people in my social work career who *want* to be locked up in a secure unit. Therefore, even when articulating what they want, the risks often clearly outweigh the young people's wishes and feelings, and remedial action must be taken. In Millie's mind, this remedial action is punitive and unnecessary; but it also begs the question of what were the alternatives? Realistically there seemed little choice for the professionals who had to make those difficult decisions at the time. As stated previously, Millie wanted to be heard; but hearing what was being articulated by Millie and agreeing with it was always going to be contentious and contested by safeguarding professionals, who felt that a secure unit was the only way that they could safeguard her from continuing exploitation.

Importantly, whether professionals agreed with Millie's position or not, the information she had provided and how it was presented gave her some agency in the Child Practice Review process. The reviewers had explained their intention to report back to Millie with feedback from the RSCB, but Millie had re-affirmed her position (below) before the RSCB meeting (contained in the original presentation). Millie was clear when talking to the reviewers, that she considered herself master of her own destiny. Nevertheless, all behaviour is a method of communication, even if it is considered risky for the young person involved.

> *I went missing three weeks ago so I could prove I could. I will need to do something more serious until they listen. After that, I will have to go my own way. They are playing with fire because I won't give up until I get my own way. They should be more worried about what I might do next. I must do these things because they don't listen to me. I started going out with a 24-year-old when I was 13 – he is in prison now because of me… it's not his fault I am like this … I love him and everything, and I am waiting for him to get out.*
>
> *(Millie, 15)*

The chairperson's closing comments were:

The reviewers have examined thoroughly the issues and circumstances that have arisen in this complex case. Nevertheless, grave concerns for Millie's safety and well-being remain.

This reiterates that balancing protection with participation and hearing the wishes and feelings of the young person is notoriously difficult. Professionals will always make the decisions that they believe are needed to keep young people safe, even if these decisions are opposed by the young people, and despite hearing what they say or think about those decisions. The conclusion in this instance was that Millie had her voice represented, it was heard but she still did not get what she wanted. For Millie this still equated to not being heard.

6.4 Heard but not seen: CSE strategy meetings (n=3)

This next section discusses the CSE strategy meetings described previously concerning Olivia (17), Ellie (15) and Lloyd (16). The structure and purpose of the CSE strategy meeting are described in 5.2.2.

6.4.1 Olivia

Olivia, aged 17, lived semi-independently in supported accommodation. She was known to multi-agency professionals and recognised as CSE-experienced and criminally exploited. Olivia's family background was troubled, and her mother was addicted to substances and alcohol. Olivia's younger sister was Callie (14), of whom she was very protective. Olivia had been in foster and residential care and was previously placed in a secure unit. There were significant concerns that Olivia was drug dealing.

Olivia's voice was represented by her social worker and missing children coordinator, Jayne, who provided excerpts from case recordings and conversations held with Olivia (on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis). The consensus of the meeting was that Olivia was cooperating because she was worried about her sister Callie (14).

Olivia doesn't want Callie to go down the same road; she knows she was exploited and is prepared to give information to protect Callie.

(Chairperson: reading from case report)

Although the meeting focus was one young person (Olivia), it quickly became apparent that attendees were considering the needs of two. It was clear from these observations that one key professional, Jayne (missing person coordinator), felt that she could speak for Olivia. This assertion was based on her existing relationship with Olivia, evidenced by Jayne interpreting Olivia's actions, behaviours, and comments, and including commenting on Olivia's disclosures:

> *Olivia has two phones; KD and his friends are contacting her on the second phone. Olivia is asking for help; she wouldn't disclose anything if she didn't want something done about it. She is broke, but her flat is full of new stuff; she has asked me to sort it. Olivia's scared of being alone at Christmas and her self-harming is increasing; I believe she is frightened.*
>
> *(Jayne: Missing young person coordinator)*

Jayne's positive relationship with and knowledge of Olivia informed her subjective view of what she believed Olivia was saying. Jayne also reported on nuances and on her observations of Olivia's flat and her protective relationship with her sister, which informed her interpretation of Olivia's behaviours and comments. This further supports the contentions of the young people Jules, Catherine, and Rhys (Chapter Four), who comment on the importance of professionals building relationships with young people.

Jayne's assertions were further clarified by the police officer, who asked.

Jayne, has Olivia told you she is frightened?

Jayne responded:

> *Not explicitly, but I know when Olivia wants me to act, and when she is not saying something, I always say, Liv, I have to pass this on; she wouldn't tell me if she didn't want me to do something.*
>
> *(Jayne: Missing young person coordinator)*

Jayne's position could be viewed as problematic due to representing a young person's choice that is opposed by other professionals. Therefore, if a professional is advocating on behalf of a young person regarding their perceived unsafe choices, they could be viewed as colluding with the young person, and possibly perceived as overstepping or blurring professional boundaries. Here, the police officer immediately recognised potential safeguarding concerns associated

with exploitation and quickly identified the protective element, asking if Olivia had told Jayne that she was frightened. Furthermore, Jayne recognised her dual role here as both the missing children coordinator, advising on risks to which Olivia was being exposed, and advocating for Olivia in her absence, thus creating the metaphoric bridge between Olivia and the meeting professionals.

This was a reminder that this was not Olivia's direct voice but a professional's 'interpretation'. Even if it were, we know from the case of Millie previously that her opinions would not necessarily be acted on. Therefore, there was a need for professionals to balance what Olivia was saying (via Jayne) with all other information, including Olivia's wish to protect herself and younger sister Callie from any risk of significant harm. Consequently, balancing a young person's rights of privacy, autonomy and choice against the competing priorities of child protection and safeguarding young people provokes professional tensions and challenges and is a very fine line to tread (Mildred and Plummer 2009; Sapiro et al. 2016; Sagar et al. 2016).

The strategy meeting concluded that Olivia remained at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation because the historical background and the future risks identified were deemed too great. As a care leaver, it was agreed that Olivia needed (and wanted) more structured professional involvement. Thus, Olivia's voice was heard, but the police advocated that Olivia remained under the CSE protocol, so that professionals could further monitor sibling Callie whom Olivia was actively trying to protect.

The appropriateness of secondary safeguarding monitoring (when the focus of the safeguarding meeting was Olivia, but also encompassed the safeguarding of sibling Callie) was debated between the police and social worker, who was concerned that this might detract from the focus on Olivia. Callie clearly had a safety plan, but Olivia suggested to the missing children coordinator that she was closer to Callie and had some agency in the meeting by her assertion that she could and would protect Callie (and therefore, to a lesser extent herself). Professionals did not view this as a good enough protective safety net for either Olivia or Callie, but this was Olivia’s proposal, perceiving herself responsible for Callie as Callie's surrogate mother when they were children. I concluded that this evidenced that professionals were listening to Olivia (via Jayne), but had she been present, she may have been more effective in working alongside the professionals

trying to keep her (and Callie) safe, although she may not have achieved her proposed solution.

6.4.2 Ellie

Ellie was in residential care, having had many care episodes, chaotic parenting and multiple placements, resulting in attachment issues (see Coy 2009). Ellie was placed on the CSE protocol but repeatedly absconded back to her placing authority area. Being in residential care increased daily scrutiny and observation from key workers; however, being a care-experienced young person is cited as a heightened risk for CSE (see Lefevre et al. 2018). Consequently, although keyworkers had more contact with Ellie than in the case of Olivia, they found themselves in a no-win position trying to build a relationship with her but following due process and procedure to safeguard her. For example, when Ellie 'went missing', keyworkers would have to report her absence from a safeguarding perspective; this alienated Ellie further and increased her risk, since, for example, she returned to geographical areas where she was most vulnerable.

Ellie's voice was represented in the meeting via direct quotes from the care home duty log and the social worker's case recordings.[14] Additionally, the police shared their missing person reports and debrief interviews when Ellie was challenged about her whereabouts. These were one-to-one sessions recorded as contemporaneous notes, in contrast to Millie and Olivia, as Millie's voice was represented via her drawings, and Olivia's voice was represented through the missing children coordinator.

The following is Ellie's response to her key worker Cheryl:

> *You've got it wrong; I got a lift off some bloke. I was hammered. I got out of his car, got picked up by [names three females] who called the police cos I was in a state. My choice; my life. I don't like the word frequenting, ok? You say frequenting like it's every day, change that, it's not how it is.*
>
> *(Ellie's verbatim words written in the log, following a key working session)*

[14] A care home duty log is like a diary, where conversations, key working sessions, incident forms, missing reports or visits to the home are recorded. They may not be verbatim but are very close accounts.

Cheryl explained that she had reviewed and changed the wording in the duty logs, which Ellie then accepted. Therefore, Ellie's voice and choice had been acted on. A small victory, but, nonetheless, giving Ellie agency in some of the decision-making and some control over what was written about her; thus, Ellie was adamant that she was in control and not at risk. However, Ellie's risks continued to escalate, and the multi-agency professionals then ascertained how and who would engage with Ellie.

The Youth Offending Service (YOS) had also engaged positively with Ellie. They had undertaken further prevention work based on their recent positive interaction with her. It was clear that the YOS professional knew Ellie well and thus capitalised on her positive engagement.

> *Ellie was engaging; she completed art sessions and had a work placement at an animal rescue centre; she was starting to express herself through these avenues.*
>
> *(Debbie: YOS)*

> *I would like to work with animals; they don't give you any grief; it's unconditional. If you love them, they love you back.*
>
> *(Ellie, via case recordings)*

> *I love drawing, ain't going to college though. I like seeing mam at weekends, and watching films, and I go out in some cars, not often; I like being a regular teenager.*
>
> *(Ellie, via Debbie)*

Whether or not Ellie felt listened to was discussed; professionals working closely with Ellie recounted how she felt ignored and her views minimised, that she felt she was being policed and that it was normal for teenagers to have sexual relationships. Ellie suggested that professionals did not understand this; furthermore, when she had contributed to discussions in the care home, Ellie felt blamed, as she had been told that her behaviours were too risky. This created an issue with the language used by professionals about Ellie's behaviours, which placed the responsibility of protection firmly at her feet. All behaviour, including running away, substance misuse, or self-harming, is a form of communication, and the language used by professionals to young people shapes their response (Durand 1993). Ellie's exclusion from the CSE strategy meeting meant that she

was unable to effectively contribute to the discussion, her safety plan, or articulate these views herself (see also Dodsworth 2014; Hallett 2019). In Ellie's case, as I observed professionals presenting these views, the unavoidable difficulty became apparent (as previously with Olivia and Millie), that professionals try to balance protection with what the young person feels about their safety plan.

