

Project Paradigm welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the consultation on the Second Action Plan (National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032)

Project Paradigm is an IFYS program which had its inception as a youth shelter on the Sunshine Coast over 40 years ago. Much of the focus of its work at that time was aimed at addressing what was referred to at the time as ‘opportunistic prostitution’ but is now termed child sexual exploitation (CSE). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) defined CSE as follows;

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse that occurs when an individual or group attempts to or succeeds in coercing, manipulating or deceiving a child into contact or non-contact sexual acts:

- a) in exchange for something including, but not limited to, money, gifts or accommodation or less tangible goods such as affection or status, and/or
- b) for the financial advantage, increased status or other reward for the person/people exploiting the child.

A child over the legal age of consent may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual act appears consensual.

As understandings about CSE have developed, so too has the IFYS response which is embodied in Project Paradigm. This is a national programme working to support CSE prevention, early intervention and community capacity building.

The focus of contemporary research across the sector is seeking to explore the intersectionality and co-occurrence of interpersonal violence and child sexual abuse, in particular Project Paradigm has observed that CSE often precedes violence against women and their children, with services identifying exploitation at the origin of partner relationships. The intersection between CSE and domestic and family violence (DFV) and inadequate understanding and responses to CSE are clearly outlined in the following case study.

Case Study:

In 2016, 21-month-old Mason Jett Lee died after a prolonged period of severe mistreatment by his mother’s partner, William O’Sullivan (Coroner’s Court of Queensland, 2020). Mason’s mother, Anne-Marie Lee, was convicted of two charges of manslaughter and child cruelty, and she was sentenced to 9 years in jail in February 2019 (Vujkovic, 2019). The coroner’s report of the inquest into the tragic death of Mason documented prolonged gender and systems violence against Anne-Marie throughout her life. Anne-Marie’s life experiences included physical and sexual abuse by her father after her mother left the home at the age of 2, removal into state care aged 9, and subjection to sexual exploitation by older men throughout her childhood

(Coroner's Court of Queensland, 2020). The 26-year-old father of then 16-year-old Anne-Marie's first child was noted to be, "... violent and controlling as were all but one of her subsequent partners" (Coroner's Court of Queensland, 2020, p.22). When domestic violence workers partner effectively with victims and are curious about their life experiences and historic interpersonal relationships, child sexual exploitation is frequently discovered as something that they have experienced either with the current partner who is perpetrating violence, or in previous relationships.

Priority Area 1: Victim-Survivors Consultation questions

1. What service or system responses would make the biggest difference to victim-survivors' safety, wellbeing, healing and recovery?

The case study demonstrates that there were multiple missed opportunities for Anne-Marie Lee to have received effective intervention in response to child maltreatment, CSE and child sexual abuse, and in her early relationships. Effective early intervention may have prevented later experiences of DFV, and ultimately Mason's death.

Whilst domestic violence is an acknowledged social issue that features heavily in the media, advocacy, Federal and State policy, investment in services, and academic research. Meanwhile, Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) remains a hidden problem because is also a type of child sexual abuse that is not consistently defined across Australian states (Ciftci et al. 2026).

In our day-to-day work, Project Paradigm are observing situations in which sexually exploited children are misidentified and labelled in ways that distract from the reality of the abuse they are suffering. This can include:

- placing them in the domain of harmful sexual behaviours;
- viewing them as being engaged in a consensual intimate partner relationship;
- and/or considering them to be in a domestic violence relationship.

The uncertainty that arises from a lack of a national definition, alongside the misidentification and labelling of sexually exploited children means that CSE is a complex, social problem that is difficult to identify and prevent.

- Project Paradigm recommends the adoption of a nationally accepted definition of Child Sexual Exploitation, which is articulated in the second action plan, to provide the basis for policy and practice frameworks across a range of service domains – domestic violence, sexual assault, health, police, child protection, etc – ultimately leading to better outcomes for victims and survivors. A consistent national definition will align with recommendation 12.15 of the Royal Commission into Institution Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017).

2. What helps people access support earlier, and what barriers prevent people from seeking help or engaging with systems and services?

When a victim-survivor, like Anne-Marie does not receive statutory interventions in childhood their trust in these service systems is undermined, and vulnerability to DFV is exacerbated.

