



O X F O R D

WHITE PAPER

Swipe. Scroll. Harm.

Safeguarding Looked After
Children in the Digital Age

O X F O R D

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SWIPE SCROLL HARM

Safeguarding looked after children in the digital age. In summary...

ONLINE. UNSEEN. UNPROTECTED. Looked after children are facing a digital safeguarding crisis - and we are not yet fully equipped to deal with it. Despite being among the most vulnerable in society, there is a profound lack of data, clear policy, and practical tools to manage the role smartphones play in their lives. Yet the reality is unavoidable: the phone is not an accessory - it is where Life is lived and childhood now happens.

Removing it excludes. Leaving it unmanaged exposes.

NOT THREAT. REALITY. Risks are immediate, systemic, and escalating. Looked after children are far more likely to experience trauma, exploitation, and poor outcomes, and the digital world magnifies each and every vulnerability. Excessive screen time is driving worsening mental, physical and social health.

At the same time, they are actively targeted for grooming, sexual exploitation, and criminal activity - often through mainstream platforms designed for connection. Many go missing repeatedly - the numbers are stunning - with strong links to abuse. Online harm is no longer incidental - it's a playground for predators... industrialised, scalable, global, and always on.

FRONTIER WITHOUT A SHERIFF. The system's response is failing looked after children. Safeguarding is still largely reactive, intervening after harm has already occurred. There is no consistent national policy for smartphone use in care, unlike in schools. Regulators treat it as a secondary issue. Carers are expected to manage complex digital risks without the tools, training, or authority to do so. Children, meanwhile, are left to navigate high-risk environments with minimal support.

The gap between threat and response is not just wide - it is dangerous.

FLIP THE PHONE. The solution is already in children's hands. The same device enabling harm can be transformed into a powerful safeguarding tool. With new and superior technology, a safeguarding system for smartphones can set healthy use, detect early signs of grooming, identify behavioural shifts, block harmful contact, and trigger faster intervention - particularly when a child goes missing. This is not theoretical.

The Voop system, as an example, can do all this today. This is the critical shift: from reacting to harm to preventing it. From hindsight to real-time insight.

SUPPORT NOT CONTROL. But this must be done properly and with due care. We already know the solution is wanted by children and welcomed by their carers. But protection must feel like protection. Safeguarding cannot become surveillance. Any solution must be child-centred, transparent, and child-consent-based - tailored to the child's age, needs, and risk and fully compliant with rights of the child. It must work as a system, combining technology with education, skilled carers, and clear policy. Above all, it must build trust. Protection must act as support, not control. It must be done **with** children, not done **to** them.

GAME CHANGE. AT SPEED. AT SCALE. Done brilliantly, this approach could set healthy digital habits, reduce missing incidents, disrupt exploitation earlier, stabilise placements, and finally generate the data needed to understand and manage risk at scale.

It would improve life chances for vulnerable children while reducing the long-term cost of failure across social care, policing, and the wider system.

ACT OR FAIL. The conclusion is stark. Looked after children are navigating a digital world that amplifies every existing vulnerability - and the current response is not keeping pace nor deploying better tailored system solutions... The smartphone will either continue to deepen harm or switch to being one of the most powerful safeguarding tools we have.

The question is no longer whether to act. It is whether we act with the urgency, scale, and ambition this crisis demands.

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Scope

This White Paper reviews what we know – and don't know – about smartphone use by looked after children and related policies and practices.

It considers the specific needs, behaviours and issues faced by looked after children up to the age they leave the care system. It sets out to identify and understand how looked after children use smartphones and potential dangers of smartphones to them. It is limited to data and insight on the use of this technology for communication and internet access by children.

Many official reviews and enquiries have stated that abusers target looked after children disproportionately.

It therefore considers the role and specification of a new breed of safeguarding smartphone. It reviews how phone technology might tackle both abuse 'red flags' encountered by these vulnerable young people across different grooming models and the known health and wellbeing issues caused by excessive phone use.

In this it is impartial, looking at both positives and challenges in specification of any safeguarding smartphone, how it is set up with the child and used, and how guardians might monitor it.

It acknowledges data gaps.