Ellie's views on whether this was working were unequivocal:

> *Why aren't you listening? I am wiser than I look. I don't tell you everything because you tell everyone else, then the police look for me, you have to trust me.*
>
> *(Ellie via Cheryl: Keyworker session)*

The multi-agency practitioners acknowledged that Ellie needed her views heard, but also that Ellie addressed individual keyworkers, not the multi-agency fora. Professionals questioned whether Ellie would say something different in larger multi-agency arenas. These subjective discussions about Ellie's comments could not be confirmed or denied by Ellie, who was absent. Some professionals felt that the need to manage the safeguarding risks outweighed Ellie's rights to contribute to effective safety planning, even though no new concerns, locations, or 'risky adults' known to be associating with Ellie were identified. According to her keyworker, Ellie wanted to exercise her choice and voice and wanted her name removed from the CSE protocol. However, the professionals overruled this position:

> *Ellie has been given little leeway in respect of unsupervised contact or in the community. If unsupervised contact with Ellie's mother increases, this may indicate higher risks, suggesting increased monitoring or further assessment. We need more information; therefore, we recommend Ellie remains on the CSE protocol.*
>
> *(Chair: Strategy meeting)*

Despite her representations, Ellie's name remained on the CSE protocol for a further three months. This is an example of the young person being heard but professional judgement taking precedence. Had she been able or invited to attend, Ellie's physical presence and voice at the meeting may have changed the dynamic and possibly the outcome, as the observed tensions could have been explored further, and Ellie's reflections on any identified risks may have constructively

contributed to her safety plan or helped Ellie feel she was at least being listened to, if not heard. It also suggests that tension between protection and participation needs more investment and exploration.

6.4.3 Lloyd

Lloyd (16) was in a long-term foster placement, having been removed from his parents aged seven because of physical and sexual abuse perpetrated by his stepfather. Lloyd had in recent years re-established contact with his mother, who was now more stable and regarded as a protective factor, and with whom he had a good relationship. Had these allegations of abuse happened more recently, it is likely that his stepfather would have been removed rather than Lloyd himself, and it may have been safe to return to his mother. Professionals suggested that Lloyd's behaviour was linked to his sexuality and his traumatic and abusive childhood (see also Best and Fortenberry 2013). Lloyd wanted to join the army and knew he had to 'stay clean' if this ambition was to become a reality.

Lloyd was neither willing to engage nor felt at risk. The concerns highlighted suggested his involvement with peer-on-peer abuse, and professionals identified Lloyd as CSE-experienced. Lloyd's social worker and missing children coordinator (both present) said that Lloyd saw no risk at all and that he felt that he was just being 'a teenager' exploring sexual activity and his sexuality, with peers whom he felt were consenting. Lloyd was reluctant to discuss any of this, so for professionals, without knowing what was happening, using their subjective and professionally informed knowledge and opinion, this increased the likelihood of Lloyd being perceived as at risk of, or engaging in exploitative behaviours. According to case recordings and his foster carers, Lloyd was clear about the choices he wished to make. The professionals concluded that Lloyd felt that it would be harder for them to control his actions or movements if he did not engage. As far as could be ascertained, Lloyd was not involved in crime or significant substance misuse. Lloyd was described as 'bright, articulate and streetwise' by professionals who knew him, that he 'knew the system' and was always 'one step ahead'. Lloyd had a history of absconding but returned before concerns escalated regarding his whereabouts.

Lloyd's voice wishes and feelings were again represented through third parties, and his absence was a barrier to verifying how much of this was what

Lloyd thought or wanted. Professionals present acknowledged Lloyd's reluctance to accept the risks to which he was believed to be exposed. His rights and wish for autonomy were noted, but his (represented) view of being 'safe enough' was largely discounted. Professionals echoed this 'we know best' position across the strategic meeting, CSE strategy meetings, and case conference. Initially, they agreed that managing Lloyd safely needed to involve his account, which was achievable alongside the professionals who had the ability and confidence to engage with him –by both accepting his perspective and exploring the perceived risks together. However, Lloyd was excluded from the meeting, and no other form of multi-modal representation had been explored. Despite Lloyd's lack of engagement (or presence), a positive observation was that Lloyd (and indeed Olivia and Ellie in their CSE strategy meetings) were consistently referred to as young people not children; the significance of this is explored later.

The SERAF[15] risk assessment was applied, but the identified risks were subjective and more concerned with the professional's voices, views, and interpretation, not Lloyd's voice, feelings, or his own risk analysis. Consequently, the outcome of the SERAF augmented the perceived risks and raised professional anxieties. Furthermore, Lloyd's lack of engagement or recognition of the risks involved reinforced the professionals' position, advocating more intrusive or protectionist interventions, as expressed by the police.

> *Does he know whom he's going around with? Do we? What they are up to, and who is explaining these risks? There are too many unknowns; Lloyd is bright, he knows the system, surely at least a curfew and a CAWN (child abduction warning notice)[16] must be an option.*
>
> *(Dave: Police)*

The social worker defended Lloyd's position, proposing a more proportionate response, arguing that more prohibitive measures would alienate

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[15] SERAF the *Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework* Barnardo's (2005)

[16] Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs). Abduction of a child by a person connected to the child (commonly referred to as parental child abduction) – Section 1, Child Abduction Act. https://safeguardinghub.co.uk/non-parental-child-abduction

Lloyd, placing him at further risk. This again highlighted professional tension regarding protectionist intervention and prevention.

> *Lloyd hasn't done anything wrong; we have reports of cannabis use but have never seen it; he goes missing but always comes back. More punitive measures will alienate him, and we need to build up a relationship if he doesn't trust us. We need to help him get into the army, focus on the positives, facilitate activities that take him away from J.D. (alleged CSE perpetrator).*
>
> *(Deb: Social worker)*

Lowden (2002) discusses the lack of reflective space for practitioners who advocate for more rapid protectionist intervention, which, without young people's agency and participation, disempowers them further, which is what the police were doing in Lloyd's meeting. Lefevre et al. (2018) note the balance between efficacy and identification of contextualised risk, but also that the by-product of a MASE meeting can be the loss of the young person's right to privacy and autonomy because much personal information about their lives is shared with many professionals and organisations. In addition, young people being absent or excluded from their meetings (discussed later) meant that they could not confirm, or otherwise, their reported words. Furthermore, consideration was not given to the possibility that views and circumstances may have changed between the time of the case recordings and the timing of the meeting, leading to retrospective reporting.

This meeting differed from the other CSE strategy meetings, as Lloyd refused to engage and avoided professionals; there were no direct quotes from him, although social workers had received third-party information from the carers. There was minimal data recorded regarding what Lloyd said or wanted, except for the social worker reporting that Lloyd felt he was 'safe enough'. The evidence that supported Lloyd's assertion was that he controlled his missing episodes by returning before professionals were too concerned about his whereabouts; furthermore, there were no reports of criminal or anti-social behaviour. Although noted and acknowledged, Lloyd's 'safe enough' position was overruled by professionals who again argued against the positive evidence, insisting that their

safeguarding but arguably intrusive agenda had to take precedence because there were too many 'unknowns', as Dave highlighted from a police perspective above.

6.4.4 Summarising the CSE strategy meetings

As previously discussed in relation to each observed CSE strategy meeting, the young people were the focus, yet they knew very little about the meeting, what information was being discussed about them, or whether that information was factual or subjective. Although there were arguably legitimate safeguarding reasons for this, it could also be asserted that this disempowered Lloyd, Ellie, and Olivia, suggesting that their private lives are 'owned' by concerned professionals given authority to invade that privacy. This poses questions as to whether professional disregard of young people's rights to autonomy and privacy should be addressed from a moral and ethical point of view.

Notably, the decision-making process of the CSE strategy meeting resulted in a professional decision (to place the young person's name on the CSE protocol) without discussion with the young person. Consequently, young people have no agency in the decision-making process, although, in Lloyd's case, it was acknowledged that a positive relationship needed to be built with Lloyd to facilitate this.

All the strategy meetings were managed and chaired consistently using established norms and protocols that supported professionals and the young people they were trying to protect. After Lloyd's meeting, I held an impromptu discussion about young people attending or not attending their meetings. The professionals present acknowledged the need for young people to attend but gave various reasons for their exclusion, including:

> *This is just the way it's done.*
>
> *(Health)*

> *It's safer for young people (not to attend) because we are discussing disruption and naming other young people associating with the (alleged) perpetrators.*
>
> *(Police)*

These comments indicated that the established norm of excluding young people from their CSE strategy meetings would not be imminently challenged nor

changed. However, across the meetings, multi-modal participation methods captured young people's voices. Using virtual technology and social media, more participation would be achievable via video calling; in this way, partial meeting attendance or exclusion (as deemed appropriate) could easily be viable options.

6.5 The child protection case conference and the contextualised risk panel

This section examines the final two observed meetings; a) the statutory child protection case conference, where the young person (Kayleigh) was invited and present, and b) the contextualised risk panel.

6.5.1 Kayleigh's voice

Kayleigh had been placed on the child protection register under dual categories of neglect and emotional harm. Kayleigh was good at school (when she attended) but had 'got in with the wrong crowd'. Kayleigh had a reasonable relationship with her mum and adored her sibling Jac; she received and enjoyed respite care. There were clear presenting indicators of potential CSE in the case conference, but the focus was on home conditions, non-school attendance, parental substance misuse, and Kayleigh's chaotic lifestyle.

In this formal arena, I observed that professional attendees were familiar with each other and understood each other's roles and statutory responsibilities, embracing a shared safeguarding approach and constructive professional challenge. As confirmed previously, young people are invited to their case conference; however, it was also previously acknowledged that their attendance was unusual. The social worker had persuaded Kayleigh to attend, but her reluctance to engage in the process was apparent, and her attendance did not equate to participation. However, the production of a letter by Kayleigh was a proactive and positive example of how she tried to 'have her say' and how her voice was represented after she had left.