Victim-survivors are unlikely to access systems and services which blame them. Victim-blame is a common response to children and young people who are subjected to child sexual exploitation (Eaton & Holmes, 2017; Lloyd, 2022; Brown, 2015). Responsibility and causation of the abuse is often assigned to the victim as an outcome of 'risky' behaviour, or 'risky choices' (Jackson, 2014; Eaton & Holmes, 2017; Lloyd, 2022), and the element of 'exchange' in definitions infers a benefit to the child, evoking victim blame (Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, 2022). These misconceptions and attitudes emerge from misunderstandings about CSE and lead to flawed interventions that focus on the child's characteristics, behaviour and so-called 'choices,' while the structural inequalities that are the key drivers of child sexual exploitation are overlooked (Radford et al., 2017).

Domestic violence remains siloed from other service systems including sexual violence prevention. There are points of similarity and difference between the needs of victim-survivors and the characteristics of the perpetrators of CSE and DFV. When children's experiences of child sexual exploitation are understood in the context of a DV 'relationship' it obscures the perpetrator and frames the issue in an adult lens.

- Project Paradigm recommends that the second national action plan supports an integrated response to facilitate effective intervention to stop the violence and create easy access for victim-survivors to seek help from and engage with systems and services. This will ensure that the distinct drivers and vulnerabilities of CSE are not ignored and that effective disruption can take place.
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3. What current or emerging issues should the Second Action Plan address, including in relation to coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse?

Anne-Marie's life experiences demonstrate that women and their children suffer consecutive experiences of coercive control. It is likely that this behaviour becomes a 'normal' feature of their familial and intimate relationships, and they require support to navigate these relationships and stay safe from violence. Similarly, CSE often occurs under the guise of a relationship which perpetrators maintain using technology and coercive control. Due to the influence of grooming, threats, and coercion, often the child or young person may not consider what is happening as harmful, and they are unlikely to identify as a victim (Roberts et al., 2024). Consequently, when systems and services assume that young people are in a consensual relationship, rather than being

entrapped in an exploitative situation, the coercive aspects to the relationship are overlooked and interventions do not address these.

- Project Paradigm recommends that the Second Action Plan provides a nationally accepted policy framework to respond to CSE that:
 - a. comprehensively understands the complex dynamics of perpetrator and victim contexts found within Child Sexual Exploitation and;
 - b. supports multi-disciplinary decision-making processes that both protect victims and disrupt perpetrator activities.

4. What gaps remain in addressing the needs of diverse communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are over-represented in out of home care systems. They also experience a gap between the life opportunities enjoyed by Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians and perpetrators prey on vulnerability. Therefore, it is highly likely that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and those from other cultures experience CSE at a higher or similar level. However, there is no national prevalence data focusing on CSE to confirm this, or academic research that describes the unique needs and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

- Project Paradigm recommends that CSE is included in the Australian National Research Agenda (ANRA) as part of the second action plan, to establish the prevalence of this harm, and the unique needs and experiences of diverse communities including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Priority Area 2: Prevention and early intervention

Consultation questions:

1. What would make the biggest difference in preventing and ultimately ending violence?

All children are vulnerable to CSE perpetrators, however CSE commonly occurs alongside childhood trauma, instability, disconnection, poverty, homelessness and substance use (Gatwiri et al., 2020; Hallett, 2023). A child or young person may exchange sex for their own survival to meet essential needs that have rarely been met by family, or alternate care and welfare systems (Hallett, 2023). Consequently, addressing systemic inequities, and ensuring that children living in out of home care are provided with safety, nurturance, stability and care, are likely to reduce opportunities for perpetrators to sexually exploit children (Radford et al., 2017).

- Project Paradigm recommends that the second action plan includes early responses to disrupt the progression from CSE and domestic violence. Early

intervention could also prevent domestic violence perpetrators from leveraging the past trauma of mothers to manipulate and control them so that they can perpetrate DFV and/or sexually abuse a biological or partner's child.

2. How can governments, communities, schools, workplaces, online platforms and others better support people to recognise and respond to harmful attitudes and behaviours?