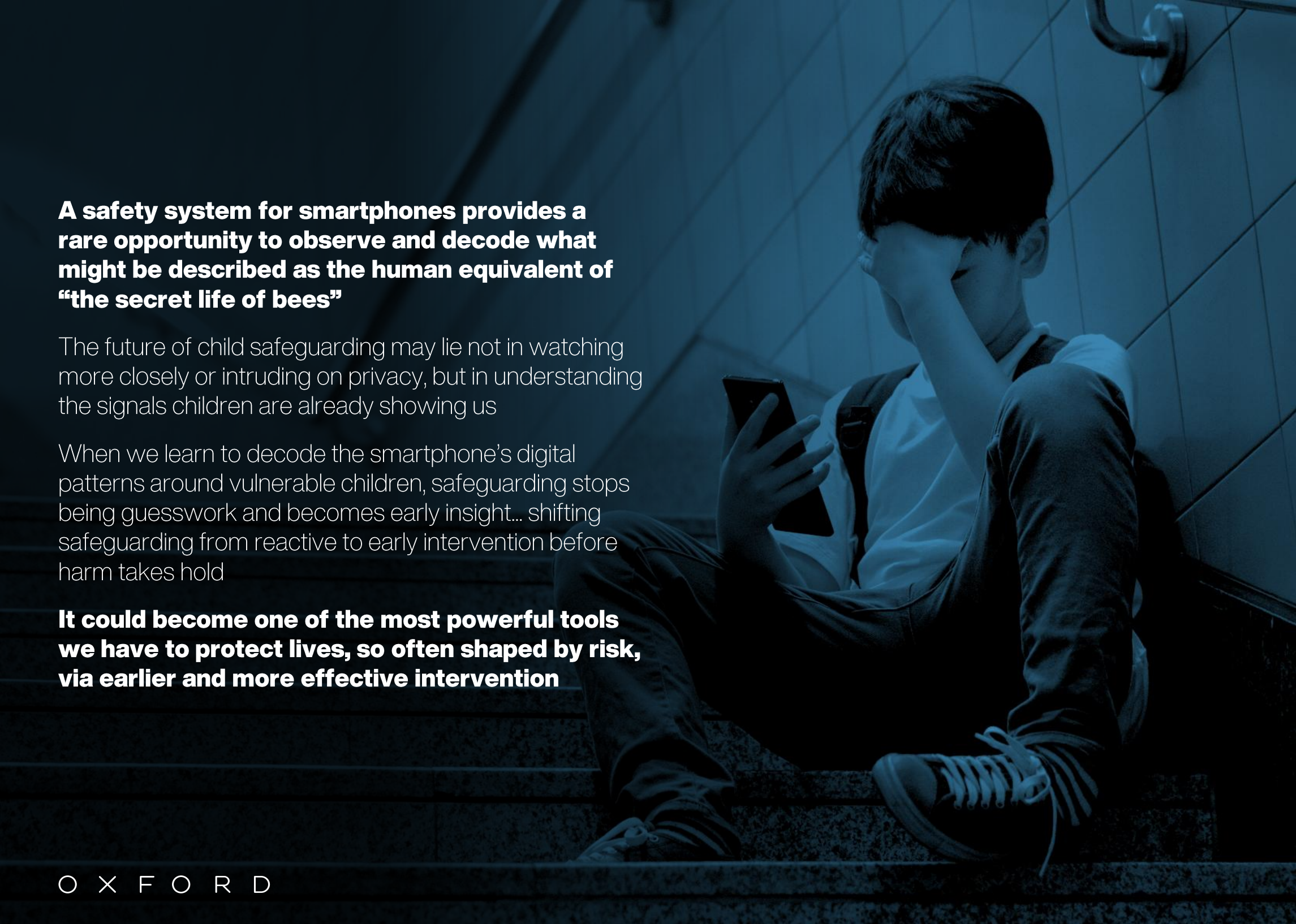
Where data is not available for looked after children – and there are significant gaps - it considers the relevance and accuracy of data available for all children - looked after or not.

With the constant evolution of digital technology, changes in media and evolving data protection legislation, data specific to internet access and smartphone use in most cases focuses on the last 3 years. Robust sources have been favoured ... Government, police, and authorities; third sector child specialists; academics and professionals.

Sources

This White Paper is supported by a Fact File, enabled by Voop. This lists all references and supporting data.





A safety system for smartphones provides a rare opportunity to observe and decode what might be described as the human equivalent of “the secret life of bees”

The future of child safeguarding may lie not in watching more closely or intruding on privacy, but in understanding the signals children are already showing us

When we learn to decode the smartphone’s digital patterns around vulnerable children, safeguarding stops being guesswork and becomes early insight... shifting safeguarding from reactive to early intervention before harm takes hold

It could become one of the most powerful tools we have to protect lives, so often shaped by risk, via earlier and more effective intervention

There is a digital blind spot for those looked after. Many assumptions. Little evidence.

Imagine opening a beehive: it looks busy, noisy and chaotic, yet we now know that hidden inside is a secret communication network. Bees communicate via the 'waggle dance' - a subtle pattern of movement conveying coded messages that tell its sisters where to go, how far to fly, and how good the reward will be. Within seconds the whole colony knows.

This sophisticated communication instructs, engages, and controls the hive.

Something similar happens every day with children and their smartphones. The online network is their hive; the smartphone their medium of communication.