My reflections on the case conference observation led to the conclusion that professionals recognised the difficulty for Kayleigh to speak out in a formal and statutory meeting, which could have enormous implications for her. The probation officer commented on the holistic picture, noting that Kayleigh could be placed in foster care.

> *How hard it must be for this child, knowing that her mother's behaviour is being scrutinised, believing that if she puts a foot wrong, she may end up in care. I wouldn't want to speak up either.*
>
> *(Carolyn: Kayleigh's mother's probation officer)*

My observations noted the difficulty in engaging Kayleigh directly in a process that was not predisposed to her participation. The chair directed that Kayleigh's wishes and feelings be given proper status in the meeting, and views were gathered verbally from those who knew her best. It was acknowledged that the advocacy service was a valuable resource; however, there had been no current advocate engagement with Kayleigh. The chairperson asked if there were any indirect views from Kayleigh, who had now left the conference. Kayleigh's social worker produced the letter written by Kayleigh:

> *I want to stay at home; my mam and Jac (sibling) need me there; I enjoy going to respite, but I worry about them. I am not running to Kris's house. I go out, and I get back on time; leave us be, we are fine.*
>
> *(Kayleigh, 15)*

Reading Kayleigh's letter reiterated her wishes and feelings, giving her perspective on her situation and ensured that Kayleigh's voice was considered in the formal safeguarding arena, giving her some agency, at least. The conference lasted for two hours (an unmanageable timeframe for most teenagers); it was hardly surprising that she had left. A majority vote agreed that Kayleigh would remain registered under the category of neglect. The concluding discussion regarding sexual abuse and CSE confirmed a lack of evidence to support dual registration, although it was agreed that signifiers of exploitation were present. The primary and overriding risk for Kayleigh was deemed to be neglect. The key arguments concerning Kayleigh's voice include professional conflict about her presence and inclusion in the meeting and reference to her as a child (which constructed as her less powerful); and even though Kayleigh had tried to engage with the process via letter, her position was overruled by professionals struggling with balancing protection versus participation.

In the conference, tensions were observed in professionals who admitted it was much easier to speak after Kayleigh and her mother had left the meeting. Some professionals suggested that Kayleigh's attendance at the conference

inhibited their contribution. Notably, some professionals viewed the young person's inclusion in the child protection process as incompatible with their welfare or well-being.

> *It's easier now that they have left, I do not want to distress Kayleigh and criticise her mum's parenting in front of her, but this* ***child*** *is not getting boundaries, parenting, the home life, or the education that she needs or is conducive to her safety. However, I don't want to jeopardise their relationship with school as it may alienate Kayleigh more.*
>
> *(Tony: headteacher)*

Although this is a single sample of a child protection case conference, with limited participation and inclusion of Kayleigh, her views were considered and represented, and advocacy encouraged. However, the conference's formal nature was prohibitive of inclusion and marginalised Kayleigh's voice, focusing more on family chaos and dysfunction than on the risk of exploitation. Conversely, young people did not attend their CSE strategy meeting, but professionals were proactive regarding inclusion and hearing them. My observations indicated that young people's views were central to the strategy meetings because the meeting focus was CSE; consequently, Olivia, Ellie, and Lloyd were viewed as young people with more agency than was observed with Kayleigh, who was viewed as a child.

6.5.2 The contextualised risk panel

The contextualised risk panel dealt with context and community protection, peer-on-peer abuse, and gathering soft intelligence. There was no specific focus on individual young people; but as in the previous five observations, individuals were identified and spoken about under the umbrella of one meeting (Elise 15, Lilly 17, and Zac 15). In contrast to the case conference, 'children' were referred to as young people. This name shift recognised young people's teenage status and suggested recognition of agency in their choice of behaviour and actions. Consequently, this agentic position highlighted potential conflict between what young people wanted and what professionals' thought was best for them (see Lefevre et al. 2018).

I concluded that professionals wanted better organisational systems, strategies, and protocols to enable frontline multi-agency practitioners to communicate directly and quickly with each other within the small windows of

opportunity that CSE-experienced young people present. There were different professional opinions at various junctures, and interdisciplinary and multi-agency working often results in opposing opinions concerning young people's welfare. However, when directly speaking with young people, their agency, views, and lived experience can shape multi-agency perspectives and risk assessments, along with their active contribution to those decisions and safety plans. The multi-agency contextualised risk panel expected no input from young people, although this was an aspirational position that some professionals articulated they would prefer.

> *It would be great if Elise (15), Lilly (16) and Zac (15) could tell us what they want to happen; we are second-guessing the risks, which they often understand better than us.*
>
> *(Mike: Chairperson)*

As researcher, I faced some difficulty in eliciting further insight into the young people being presented at the contextualised risk meeting, because fewer details were provided about the young person being discussed; this was because the focus of the meeting was on the wider context i.e., the extra-familial risks being posed to young people. Furthermore, the young people who were being discussed were not aware of the meeting, had not consented to the discussion and did not know that they had been referred in.

There was limited background information provided about the young people, which came out of the referral form presented to the panel. The panel consisted of six multi-agency professionals: police, social worker, education, health, the third sector and Youth Justice Services. The referral was presented by the agency that had raised concerns; therefore, Elise was referred by the police, Zac by education and Lily through Youth Justice Services. At the time of the meetings, only Elise was known to social services and therefore only she had any sort of relationship with a professional in respect of addressing CSE risk. The chair was the safeguarding lead for the authority and recognised that young people could have told them more about the risks, had they been present or participated in some way. The aspirational position alluded to by professionals was that young people should attend (despite the difficulties of them potentially alerting perpetrators to the agency interest in them); but it was clear that the outcome of the meeting included an expectation of professionals being able to build

relationships with Lilly and Zac, to hear their voices and to help them navigate the risk of exploitation.

In the contextualised risk meeting the voice or opinion of individual young people was heard and presented indirectly via verbal evidence from professionals; however, the circumstances in which young people found themselves could be addressed via disruption techniques (see Chapter Five). Therefore, despite young people being excluded from the meeting, there was definite merit, whilst considering their choices, in discussing the contexts, risks, and places frequented by the young people (see Firmin 2018). This said, the young person's voice was far more difficult to evidence in terms of hearing them and acknowledging their lived experience in the meeting, yet professionals were discussing significant interventions regarding their lives, their peers, and their futures, without them. Given what the study has raised in terms of whether young people fully understood the reasons for the decision-making processes, or rationale in relation to professional meetings, it is difficult to advocate that young people could be heard in the CSE contextualised risk meeting. Young people certainly did not actively participate, even though their voices were represented via hearsay or indirect third-party representation. Furthermore, because only one young person of the three who were discussed had a relationship with the professional who had referred them, the remaining professionals, as stated by Mike (chairperson) were ‘second-guessing’. It is, therefore, crucial for multi-agency professionals who are tasked with building relationships with young people identified in contextualised risk meetings to ensure that the language they speak is understood by the young people, and that they clearly explain the purpose of the decision-making meetings that affect the lives of the young people. This also links back to findings in the CSE strategy meetings and again highlights the difficulties of balancing participation and protection while considering young people's human right to family life, alongside their right to be free from abuse.

6.6 Sharing information and a multi-agency approach

This chapter has discussed how young people are represented differently within different observed meetings, and the barriers and perhaps the aspirations for hearing the young person involved. However, hearing them is also dependent on who is present and their willingness and ability to 'listen'. As already noted, to

varying degrees, key multi-agency professionals, including police, health, social services, education, third sector CSE charities, probation and care home staff conveyed the views of young people in various CSE meetings. I now discuss another aspect of multi-agency working, namely the importance and timeliness of information sharing between multi-agency partners and with young people.

6.6.1 multi-agency information sharing

There were no issues perceived with any information sharing between professionals in any of the observed meetings, as discussed in Chapter Five, where it was recognised, accepted (and acted upon) that information sharing was wholly necessary, integral to good practice in safeguarding situations, and was borne out by the reports presented and discussions held at all these multi-agency safeguarding meetings. However, in the child protection case conference, there was some reluctance to share professional opinions with the young person regarding the risks, as the teacher did not want to jeopardise their relationship and risk alienating her. For the teacher in question, this was about not losing a window of opportunity to engage with the young person, and to keep dialogue open, which she felt would offer more protection and engagement than alienating the young person and shutting conversations down. However, for the majority of multi-agency professionals, information sharing was not considered problematic (Peel and Rowley 2010).

Having said this, information sharing is not accepted practice in all multi-agency safeguarding arenas, where confidentiality agreements and WASPI[17] arrangements are used routinely to underpin safeguarding meetings, including Prevent and Channel (counterterrorism) meetings (Grace 2018). In child protection and CSE meetings, the term ‘daring to share' is frequently used. This relates to multi-agency professionals being confident that sharing information deemed confidential must always be a priority in safeguarding situations.

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[17] WASPI – Wales accord for the sharing of personal information.
Prevent – https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/.../prevent-strategy-review.pdf

6.6.2 Daring to share

There are two key discussion points that arose from the observations of the meetings in terms of information sharing – a) the timeliness of information sharing was raised as a concern by some professionals, and b) whether allegations or negative comments should or could be shared with the young person.

In the case conference and CSE strategy meetings, there was a clear commitment to sharing information with the young person at the start of the meeting (provided it did not undermine the safeguarding plan). However, in the contextualised risk meeting, information could not be shared with the young person before the meeting but was considered essential within ongoing direct work; for the strategic RSCB meeting, Millie was told that her drawings and statements would be shared with the RSCB.

The dominant discourse in the formal child protection arena sits squarely with those in the CSE arena, i.e., young people should not be passive or 'done to' in decision-making meetings about them. Berelowitz (2013) concluded that young people feel valued and empowered when they are involved, and their agency is considered in the safeguarding process. Some professionals view this as incompatible with promoting young people's welfare and safety, as observed in Kayleigh’s case conference and the CSE strategy meetings (see Lansdown 2005; Firmin 2016). However, in the observed meetings relating to individual young people, their lack of direct participation was an obvious omission. That said, noticeable efforts by agencies undertaking indirect work, conversations, or interventions enabled the voices and contributions of young people to be made. For example, the multi-modal communication via Millie's drawings and Kayleigh's letter was probably the most effective ways of hearing and enabling these young people. It also illustrated other ways in which young people can be heard and highlighted that specific communication difficulties further disadvantaged some young people (Twycross and Smith 2017), so professionals need strategies to address these difficulties. Thus, differing organisational roles, responsibilities, and agendas can both inhibit and enhance the multi-agency process in the safeguarding arena.