Governments, communities, schools, workplaces, online platforms and others better recognise and respond to harmful attitudes and behaviours when they have a shared understanding and awareness of the problem. Currently CSE is a hidden or misidentified issue for which the child or young person is blamed. In part, this is the outcome of perpetrator behaviours. To commit CSE and maintain control over the child, perpetrators cause or exacerbate mental health and/or substance abuse issues (Safe and Together Institute, 2019). They manipulate victims into committing criminal offences, including the recruitment of other children for exploitation, preparing, holding or selling drugs, or car crime (Casey, 2025). Fear of repercussions for criminal activity is likely to prevent children from reporting sexual exploitation to police or seek help and support from family members or agencies in the community (Casey, 2025; Smeaton, 2026). Individuals in government, communities, schools, and workplaces are more likely to view victim-survivors of CSE as young criminals or those engaging in risky behaviour (Jackson, 2014; Eaton & Holmes, 2017; Lloyd, 2022).

To motivate individuals, communities and professionals in organisations and institutions to safeguard children from CSE, damaging discourses must be overcome which refer to 'child prostitution' manifesting in victim-blame and stigmatisation of children and young people who are victims and survivors of CSE. The term, 'prostitution' is still used in criminal codes. For example, see the Crimes Act (1900-40) [NSW] Sections 91C, 91D, 91E and 91F are part of Division 15: Child Prostitution. The continued use of this language implies that when children are perceived to 'gain' something from a sexual encounter, they have exercised agency by deciding to engage in such activity (Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse, 2022).

Furthermore, due to social and political constructs of victimhood, if children are considered less vulnerable and/or innocent (McAlinden, 2014) than their peers due to their behaviour or circumstances, they are deemed less deserving of help and are often blamed for the harm and abuse they suffer (Brown, 2015). The following case study demonstrates differential responses from communities, organisations and professionals in institutions depending on their attitude toward the child.

In February 2024 a 12-year-old girl went missing from her family home in a regional town after telling her older brother she was going to the park nearby. She was groomed online by an adult male and persuaded to meet up with him. She was found 2 days later 35km away. During that week, law enforcement, SES and members of the public carried out an extensive search including search parties,

drones, broadcasting pre-recorded messages, scouring CCTV footage and releasing amber alerts via social media.

In contrast, that same week, Project Paradigm consulted on a case further North, where a girl (just turned 13) in out-of-home residential care was groomed online and reported missing. Her support workers had to fight hard to get the child classified as missing by police. The response they received was “she will turn up when she gets hungry, she has done this before”. Following extensive enquiries by the support workers, it was discovered the girl was 120km away. Support workers requested a welfare check be undertaken by local police until they could get there to pick her up. This request was refused and instead workers were told the police had “more important matters to deal with”. Finally, on return to her place of care the young person asked a worker to take her to get a pregnancy test as she thought she might be pregnant and subsequently disclosed that an adult male had sexually abused her while she had been away from her place of care. No drones, no search parties, no amber alert...

(Ten News First, 9 February 2024)

- Project Paradigm recommends that the second action plan articulate a definition of CSE, accompanied by a public awareness campaign. This is an integral starting point to raising the awareness of individuals and communities to understand, identify and respond to CSE. As demonstrated in the case-study, community awareness of the lived experience of those subjected to violence and CSE, like Anee-Marie Lee is needed to encourage community compassion and eliminate victim-blaming mindsets

Priority Area 3: Children and young people in their own right Consultation questions:

What would make the biggest difference to improving safety, recovery and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people affected by this violence?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989. Article 19 (United Nations, 1989) requires States Parties (countries that have agreed to be bound by the convention) to take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of violence and exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents or legal guardians (Rees et al., 2026). Recent Australian research found there were no examples of interventions in Queensland, that resulted in the perpetrator of CSE being apprehended and the child protected (Rees et al., 2026a). Consequently, the Australian government and society are failing in their obligation to protect children from CSE by failing to take effective action to improve the safety, recovery or wellbeing outcomes for children and young people affected by CSE, hence the frequent progression from CSE to DFV.

- Project Paradigm recommends that CSE must be included in all National Plans that contain strategies to tackle violence to fulfil Australia's obligations under international child's rights treaties.