The chapter's key findings are now summarised, triangulating with emergent themes from the two other data collection points in the study, and linking back to the young person's voice being heard. The conclusion of the chapter

highlights the implications of young people not being heard by professionals, which undermines the safeguarding process, and exacerbates risk for them.

6.7 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to answer research questions RQ1, RQ2 and RQ6. The findings suggest that in all the observed meetings, the views and decisions of professionals took precedence over the voices, wishes and feelings of young people. It could be argued that the professionals did not understand the risks from the young person's perspective (confirmed by Olivia) or that they felt that the risks were too significant to support the young people's views (as in Ellie's case). However, in Ellie's meeting, these perceived increased risks were not supported by the presenting evidence. Therefore, I conclude that the voice of the professional was significantly louder and more powerful than the voices of young people. Consequently, this 'professional powerfulness' effectively disempowers and potentially disengages young people, exacerbating risk, and contradicting the ethos of working in partnership and hearing young people.

In all the meetings that I observed, and all the interviews that took place, again, the young people showed insight into the processes and procedures of which they were a part, at various parts of their journey. However, looking at their understanding of the language that professionals used and how young people interpreted that language (4.3.3), some evidenced a lack of understanding regarding the child protection register and CSE-related terminology. Therefore, I am not convinced that young people understood the meetings or decision-making processes of which they were a part while experiencing them.

Every chairperson explained what the meeting was about; however, as only one young person was present, I cannot confirm that he or she, or those who were not present, were fully conversant with or apprised of the rationale or reasons for the meetings that were taking place. Therefore, multi-agency professionals must ensure that the language they speak is understood by the young people with whom they are working. Furthermore, they need to clearly explain the purpose of the decision-making meetings that affect the lives of these young people. Essentially, wherever possible, young people's attendance should be encouraged and facilitated.

From the findings presented, I have discussed and shown how young people can be presented and represented at different meetings in different ways, some more effective than others. The findings suggest that the young person does not necessarily have to be present, but it may sometimes be beneficial. Overall, an emergent key conclusion is that professionals need to ensure that, somehow, the young person feels that they are being listened to even when, to keep them safe, it is sometimes impossible to act on what they want. The chapter has illustrated the importance of young people having some influence on what is said about them, i.e., what they want to add to their case, and the language used to increase their feelings of agency. Therefore, having feedback on how decisions are made may also be conducive to making young people feel heard. Based on the findings, I suggest that if young people understand and are included in the decision-making process, and the reasons for those decisions are fully explained, at least they will feel that they have been listened to. This inclusion cannot equate to equal decision-making power for young people, but it gives them agency and scope to contribute and shape their suggested safety plan. For real commitment to hearing young people's voices, their lived experience should be integral to reviewing and shaping Welsh policy and practice. There is a drive toward junior safeguarding boards, youth fora and participation groups (see Hillman et al. 2010; Rees et al. 2021); however, these do not usually include the most disadvantaged or hard-to-engage young people, including those at risk of CSE.

Finally, and supported by literature including Warrington (2013), Hallett et al. (2020) and Coy et al. (2017), the argument remains that if young people can bring agency to their safeguarding processes by their inclusion, they will exert both power and influence over their service provision, thus constructing young people as a resource rather than a problem.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and key findings

The starting point for this thesis is that young people exchanging sex for money or material gain is problematic for them and society. However, as professionals, we must understand why sometimes they feel that they must make that choice. This concluding chapter elicits the findings and themes of the empirical chapters highlighting the key points of my study, providing the overall answers to my RQs. Finally, I explore the study's limitations and suggest the possible direction of travel for further research.

7.1 Introduction

I begin this concluding chapter by reminding the reader of the aims of the study and re-state my RQs:

RQ1: When multiple professionals work together in cases of CSE, what does it mean to hear the voice of the young person?

RQ2: How effective is the participation of children and young people in decision-making meetings about them?

RQ3: What are the barriers and opportunities in relation to the child's voice being heard and responded to?

RQ4: What are the professionals' perceptions of how the voices of young people are listened to and responded to?

RQ5: What does 'being listened to' mean to young people?

RQ6: What are the barriers to, or opportunities for, hearing the voice of the young person when working in multi-agency settings?

To answer the RQs, this study took an iterative approach to analysis, and the findings support previous literature, including Warrington (2013), Coy et al. (2017), Diaz et al. (2018) and Lefevere et al. (2017;2018).

Throughout this thesis run six important themes, as discussed below. Whilst exploring these emergent themes, one issue became a recurring talking point for professionals and young people across the three empirical chapters – the sound of silence (Lewis 2010). The omission of young people from key meetings affecting their lives and life choices renders them invisible and unheard, Furthermore,

young people were being excluded from invitee lists for meetings that were making key decisions about their lives, which made their contribution seem irrelevant, i.e., because they weren't invited so they didn't count. Consequently, if young people are excluded or inaccurately represented, they are silenced, marginalised, or excluded. This omission was explored, and invisibility and silence provided a framework to elicit these findings, thus making the invisible visible and centralising and welcoming young people's voices in the meetings, discussions, and safeguarding processes about them. Addressing silence and invisibility hopefully adds academic value and rigour to a largely unexplored topic, which may inform professionals and assist young people in their quest for inclusion and agency.

Saying this, and within the recommendation for inclusion and participation at their meetings, I am mindful that the young people interviewed talked specifically about their preference for one-to-one working. Although I understand the reasons, their exclusion from their meetings meant that they had limited opportunities to explore inclusion and participation within the meeting setting, as set out in Chapter 5. It was also evident in two observed meetings that, even when young people were included, professionals made decisions overruling their wishes and feelings based on safety or vulnerability concerns. The recommendation for inclusion and participation is therefore based on my own observations of participation via multi-modal means, the individual views of professionals and young people, and the collective views of multi-agency professionals in their respective meeting fora. Participation should be viewed as a process, not a one-off event, and tokenistic approaches must be avoided (i.e., where children and young people's views are sought but not adequately considered) as outlined by Hart (2008), who also emphasises continuous conversation between children and adults, in a spirit of mutual respect

In this study, I have referred to previous research, including Hart (2008), Diaz (2020), Bourke and Loveridge (2014) and Barford and Wattam (1991), that supports the view that participation in decision-making is vital for effective policy making and to improve services. Inclusion and participation increase autonomy and opportunities for action on the part of children and young people. Therefore, effective participation by children and young people is crucial and allows them to have their voices heard on a whole range of issues, to shape decisions and create

positive outcomes and changes. Although, for this study, participation and inclusion are CSE specific, they are, of course, not confined to the world of exploitation. Inclusion promotes increased empowerment, engagement, and commitment by children and young people to participate in all spheres of life.

In this study, participation and inclusion demonstrate recognition of young people as competent actors/players, which can increase the development of skills, and their understanding and awareness of how to participate to make a difference and contribute to keeping safe. They also promote the realisation that young people have rights, which can enhance the validity of collaborative decision-making. Therefore, the recommendation for participation and inclusion in the decision-making processes and meetings is based on the voices of young people and professionals in this study. It will involve both direct and indirect participation in decision-making, and include action, practices and dialogue with adults, parents, staff, carers, professionals, and community members to create positive outcomes and change. The more meetings that young people are enabled to join, the more their voices will be heard.

The six main themes are now summarised as concluding thoughts on the findings.

7.2 The six themes

7.2.1 Theme 1: building relationships

Young people advocated that key to being heard was opportunities to build relationships with the professionals working with them. This finding supports previous studies, which conclude that relationships between young people and professionals were critical to meaningful participation and inclusion (Diaz et al. 2018; Pert et al. 2017; Hallett 2013).

In Chapter Four, the data suggested that young people often saw the exchange of sex as the least problematic issue, focusing instead on their need (and preference) for professionals to spend time with them, building relationships to understand the issues they faced. In turn, these relationships were critical to validate their experiences. This was supported by the young people who identified numerous changes and contacts with multiple professionals (specifically social workers and police officers), which impacted their trust, confidence, and engagement. Young people felt 'let down' and abandoned by professionals who 'moved on' because, often, the investment in those relationships enabled them to

understand that they had been exploited. Therefore, when young people perceived that their relationships with professionals were poor or were of little value, this left them feeling disbelieved and devalued, and reduced their ability to engage and be heard. Conversely, when young people felt that their relationships were good, as with their CSE worker or missing children's coordinator, this instilled confidence and an ability to invest in these relationships and to begin to 'have a voice'.

Several young people spoke about the human and authentic qualities of professionals who worked with them, suggesting that they equated professionals investing in those relationships to professionals investing in them. This concurs with Selwyn and Riley (2015) and Diaz (2019), who emphasise the importance of relationships between young people and professionals. Hallett (2017) defines this as the 'non-work' work approach, often unquantifiable in an assessment or case recording but forming the basis of trust and open lines of communication, driven by the relationship as the goal. This approach involves supporting a young person's well-being while working at the young person's pace, not just to statutory requirements. This draws on Hart's (2008) ladder of participation, advising professionals to 'try to integrate our thinking on children's formal participation with what is known of children's informal participation' (Hart 2008, p.19.); this is precisely what these young people were saying made a difference, unwittingly using Hallett's 'non-work' work model.

The data in Chapters Four and Five corresponded, in that CSE-experienced young people found difficulty in building relationships with professionals; similarly, professionals had difficulty building and sustaining relationships with them. The findings highlight the professionals' dilemma, of having to acknowledge (and often accept) the transitionary rites of passage for teenagers exploring sex and sexuality within exploitative situations, whilst simultaneously risk-assessing those situations, for example, when predatory adults are believed to be taking advantage of vulnerable young people. Age is a factor here and was discussed several times by professionals and young people in the study, because the age signifier influenced how the young person's wishes and feelings were considered, how they were heard, and how engagement was evidenced; this supports Scuse and Mathew (2015) who advocate that adolescence is a social construction. However, it should be stated here, that morally (and supported by law), children

of a certain age should not be able to consent to a relationship that professionals regard as exploitative; this does not advance the constructionist position very far in respect of age. Professionals are left in an unenviable position, with a duty to report or investigate concerns, but thereby potentially alienating young people and increasing their vulnerability by jeopardising their relationship with them.

In Chapter Five, professionals explained why building relationships with young people became difficult, citing competing organisational agendas, dual roles and responsibilities and lines of communication with young people when trying to balance the risks of participation with protection. This links with the following sections in terms of structural deficits within agencies, and the use of professional language, which is discussed as the thesis concludes.

7.2.2 Theme 2: structural factors and the listening environment

The data provided evidence that when young people were unheard, they often felt powerless, invisible, devalued, or disbelieved. The empirical chapters explored and examined what factors influenced those feelings, and what made young people vulnerable, and who responded to those vulnerabilities. In Chapter Four, the data showed that young people's experiential interpretation, core values, nuances, and environments were also instrumental in giving them the confidence to share their stories.

The young people’s evidence made it clear that being listened to involves more than someone hearing what is said, the listening environment needs to be conducive for them to talk freely and is crucial to them being heard. When Jules was interviewed by professionals in what she perceived to be a cupboard, she felt devalued, which prevented her engagement. This also endorses the cruciality of professionals listening and understanding what young people are saying, but, sometimes, more importantly, hearing and understanding what they are not saying.

Chapters Four and Five explored the 'listening environment' and how and where young people experienced 'being listened to'. Young people suggested that if certain prerequisites were met, including the right listening space and building, and professionals investing in relationships and engaging in 'non-work' work (Hallett 2017), being listened to and heard equated to being believed and valued.

Professionals also recognised the importance of the ‘right’ environment, reflexively questioning whether the service structure for multi-agency working, the environment, and current policy and practice guidelines provided enough professional resilience to sustain positive relationships with young people and colleagues under emotionally challenging circumstances. Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that formal or statutory environments do not cater well to hearing or empowering young people. For example, observing the multi-agency meeting environment confirmed that paternalistic and protective professional agendas remain, endorsing the exclusion of young people from meetings that made key decisions about them; because they were not active participants, preparation for their inclusion was non-existent.

The data illustrate the young people's complex backstories and some similarities in the factors that impacted how they were listened to. The professionals recognised CSE as indicative of unmet need and a need to survive, often resulting from the young person's family dynamics, including poverty, disadvantage, and poor parenting. These environmental and structural factors often led to decisions being taken by young people that placed them at greater risk of exploitation, as found by previous research by Hallett (2013) and Franklin et al. (2015). For example, young people suggested that exchanging sex was 'no big deal' or the 'easier of difficult choices’ as stated by Rhys (Chapter Four). These difficult choices often drove young people ‘underground', diminishing their chances of being heard, consulted, and listened to, at times when life was most dangerous and when they needed their voice the most.

In light of this, I considered the balance of young people's rights to participate versus the role of society, the state, and multi-agency professionals to protect them. The right to participation, the right to protection, and the right to provision are set out in the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child* (1991), yet in this study, there was little evidence of physical participation by young people, who were generally excluded from their CSE or statutory meetings. Furthermore, it was clear in my study that young people would rather know what was going on, even if they disagreed, than be excluded from discussions or decisions about them; this was highlighted by Tasha (page 105/6. Moreover, and highlighted by Bourdieu’s (1992) theory of reflexive interplay between structure and agency, my findings suggest that young people's agency in this decision-

making could be a vital strategy for self-protection from sexual exploitation. Therefore, environmental and structural considerations were critical for enabling young people to be heard and included.

7.2.3 Theme 3: Agency and the importance of being heard

The findings in the three empirical chapters suggest that young people being without agency in decision-making meetings or discussions, with their voice not recognised as legitimate or necessary by 'protective and paternalistic professionals', creates their silence and exclusion. This exclusion makes already vulnerable young people easy prey for perpetrators who seek to exploit them; young people are left believing that the person exploiting them for sex is the one validating them and nurturing them most and giving them what they think they need. This supports previous findings by Hallett (2013). Young people in this study seemed to assert that they were not vulnerable or at least not in the way that professionals perceived them to be.

The study examined what agency meant for young people. Agency suggests ownership of the meeting process, inclusion, participation, and a voice in decisions being made. The data suggest that young people did not feel consistently heard by professionals and, when they were, it depended on which part of their CSE journey they were on. The finding here illustrates a continuum of being heard, ranging from not being listened to or believed, to building a relationship with key professionals where they felt safe and respected enough to talk to them, and one where the trusted professional ‘had learned loads' (Jules, page 79).

In Chapters Five and Six, the data illustrate that the observed multi-agency meetings (and their processes) did not encourage good enough inclusion or participation for young people to be heard. For example, in six multi-agency meetings, only one young person was invited and attended, although, as discussed, in another there were reasonable attempts to include the young person’s opinion through multi-modal means. Most multi-agency professionals considered the inclusion and participation of young people vital; however, despite their best efforts, this inclusion, when measured against Hart's ladder of participation (1993; 2008), was often tokenistic, because even when asked for their views or when third parties represented them, the risks were considered too high, so the young person’s views rarely impacted the safeguarding decisions made.

The scope of the observed meetings was not wide enough or considered safe enough for real agency to occur. Therefore, although young people's agency in the decision-making processes was recognised as essential, achieving it proved problematic and often conflicting as it became evident (and supported by the data) that the professional's voice was more powerful and agentic than the voice of young people, disempowering them further. Such disempowerment and minimisation further reduce young people's agency in decisions that impact their lives, particularly in relation to exploitation. Therefore, the findings in Chapters Five and Six support those in Chapter Four, building on young people's perception of their lack of agency and, consequently, lack of choice, voice, and control over their situations (Cossar et al. 2019). In addition, and as summarised previously, in contrast to young people's agency not being upheld in decision-making meetings, they were in fact seen as having agency in their behaviours and their involvement or choices in their sexual relationships; and despite an overriding framing of 'exploitation', there were examples of young people being made to feel responsible for the situations they were in, thus giving a very different perspective to agency and suggesting that at times there was a professional culture of blame.

7.2.4 Theme 4: A culture of responsibility

The data suggests that young people were negatively impacted by what they viewed as a 'professional culture of blame', which has some similarities with the historical position and the social construction of child prostitution; young people often felt responsible for their exploitation by a) being criminalised, b) being judged negatively due to their behaviours or c) being blamed for being exploited or 'involved in risky behaviours. This further correlates with the findings in Chapter Five in respect of blameworthy language used by professionals about young people, including, 'he is always one step ahead' (Chapter Five, page 154 Lloyd) and 'Ellie felt blamed as she had been told that her behaviours were too risky'. (Chapter Four, page 151). A significant piece of data sums up this finding:

I was (viewed as) 'trouble not troubled'

(Jamie, Chapter Four p.91)

Jamie stated that he could never be seen or heard by the professionals tasked with supporting him when he was viewed as the problem and defined as such. However, my findings suggest that this blameworthy language and the

labelling of young people as offenders, not victims, can have the dual effect of both ascribing and denying them agency. In Jamie's case, it transferred responsibility for his exploitation back to him; the findings suggest that this culture of responsibility (as felt by young people) could jeopardise their relationships with professionals, leading to mistrust and being silenced, creating barriers to being heard, and arguably denying them agency as victims. Conversely, it could also lead into the early intervention and prevention domain of the criminal justice world where support and more frequent intervention is available to young people, which paradoxically could become a protective factor in cases of CSE, arguably enabling them as victims, to be heard.

In Chapter Six, it was evident in the observations of meetings, that the professional consensus was that young people needed agency in the processes and meetings that made key decisions about their lives to a) begin the process of recovery and b) move away from exploitative situations or relationships. Within that agentic position, notably, young people became more powerful when viewed, treated, and identified as young people, rather than as children who are categorised and expected to be passive, invisible, and dependent. However, this was within the context of the young person not being physically present and using multi-modal or third-party representation at the meetings. Conversely, opportunities could arise to hear young people and break the cycle of exploitation when they are agentic and visible. Thus, supporting young people to attend and contribute to more of their meetings is key. The findings captured the need for young people to feel visible and valued and to begin to speak with some authority in meetings that are crucial to their safety and well-being, which consequently authenticates their voice and choices. This notion of authentication of the young person's voice by their inclusion and agentic position was a theme that permeated all three empirical chapters.

Further issues highlighted by professionals which impacted young people being heard were systemic deficits that may 'lose' or silence young people's voices, including incompatible systems, inadequate multi-agency training, lack of multi-agency line management, and no shared geographical base. Professionals' awareness of these issues was a testament to their commitment to keeping young people's voices integral to good multi-agency, young person-focused practice.

In Chapter Four, young people confirmed that once authenticated, respected, valued, and believed, it was more likely that they would engage and discuss what was happening to them, enabling their contribution to their safety plans. Furthermore, in Chapters Five and Six, many professionals noted that the omission of young people from their meetings was highly significant. 'Nothing about them without them' was an emergent theme, as was the young person needing to be central, not peripheral, at CSE meetings. This approach may make young people feel that they have a voice (because it is being represented at meetings). In reality, their voices are not counted, as evidenced by Ellie's strategy meeting (Chapter Six), where professionals felt that the risks were too significant to support her views; they rejected the presenting evidence which did not support these perceived increased risks. The findings of the study confirm that professionals recognise CSE and do not perceive it as a hidden problem; instead, they recognise, and are confronted with, a set of circumstances that are incredibly hard to manage without assuming an authoritarian and paternalistic stance to protect young people from significant harm, as defined by law and in policy.

The findings suggest a substantial appetite for practitioners' engagement with young people in the observed operational meetings, whether to hear their voices or find alternative communication methods to represent them. In the three empirical chapters, it was evident that CSE was not viewed in isolation but part of a larger continuum of multiple forms of exploitation seen in contextualised risk, including peer-on-peer abuse. Therefore, the context in which exploitation occurs also needs to be managed better by policy and practice, rather than only the behaviours, attitudes, or the criminal activities of young people (Firmin 2016).