What approaches are most effective in supporting children and young people who are using violence or displaying harmful sexual behaviours to take accountability, change behaviours, and reduce harm?

Due to a lack of understanding about the complex dynamics of CSE children and young people who are using violence or displaying harmful sexual behaviours may well be victims of CSE (Eaton & Holmes, 2017).

- Project Paradigm recommends that the second action plan includes responses and interventions that safeguard children and young people from CSE. Less CSE will reduce the harm arising from children and young people who use violence or display harmful sexual behaviours.

How can children and young people be meaningfully involved in shaping the policies, programs and services that affect them?

- Project paradigm recommends listening to the voices and experiences of children and young people with a lived experience of CSE and incorporating this approach in academic research, policy and practice.
- Exploring the intersection between DFV and CSE would be integral to this knowledge.
- Expanding the knowledge base by including CSE on the Australian National Research Agenda (ANRA) will identify what would make the biggest difference to improving safety, recovery and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people affected by CSE and DFV.

Priority Area 4: People who use violence

Consultation questions:

What would make the biggest difference in preventing and responding earlier to the use of violence?

Developing a strong awareness of perpetrator strategies and behaviour and disrupting perpetrators is a more effective form of prevention than focusing intervention on victims and survivors. State and territory police services assume responsibility for responding to perpetrators yet they lack specialised training about CSE, are not adequately resourced to meet the needs of sexually exploited young people who may also be implicated in criminal activities and are limited in their ability to pursue and disrupt perpetrators because policy and procedures are not specifically tailored to CSE; they don't have the legislative powers that they need (Rees et al., 2026a). For example, child sexual exploitation is not a specific sexual offence in Queensland, so a perpetrator might be charged with any one of a range of sexual

offences specifically related to grooming, abduction or other sexual offences (Townson, 2019).

In the UK and US, police approaches to child sexual exploitation target offenders and have developed a range of hard and soft activities to disrupt and deter perpetrators (McVeigh & Heward Belle, 2024). In Australia, where each state and territory operates under different civil and criminal legislation, the range of legislative approaches to disruptive policing does not exist in all states and territories (McVeigh & Heward-Belle, 2024). In states and territories where there is a separation of responsibilities between child protection departments who support and protect children, and police who are responsible for apprehending perpetrators, these issues are exacerbated. The disruption of perpetrators needs to be expansive and creative, with policy initiatives instigated within police forces, child protection and welfare fields to develop 'a proactive disruptive stance' (McVeigh & Heward-Belle, 2024, p.9).

- Project Paradigm recommends that police receive specialist training, resourcing and legislative powers to disrupt CSE perpetrators.

How can services, families, communities, workplaces, institutions and others better recognise and respond safely to people using violence or at risk of using violence?

Early recognition of CSE requires a stronger understanding of perpetrator tactics, grooming behaviours and coercive control across all sectors that work with children and young people. Families, schools, youth services, child protection agencies, health services and police are not equipped to identify the behaviours of those perpetrating exploitation. Training should therefore focus not only on victim indicators but also on the warning signs of perpetrator behaviour, including targeting vulnerable children, manipulation of family relationships, gift-giving, recruitment through peers, online grooming and the use of threats, intimidation or debt.

- Project Paradigm recommends that a shared responsibility model is endorsed in the second action plan, where professionals across sectors are supported to identify concerns, record intelligence and share information. Multi-agency responses that bring together parents, young people, child protection, police, education, health and community services enable a more comprehensive understanding of risk and facilitate earlier intervention before exploitation escalates.

What approaches are most effective in supporting people who use violence to take accountability, change behaviours, and reduce the use of violence, while focusing on victim-survivor safety?

Approaches that focus on accountability, behaviour change and ongoing risk management are the most effective in reducing the use of violence. In the context of CSE, interventions should move beyond punitive responses alone and incorporate specialist perpetrator-focused approaches that address patterns of grooming, coercion, entitlement and exploitation.

- Project Paradigm recommends that the second action plan endorses a coordinated, multi-agency approach to respond to perpetrators of CSE.

How can governments and services, among others, strengthen culturally safe, accessible and evidence-informed responses for a range of communities and cohorts?