The findings suggest that differing organisational roles, responsibilities and agendas can both inhibit and enhance the process of multi-agency working, and that competing priorities and organisational constraints were viewed as a negative by both young people and professionals. For example, young people felt devalued by 'not enough time spent' with them and professionals felt 'torn' by many competing priorities. However, the findings suggest that even when the young person's views are in opposition to the professionals' views, if there are mechanisms in place to address these contradictions and obtain feedback and young people's agentic involvement, the weight of their views and the extent of their participation, and the safeguarding collaboration between young people and

professionals can counteract or at least reduce those contradictions. These in turn will present more balanced arguments to support and engage young people, as seen when exploring inclusion via multi-modal representation in Chapter Six.

The findings in Chapter Six suggest that multi-modal methods of communication proved an invaluable and effective way of listening to young people's voices, such that they do not always have to be physically present at their meetings. This was illustrated by Millie's drawings (Chapter Six, page 143 and Kayleigh's letter at her case conference (Chapter Six, page 158). It is fair to say that these two multi-modal representations and communication methods were the most effective ways of hearing the young person's voice across all six meetings. Multi-modal techniques of gathering data could also be expanded in future research studies.

It is relevant that this research was finalised as we experienced the pandemic of 2020/2021 and the world became one of virtual platforms, moving in and out of mandatory lockdowns (Waizenegger et al. 2020). As a result, post-pandemic opportunities and infrastructure for engagement via instant virtual platforms became (and remain) widely available, welcomed by a professional appetite to engage more with young people. Another significant finding promoting the future use of virtual platforms was that often, the last recorded meeting or conversation between young people and the professionals who would be representing them at their meetings could take place up to a fortnight before the meeting was scheduled. Therefore, the circumstances, the risks, and the views of the young people were often retrospective. A week is a long time for a young person at risk of exploitation; but social media platforms allow instant and contemporaneous access to young people, so their wishes and feelings are current and 'live', and their situation can be more accurately reflected.

Diaz et al. (2018) and Pert et al. (2017) commented on young people attending their children who are looked after meetings which are usually a multi-agency cohort, and Pert et al. (2017) reported a 'procedural approach' taking precedence over children's participation (Muench et al. 2018), suggesting that young people's attendance at their meetings was a significant area for improvement. Thus, the use of multi-modal ways of engaging with young people could change the dominant discourse of limited participation and exclusion of young people to their inclusion and agency.

7.2.5 Theme 5: language

The data reported throughout Chapter Four (and supported by Chapters Five and Six) illustrated that language was key for young people. The exploration of the use of language or dialogue when working with young people showed why they needed to communicate and be understood by professionals and vice versa. Any language which frames young people as blameworthy, deviant, streetwise or risky must be challenged, as it places the responsibility (and blame) on young people for their exploitation by predatory and powerful adults or peers and supports the culture of responsibility discussed earlier (Mannay et al. 2019).

The findings highlight the need and reasons for clear, consistent professional language and illustrate that the lack of understanding about what constituted CSE impacted a young person's response. If young people do not understand the professional terms and language used, they cannot contribute effectively to conversations about them. This correlates with the young people's semi-structured interviews (Chapter Four), which also identified plain language as critical for engagement and confirmed that when young people do not understand the language used, or disagree with it, this renders them more vulnerable and isolated. Chapter Six found that the language used in meetings in terms of whether the young person was referred to as a child or young person, offender or victim proved very relevant for whether they felt heard or had agency as a young person. The finding across all empirical chapters was that a common and clear language was integral to success in listening to and hearing young people’s voices. Furthermore, young people illustrated by example why clear, conducive, young person-friendly language, which avoids confusion and, crucially, is confirmed as understood by them, is essential. This assertion was supported by professionals in their interviews (Chapter Five) and observations of meetings (Chapter Six).

7.2.6 Theme 6: Balancing protection with participation

The findings across the three empirical chapters confirm that balancing protection with participation emerged as a highly complex but key theme throughout the study. The cohort of participant professionals in Chapter Five recognised the conflict between organisational agendas and the young person's voice, choice, and positionality, noting the difficulties in balancing protection and safeguarding with participation and inclusion while simultaneously meeting their

emotional and developmental needs. The data in Chapter Six confirmed that professionals must continue to make both legal and moral decisions to keep young people safe, despite hearing opposition or negativity about what they think about those decisions. Honneth's theory of recognition (1996) is relevant here, as applied by McCafferty (2021). McCafferty explores the social worker's dichotomy described above and offers insights into why effective listening to children and young people must find solutions – incorporating professionals' responsibility to keep children safe while encompassing Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC).

The findings also suggest that professional dilemmas occurred when undertaking the dual role of representing their organisation and simultaneously representing the young person, evidenced by the missing children coordinator and key worker (see Chapters Five and Six), balancing protection with participation. Professionals must consider young persons' vulnerabilities, their positionality in exploitative situations and the transactional exchange of sex to meet other needs (as highlighted previously). The narrative and data in Chapter Five illustrated the professionals' recognition of those vulnerabilities and identified that they were not always related to CSE. Multi-agency professionals demonstrated that they clearly understand what constitutes CSE and the safeguarding response required. However, the current dominant discourse is that safeguarding takes precedence over participation. Indeed, the data suggests that professionals recognise CSE as part of a bigger picture of exploitative behaviours and extra-familial harm to which young people are exposed or are at risk of, recognising that CSE might just be one form of exploitation that could impact how professionals respond to or hear young people. Consequently, CSE cannot be viewed in isolation, making the balancing act even more complicated.

In the data in Chapter Six, there were elements of paternalism (i.e., professionals knowing what was best for young people) observed in the child protection case conference and CSE strategy meetings. Furthermore, it was suggested that the young person's attendance might inhibit the professionals' contributions to the meeting, and cause distress to young people and undermine their relationship with key agencies if they hear upsetting conversations or are privy to adult-themed conversations. This finding takes nothing away from the complexity of multi-agency working; professionals acknowledged that they

recognised that through the many threads of exploitation linked to CSE, they risked the young person's voice being lost. However, they also claimed that the advantages of the professional safety net, of joined-up working and interprofessional engagement, might mitigate that risk and offer opportunities for hearing young people, and to present an integrated platform for professionals to build their confidence in this relatively new field.

In practice and as observed in the meetings in Chapter Six, some practitioners struggled because balancing statutory safeguarding responsibilities with young people's rights to privacy, autonomy, choice and voice is difficult, contentious, and challenging. It was very clear that some felt that the risks and the need to safeguard young people sometimes outweighed their right or ability to contribute to effective safeguarding, thus confirming the professionals' position that balancing protection with participation by the young person, and hearing their wishes and feelings, is notoriously difficult.

7.3 Summary of implications for policy, practice, and the direction of travel

Despite the plethora of legislative, policy and guidance frameworks that exist to promote the involvement of young people in decision-making, there was minimal inclusion of young people in the multi-agency meetings observed for this study. Munro (2001) stated that most young people report that the purpose of their children who are looked after meeting is to talk about them, not to them. Some twenty years on, it is apparent that this study regarding CSE meetings confirms Munro's position. As already argued, there is potential for a much higher level of involvement from young people in meetings about them.

It was clear from my fieldwork that practitioners were aware of and welcomed the 2017 review of CSE guidance (Hallett 2017), hoping for clarity and a road map to help deal with CSE cases. Conversely, not one young person in the study appeared to know of, mentioned or referred to any legislation or guidance, including knowing their human rights. This is not really surprising given their age and circumstances, but it is an area that may see improvement with young people's versions of the guidance, and could warrant future exploration and research on their understanding of their human rights and of having a voice in situations where they may be exploited. The recent policy developments, including

the new CSE guidance (2021) and the Wales Protection Procedures (2019), go some distance to provide more updated and clear directions of travel, making CSE easier to understand, recognise and respond to. However, policymakers must acknowledge the great complexity of CSE and make it more about inclusion, agency and co-production between professionals and young people.

Having used reflexivity throughout this study, it is evident that the safeguarding and child protection system in Wales is adult-orientated, although empowerment and hearing the voice of young people are strongly advocated, as seen in the study. However, these findings suggest that for real commitment to hearing the young person's voice, young people's lived experience should be integral when reviewing and shaping Welsh policy and practice. This study also shows that CSE cannot be seen as an isolated form of exploitation, and policy and practice have been influenced by the impact on each other of all forms of exploitation; for young people who are often being criminally exploited, involved in gangs and serious violence to pay drug debts, CSE is often part of that. Therefore, there is a clear need for safety plans to be unified and become one overall plan, because professionals highlighted the repetition of meetings, and the same young person being included on several meeting agendas. As an example, Marcus is the same child made the subject of a child protection plan, a CSE strategy meeting or a child who is looked after review. Therefore, policies and processes need to be developed to reflect the overlap and to keep the young person central to those processes.

A further implication emerging from the study is the way that professionals now engage with young people in the post-pandemic virtual world. There are advantages and disadvantages to this instant access to young people; a significant advantage is the real-time interaction with them as their lives are happening, which mitigates the risk of a delayed professional response and provides more opportunities for their early inclusion and agency.

7.4 Limitations of this study

All research has limitations. This study allowed for some insights into one geographical region, which means that a national picture regarding the young person's voice is precluded, and the results cannot be straightforwardly generalised to other regions. However, other studies with some similarities to

mine, such as Hallett (2013), Radcliffe et al. (2020) and Diaz et al. (2018), cover similar themes. Multi-agency working is difficult at the best of times, and although nearly all my interviews and observations were carried out prior to the pandemic, it certainly affected the time allowed me to write up the thesis. Working days were longer, managing crises and on-call duties increased, and managing social work teams through the pandemic through 2020/21 took precedence. It also had an impact on multi-agency professionals tasked with supporting CSE-experienced young people. Professional burnout and the emotional impact of working with such traumatised young people cannot be underestimated or ignored. Staff well-being and support are critical if organisations want to sustain and maintain their biggest CSE resource, their staff.

In terms of the young participants, this small sample does not reflect all CSE-experienced young people. My personal previous social work experience suggests that a larger sample may have identified a more extensive cohort of young people who did not attend, contribute to, or participate in their meetings, which could have allowed for quantification of this experience. Thus, a larger sample may potentially show that more young people do not feel heard or listened to. This concurs with previous studies, including Diaz et al. (2018), Hallett et al. (2019) and Mannay et al. (2019). As discussed in Chapter Three, professionals chose the young people for the study, suggesting that they were arguably the high-risk young people on everyone's radar. This begs the question, 'what about the young people we do not know about?' This study could not extend far enough to answer this, so follow-up research would be beneficial. Future comparative research across a larger sample of professionals, non-specialist staff, and young people could also provide richer qualitative data and potentially more quantitative data to analyse in mixed-method research. Finally, young people with disabilities are a very vulnerable cohort who were (apart from one young person with autism) largely excluded from the remit of this study because of the limitations of its scope, and therefore warrant consideration, inclusion, and agency in future research.

My position as a reflexive researcher was often challenging and this was highlighted in the section about fighting familiarity and reflected in my research diary, for example:

> *She saw me as a professional, not a researcher, and was reluctant to talk because I made her nervous.*

(Journal entry, June 2018)

This position was a thread running through the study and at times I had to also bracket my own bias to ensure impartiality and objectivity.

At the inception of this research, the CSE 'problem' had a narrow professional focus of attention. More latterly, since data gathering began and the findings were analysed, the recognition of the extent of exploitation has expanded. CSE was not viewed in isolation, as the professional lens became broader and more nuanced. Professionals in this study had grasped the complexities of CSE; however, their organisations had not grasped the practicalities, which need far more systemic and organisational change to develop, including co-production, multi-agency training, and multi-agency co-located teams. The CSE professionals in this study largely recognised that the definitions of CSE could impact other exploitive behaviours; exchanging sex was meeting young people's needs that were not being fulfilled in other parts of their lives.

7.5 Final reflections

The findings suggest that some young people were aware of their exploitation, and that unmet needs led some of their choices. This, however, depended on which part of the journey they were on, as discussed in Chapter Four. However, the overall picture in Chapter Six was that most disagreed with the professional interpretation of their behaviour and said they were ‘fine and not at risk’. In Chapter Four, some professionals (teachers) were cited as not understanding CSE or its implications for young people, including dysfunctional family life, and that there were missed opportunities for professionals working with young people, leading to them not receiving the right help or intervention at the right time. There were also conflicting responses from professionals which impacted the outcomes for young people. Therefore, for real inclusion and participation, professionals needed to understand the complexity of the decisions and choices that young people made. The overall conclusions mirrored young people's statements in Chapter Four, i.e., that they must be supported, not blamed or 'whisked away' into care (perceived as more frightening and damaging), and they wanted to be reframed as young people with agency and voice, not passive, dependent, and invisible. Young people suggested that the more agency they had, the more they could advise professionals about what keeps them safe.

The professional multi-agency default response was 'saving young people' and protecting them from harm, narrowing the focus from inclusion to protection, away from the holistic picture of meeting broader needs, thus minimising young people's voice, choice, control, and inclusion. Young people wanted acknowledgement as active participants within their safety plans, changing the focus from child protection to co-production, inclusion, and validation. Notwithstanding, this is a difficult position to challenge, however, this study concludes that there is professional appetite to begin to explore it, and work in partnership with young people and each other.

Finally, the secondary aim of this study was to apply this research to improve or enhance my professional practice. In a recent JICPA (Joint inspection of child protection arrangements) inspection, the multi-agency thematic inspection was specifically about exploitation. The multi-agency inspectors commended the services within my portfolio, making specific reference to CSE, and recognised that young people being heard and having agency was central to my professional practice (JICPA July 2021). A further HMIP inspection of the Youth Justice Service (December 2021) graded my governance leadership and safeguarding assessment as outstanding, recognising the safeguarding and exploitation workstream as significant. This workstream has unequivocally been influenced by the qualitative research undertaken in this study with professionals and young people. Furthermore, as highlighted in Chapter Five, young people in this study who entered the Youth Justice Services were sometimes able to access CSE services and interventions more quickly than other young people; this reduced the risk of exploitation and became a protective factor, with better outcomes for them.

The overall message to take away from this small but thought-provoking study, is that when, not if, young people bring agency to their safeguarding processes by their inclusion, they will exert both power and influence over their service provision (noted by the JICPA inspectorate 2021). Young people will make the hidden visible by their inclusion, thus constructing them as an essential resource rather than a problem needing to be solved. Furthermore, this recognition and validation of their autonomy should facilitate a smoother transition into adulthood and begin to address some of the power imbalances that they have experienced as young people, which are highlighted throughout this thesis.

I leave this thesis with the quotation that begins it, from Marcus, as a reminder to professionals and researchers alike, of the impact on young people of being heard and understood.

> *When I was heard and believed, I could breathe, I felt free to live my life again, I could be myself.*
>
> *(Marcus, 16)*

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Appendices

Appendix 1a: Information sheet for young people

Hear me, Believe me, Respect Me

CSE Information sheet for young people

Are you interested in taking part in some research?

Hello, so if you have read this much, you may be asking, what research? Who is doing it? What is it about and why are you asking me?

This is me!

My name is Ali Davies, I am a social worker by trade, but I am also a student (a very mature one) at Cardiff University undertaking a professional doctorate. I am studying young people who may have been sexually exploited in South Wales.

I hope to find out whether young people who may have been sexually exploited or who are at risk of being exploited have been listened to and heard by the professionals who are tasked with helping and supporting them. These professionals include people like social workers, teachers, police officers, health workers or people you feel could have made a difference. I believe that it is important for young people to get a chance to say what they think about this issue and what to do about it, because then you, and hopefully I, can make a difference.

This is what I need to know.

1) I need to know whether we – you and I – mean and understand the same when we refer to CSE.

2) I need to find out more about what young people think of this problem, and if young people feel that it is a problem for them?

3) I need to find out what you think can be done to help young people in these situations.

4) So, I would very much like to talk to you about your thoughts on these matters. This is aimed at any young person who has had experience of CSE, is at risk of CSE, has friends whom they are concerned about, or who just wants to be heard, believed and respected.

5) I would like to know how it is in your own words; your views, your wishes and feelings, what does this mean to you? I'm interested in your voice, no frills, just '**say it as it is'.**

6) It may not be pleasant, pretty or comfortable for us adults to hear that maybe we have got it wrong; nevertheless, we need to know, or we will never get it right.

7) I need to understand the language that will help protect young people from being sexually exploited. You may have some knowledge or experiences that mean that you might have better ideas about what some people think is a growing problem in South Wales.

What do I have to do? How long will it take and where will this happen?

A lot will be dictated by you, I want to be involved in your world so that you will feel comfortable talking to me; if you prefer to discuss ideas as part of a small group of young people, this is fine too. I can visit you, or you can visit me, it's your choice, your say and on your terms. You could decide to talk to me one-to-one; if so, you can decide how long for.

I will make sure that anything we do takes place somewhere safe and comfortable. It could be at a (name of) project. I'll make sure that you have transport to get you there and home again if you need it. You don't have to come on your own if you don't want to. If you wanted a worker or a friend or a family member there then they could come too, providing it is someone you feel comfortable talking in front of.

Will people know I took part and what if I change my mind?

You should only take part if you want to. I will need your consent, and this should be in writing. You can change your mind even if it's during or after you have taken part in the study. We will have an agreed timeframe for this.

You can just let me know, in person, by text or email and I'll simply remove any reference to our meeting and or any information you provided.

Absolutely no one will know what it is you said, apart from me (unless you choose to tell them). My study will make sure that no one can be identified or recognised, and anything you say will be treated in the strictest confidence.

What happens to all the stuff I tell you or I write for you?

Everything you say will be typed up and you can read it to see if there is anything you want to take out or add. Everything you say or produce will be safely locked up together with any information I type up from our meeting. Once I've finished my study, I can give it back to you if you want it, or I'll destroy it.

Whilst we are doing the research, if you tell me about anything which could be harmful to you or other people or I feel that you are in any danger, I must pass this on to the authorities. Just like with your workers. I will tell you if I have to do this. You will be provided with a leaflet which explains this and what sorts of things that could cause you harm should be reported.

Then what?

I will be writing something called a 'Professional doctoral thesis'. This is a bit like a large report or a large piece of coursework, all about the research and what you and other young people helped me to find out.

Will I see what you write up?

Yes, you can. But in case you don't want to spend ages reading something long and detailed and probably full of jargon, I'm going to write something shorter for you to read and keep if you want. These shorter versions will be anonymised (no names or ways of identifying the people who have taken part) and distributed to the professionals who have also helped in the research, so that they can use this version to improve their work, and to help others help young people better than they might now.

Will anyone else see this study?

My research report is for Cardiff University, but will also be available after it is finished, for the (name) Safeguarding Children Board, which is involved in working with young people involved in CSE. It is important they read the report to help

them understand more about the lives of young people who are in difficult situations and find better ways to help them.

If you want to talk to me about the research or to ask me any questions about anything on this sheet, please feel free to do so. You can email me securely on a.davies8@npt.gov.uk, or I am based at Neath Children's services, telephone number 01639867722; alternatively, you can contact me on my university email DaviesAJ29@cardiff.ac.uk.

If you take part and you have any worries, or problems with how the research took place, then please contact Prof Alan Felstead on Felstead@cardiff.ac.uk, chair of the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, Jonathan Scourfield Deputy Head of School, Cardiff School of Social Sciences scourfield@cardiff.ac.uk, or Dr Tom Hall, HallTA@cardiff.ac.uk.

I look forward to speaking with you,

Many thanks,

Ali Davies

Appendix 1b: Consent form – young people

Say it as it is….

Research Consent Form – Young People

By signing below, I give my consent to taking part in Alison Davies's Professional Doctorate in Social Work study of the views and voices of young people and professionals on the problems and solutions concerning young people who may be sexually exploited.

I am signing up to the 'Say It as It is project', where my views will be heard, believed and respected.

Before signing this form

- I have read the information sheet and understand about the research
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about it and they have been answered
- I understand that I can withdraw from any part or all the research at any time within an agreed timescale
- I have been given the name of someone I can contact if I am unhappy about any part of the research meeting
- I understand that if there is any information shared that is believed to put me at risk of harm or immediate danger, the relevant authorities will be informed

Name of young person……

Signature
……

Date…….

Name of parent/guardian (if under 16) ……

Signature
……

Date…….

Appendix 2a: Information sheet for professionals

Ali Davies – professional doctoral student.