- Project paradigm recommends that culturally safe, community-led and evidence-informed responses are designed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, LGBTQIA+ communities, and organisations supporting children with disability to ensure services are relevant, accessible and trusted.

Priority Area 5: System Integration and Workforce
Consultation questions:

What would make the biggest difference in creating a more coordinated and connected system response for people affected by violence against women and children and other forms of gender-based violence and people using violence?

One of the most significant improvements would be the establishment of dedicated multi-agency CSE teams that bring together police, child protection, health, education, youth justice and specialist support services. The United Kingdom has developed co-located, multi-agency safeguarding partnerships and CSE hubs that facilitate information sharing, joint decision-making and coordinated interventions with both victims and perpetrators. These approaches enable agencies to build a comprehensive picture of risk, reduce service fragmentation and intervene earlier.

In Australia, responses to CSE are often hampered by siloed systems, differing legislative frameworks and a separation of responsibilities between agencies responsible for child protection and those responsible for criminal investigations. Developing formal interagency protocols, shared risk assessment frameworks and mechanisms for timely information sharing would facilitate earlier identification of exploitation, improve responses to children and young people, and strengthen efforts to identify, monitor and disrupt perpetrators.

- Project Paradigm recommends a nationally consistent approach to CSE that would also improve coordination across jurisdictions and reduce variability in service responses, training, data collection and legislative frameworks such as the all Wales protocol.
- The All-Wales Protocol, Safeguarding and Promoting the welfare of children who are at risk of abuse through sexual exploitation is a viable framework of principles and expectations to formalise the exchange of information between agencies and provide a framework for the identification of risk and procedures for handling concerns (All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group, 2013). A fundamental aspect of a working protocol between agencies is the clear identification of referral pathways to support services and the establishment and effective roll out of the multiagency strategy meeting. The model incorporates flexibility to support localised initiatives and approaches

What workforce capabilities, supports, or conditions are most needed to strengthen prevention, early intervention, response and recovery?

Findings from the DICE Project demonstrate that specialist training improves practitioners' understanding of the nature and dynamics of CSE, increases their ability to identify warning signs and indicators, and challenges victim-blaming attitudes that can act as barriers to effective intervention.

- Project Paradigm recommend that specialist CSE training is embedded across all sectors that work with children and young people, including child protection, policing, education, health, youth justice and community services. Training should cover perpetrator tactics, grooming processes, trauma-informed engagement, online-facilitated abuse, risk assessment and culturally safe practice. Beyond training, practitioners require organisational support, manageable workloads, access to specialist consultation and supervision, and clear pathways for referral and information sharing. Strengthening workforce capability also requires investment in specialist CSE positions and multidisciplinary teams to ensure practitioners have access to expert advice when responding to complex cases.

What support do specialist and universal services need to provide inclusive, accessible and response services?

Services require greater access to specialist knowledge, training and resources to support diverse groups of children and young people who experience exploitation. Universal services such as schools, health services and youth programs are often well placed to identify early indicators of harm but may lack confidence and expertise in recognising and responding to CSE.

What evidence, workforce or system gaps should the Second Action Plan prioritise to strengthen implementation and improve outcomes over time?

A key gap identified through Project Paradigm is the limited focus on perpetrators within current service and policy responses. Strengthening Australia's capacity to identify, monitor and disrupt perpetrators, alongside improving support for children and young people, should be a central priority of future action under the National Plan.

- Project Paradigm recommend that the second action plan should prioritise addressing significant evidence, workforce and system gaps relating to child sexual exploitation.

Key priorities include:

- Developing a nationally consistent definition of CSE and shared practice framework.
- Improving national data collection on prevalence, perpetrator characteristics, disruption activities and outcomes for children and young people.

- Expanding research on effective perpetrator-focused interventions and disruption strategies in Australian contexts.
- Evaluating multidisciplinary and co-located service models to identify best practice.
- Investing in specialist workforce development across policing, child protection, education, health and community services.
- Strengthening legislative frameworks that support the identification, investigation and disruption of perpetrators.
- Increasing access to specialist CSE services in regional, rural and remote communities.
- Embedding the voices and lived experience expertise of survivors in policy, program design and evaluation.

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