Hello, and thank you for taking the time to read this. A little information about me: I have been a qualified social worker for 33 years and I am also a qualified teacher. I have over 38 years of experience working with vulnerable children in various settings. I am currently the named Safeguarding Principal Officer for an LA for both children and adults. I have previously led on safeguarding in education, was a children's guardian in the family courts for many years and was Area Director for CAFCASS Cymru for Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent, specialising in both public and private family law.

I am undertaking this professional doctorate for personal fulfilment and feel that all these years of experience should cumulate in something worth sharing eventually. I thank you sincerely in anticipation of your support.

CSE research information for professionals

Thesis title: The barriers to and opportunities for hearing the voice of the young person in multi-agency work in cases of CSE

A research project to be submitted in partial fulfilment of the Professional Doctorate in Social Work, at Cardiff University.

Purpose of the research

My name is Alison Davies (aka Ali), and I am completing doctoral research at the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. The research is about gaining an understanding of the knowledge, skills and challenges of professionals who work in CSE and who may have a role in identifying and referring children and young people who may be at risk of sexual exploitation. The research is in two parts.

1) Examining how professionals engage with children and young people in cases where they believe they may have suffered or be at risk of sexual exploitation. I am keen to engage with professionals who are key practitioners in this field of work, to explore the different practices and strategies they utilise in the interventions they may make.
2) **Say it as it is:** a young person's perspective of 'Hear me, Believe me and Respect me', allowing young people in the Western Bay area of South Wales and survivors of CSE, to share their experiences of being heard and listened to by professionals; this is primarily an ethnographic and qualitative study which will encourage young people in the Western Bay area who have been subject to the CSE protocol, or considered at risk of sexual exploitation, to provide feedback and insight into how they felt professionals communicated with them. It will ask what was done well, how they were protected or not, and what could be done better.

What would I have to do, what does the research involve?

1. I would like to conduct a semi-structured interview with you to find out your thoughts on how you hear and represent the voice of the child/ young person, what methods are used by your organisation, and what training you have access to.
2. The interview should last less than one hour. Interviews will take place somewhere quiet where you feel comfortable; this can be at your place of work, if appropriate, or I can arrange a meeting room at Cardiff University.
3. Participation in this is entirely voluntary and you can choose to withdraw from some or all of the research within a three-month timescale of participation.
4. Your involvement in the research, and any information you provide will be completely anonymous and confidential.
5. I am also hoping (with the right level of permissions from senior officers in your organisation), that I will be able to spend some time immersed in your work setting, observing and shadowing, in order to examine the cultures of organisations and their approach to CSE.

What will happen to the information I provide?

1. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed.

2. You will receive a copy of the transcript and I can take out any information you do not wish me to include.
3. I will give you an opportunity to see my findings and interpretations as a way of ensuring that I have accurately reflected your views.
4. Transcriptions of interviews will be held in a secure area. They will be destroyed once the research has ended.

Research outcomes:

This research is in partial fulfilment of a Professional Doctorate in Social Work. I am anticipating that ******* Children Safeguarding Board may want to examine the findings of this research and will expect a presentation to discuss this.

I am hopeful that this research will inform professionals and young people alike and influence local policy and practice across the region in relation to guidance and relevance for multi-agency practitioners in the fields of protection and supporting children and young people.

The research may inform a learning event for practitioners and influence training for professionals who are dealing with CSE. I hope that by improving awareness and recognising what young people are identifying as the issues and risks for them, it should, in turn, improve knowledge and enhance the professional skills base which could improve effective interventions. My aim would be to provide better engagement with young people, while simultaneously recognising the difficulties they may be facing.

Contact information

If you would like to contact me for any reason about the research, or ask me any questions about it, please contact me at a.davies8@npt.gov.uk or on my university email DaviesAJ29@cardiff.ac.uk. If you are unhappy with how the research has been conducted, please contact Professor Alan Felstead, Chair of the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee on felstead@cardiff.ac.uk, Dr Jonathan Scourfield on Scourfield@cardiff.ac.uk or Dr Tom Hall on HallTA@cardiff.ac.uk.

Kind Regards,

Ali Davies

Appendix 2b: Consent form – professionals

Before signing this form:

By signing below, I give my consent to taking part in Alison Davies's Professional Doctorate in Social Work study into the perspectives of young people and professionals of the problems and solutions concerning young people who may be sexually exploited. I understand that the focus of the research will be to understand how as a professional I hear the young person's voice in cases of CSE.

- I have read the information sheet and understand about the research
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about it and they have been answered
- I understand that I can withdraw from any part or all the research at any time
- I have been given the name of someone I can contact if I am unhappy about any part of the research meeting

If you would like to contact me for any reason about the research, or ask me any questions about it, please contact me at a.davies8@npt.gov.uk or on my university email, DaviesAJ29@cardiff.ac.uk. If you are unhappy with how the research has been conducted, please contact Professor Alan Felstead, Chair of the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee on felstead@cardiff.ac.uk, Dr Jonathan Scourfield on Scourfield@cardiff.ac.uk, or Dr Tom Hall on HallTA@cardiff.ac.uk.

Name.....

Signature .....

Date.....

Ali Davies

Appendix 3a: Interview schedule for young people

CSE Investigation – semi-structured interview: for young person (qualitative exploration)

	Please tell me a little bit about you, why you want to talk to me, what you think this research is about.
A)	**Information sharing – understanding the risks from a young person's perspective.** 1) What information do you think you had as a young person from any professional or educational setting which raised your awareness about CSE? How was that communicated to you? 2) What information would you like to have had about CSE? 3) Do you feel CSE or the risk of CSE is a big problem for young people, if so, can you tell me why you think this? 4) Are you confident that children/young people can report concerns about CSE in a confidential and safe environment? If so, can you describe what this looks like? 5) Were you able to do this?
B)	**Understanding what CSE is from a young person's perspective** 6) Can you explain what CSE is or what your understanding of it is? 7) What does the term 'grooming' mean to you when you talk about CSE? 8) Do you think that internet/social media is a risk factor for children and young people in relation to CSE? Can you explain why you think this?
c)	**Capturing your voice.** 9) How were your views, or the views of any of your friends who were at risk of or involved with CSE, captured or understood by professionals. 10) Was your voice heard? By whom? What did they do? 11) Were you listened to? By whom? What did they do? 12) As a young person do you think you those who have been victims of CSE, or are at risk of CSE, are treated with respect? 13) Could you give me some examples?

D)	**The young person's perception of vulnerability:** 14) Do you think you were a vulnerable young person – how was that identified? Who helped/supported you? 15) Were you ever categorised as a child at risk? What did that mean to you? 16) Did you feel that you were a young person at risk? 17) If so, how did that make you feel?
E)	**Working with professionals:** 18) How many professionals were working with you – was there a key professional who communicated with you regularly? 19) Which of these professionals did you feel most able to trust? Can you explain why? 20) Was it easier to talk to anyone in particular? 21) What could the professionals do better?
F	**Family Support** 21) Were any of your family or carers able to offer you support? 22) What did that look like? Did you feel able to confide in them? 23) How did that feel to you? **Other support** 24) Were support services made available to you or your friends, were you or your friends able to access support services? 25) What did that look like?
G	**Going Missing:** 26) Have you ever been missing or reported as missing? 27) If so, could you share with me where you went, or where you think young people go when they go 'missing'? Who did you talk to when you were missing? 28) If you went missing, did you ever feel at risk, unsafe or worried about what would happen? How did you ever tell anyone how you felt? 29) How did professionals engage with you if you went missing – or after you were found? What is your take on that? 30) Is there anything else you would like to share with me? **Thank you for your time and honesty.**

Appendix 3b: Interview schedule for professionals

CSE Investigation – semi-structured interview: for professionals (qualitative exploration)

	Please tell me the name of your organisation and the role you play in that organisation.
A	**A. Information sharing:** 1) Do you provide any information to children, their families that are known to you through the CSE protocol, to raise awareness of CSE? What does that look like? How do you communicate this information to them? 2) How do you share information with partner agencies about children who are at risk of or who have been sexually exploited? What means of communication is used? 3) Is there anything in relation to sharing information with professionals that you think could be done better? 4) Are you confident that children can report concerns about CSE in a confidential and risk-free environment? If so, can you describe what this looks like? 5) Does your organisation identify vulnerable children in your area who may be at risk of sexual exploitation? How do they communicate that with each other?
B.	**B. Understanding the impact of CSE from a professional perspective:** 6) As a professional, do you check how well children understand the nature of positive and negative relationships, such as grooming, or the boyfriend model? (or any CSE model that you are familiar with.) 7) How do you communicate this? 8) How, as a professional, do you think your staff/colleagues engage with children who have been victims of CSE, or are at risk of CSE? 9) Could you give some examples? 10) Is there any multi-agency training provided in relation to CSE and hearing the voice of the child? 11) What support is provided to staff who work directly with vulnerable children who are identified as being at risk of CSE? 12) Do you feel that partner agencies proactively engage with the work of the RSCB in relation to CSE, if so, what does this look like?

C	**C. Capturing the voice of the young person and their families:** 13) How do you capture the views of children and their families? 14) Do you capture children's views of the professionals who have had contact with them in relation to CSE? 15) How do you capture the views of children and families about the support services provided? 16) What support do you provide for children and young people who have been, or believed to have been, sexually exploited?
D	**D. Signposting to relevant support or statutory agencies** **Going Missing:** 17) How do you engage with partners to deal with children going missing from home (this includes children who are looked after away from home) or school? 18) What is your model/structure for dealing with missing children? 19) Where do you think missing children in your area go? How would you relay concerns about a child who has gone missing? Who would you relay them to? 20) Does your organisation debrief children when they are found, if so, what does this look like? 21) Have you identified any trends in relation to where children have been during the period that they are missing? 22) If so, can you describe what these trends look like?
E	**E. Methods of communication:** 23) How do you engage/communicate with children with learning difficulties, disabilities or who do not speak English or Welsh? 24) What methods of communication/engagement do you use with children and young people?
F	**Additional information:** 25) Is there anything else you would like to share with me or tell me about your experiences as a professional working in the field of CSE? 26) Free dialogue, anecdotal discussion, recording of notes or observations. **Thank you for your time and your honesty.**

Alison Davies: January 2023