To adults, young people may appear to be simply staring silently at screens and scrolling without pause. But inside their digital "hive" a constant social exchange is taking place - messages, virtual meetings, links, videos, memes, location pins, and tips about games, schoolwork help, or the latest trend.

One child discovers something interesting and instantly "dances" it across their network with a tap of a screen. Others scroll, read the signal, judge its value by views, likes, comments, and shares... deciding whether it is worthy of their attention to follow the trail.

The smartphone world of young people is a modern waggle dance - a fast coded system of communication that adults understand imperfectly.

Just as the real secret life of bees lies in the messages hidden in their dances, the secret life of children today often lies hidden within the silent signals formed by busy thumbs that pass constantly between the small glowing screens in their hands.

A young girl with long, wavy hair is lying in bed, looking at her smartphone. The scene is dimly lit, with a blue tint. The phone is held up, and the girl's face is illuminated by the screen's light. The background shows a white pillow and a white blanket.

Studies show that for children their phone is where Life happens

To understand the potential for a phone to transform the lives of looked after children, the place that a smartphone occupies in all children's lives – looked after included – must first be understood

Within this context denying a child a phone risks them being discriminated against. It limits social contact and a rich social and creative life. It can lead to social exclusion and hold them back educationally – where they are already significantly disadvantaged

The answer is to design a smartphone system for a looked after child which confers all the benefits of connection but meets their very specific emotional and safeguarding needs

Childhood is lived on their phone

Smartphones strongly shape the daily life, relationships, and routines of children. Their phone is multi-purpose and every day; it's how they love, learn, connect. It's always there and always on with half claiming to be online 'almost constantly'.

Peer relationships dominate children's use... messaging, group chats, in jokes, shared content and gaming. From early adolescence it is more central than their contact with parents.

One of the strongest feelings a child can experience is fear of exclusion... no phone, no social life, no friends. It risks rejection.

For them, the phone is emotional – not physical; powerful – not neutral; a source of both safety and stress; an essential – not an optional reward that can be removed at will.

They feel pressured to stay visible and keep up with conversations. A silent phone equals rejection.

The phone is 'independence with a leash', offering children increasing freedom to roam while parents or carers retain contact and oversight. For children, parents, carers and regulators the phone is a safety tool. All value the ability to make contact quickly and reassure when apart.

But there are differences in perception. Adults frame safety as risk prevention. Children frame it as emotional reassurance so they can experience managed independence.

For children Life happens on the phone – they reject the 'phones are bad' narrative. While for adults the child's life on the phone is a disruption from 'real life', for the child it is 'real life'.

For both adult and child too much phone use can feel bad. Adults blame children for what they see as excessive dependence. Children do not deny harm ... they just resist blame being placed solely on them.

'Digital parenting' is a source of friction... setting rules, negotiating and attempting to monitor to keep a child safe online – protecting them from people, content and patterns of use that are proven to cause harm. But it is vital that the phone does not become a battleground for looked after children, many of whom have had much conflict in their lives.


Overall, this requires any safeguarding of phones for looked after children to be a complete system, not simply a 'bit of tech'.

Any smartphone needs five key operational aspects for those looked after;

- Involving looked after children in a phone's 'safety by design'.
- Gaining approval for any limitations - especially for looked after teens.
- Tailoring to each child, combining it with age-appropriate education
- Ensuring guardians see monitoring from the child's perspective and have constructive conversations about the phone use so the child does not feel penalised or disadvantaged

And it goes without saying...

- The highest level of technical safeguarding specific to their needs



The smartphone is ubiquitous and online access almost universal... So, when should safeguarding start and end?

Phone safeguarding must start at an early age and for looked after children be in place by the age of ten. This has been confirmed by Voop research

Much child abuse outside the family peaks in teen years. Looked after teens must also be given confidence to permit their phone to be monitored

Screen time harms are proven and substantial... physical, mental and social. For looked after children, 60% of whom have suffered trauma, control of screen time is as important as prevention and disruption of abuse

By 10, the screen wins – and the habit grows

From pre-school, a child's life is lived online.

There is nothing to suggest that looked after children are any different to others in the UK in their attitudes and desires when it comes to media ... or the smartphone.

The only difference may be affordability constraining their phone ownership and use. This can stigmatise looked after children with friends and at school.

At the age of 3, only c. 2% can read but 1 in 5 of all children have their own smartphone.

By 5 years old, it's 1 in 3 and by teens it's 97%.

Adoption of smartphone for internet access rises sharply from 9 years old. By teens it's 96%.

Despite minimum age requirement of 13, over half of 3-12s are reported as using at least one social media app or site, with increase in the proportion of the youngest children having access. Parents, despite their social media concerns, collude with their children in breaking guidelines and allowing social access.

At the end of primary school years, life is largely digital.

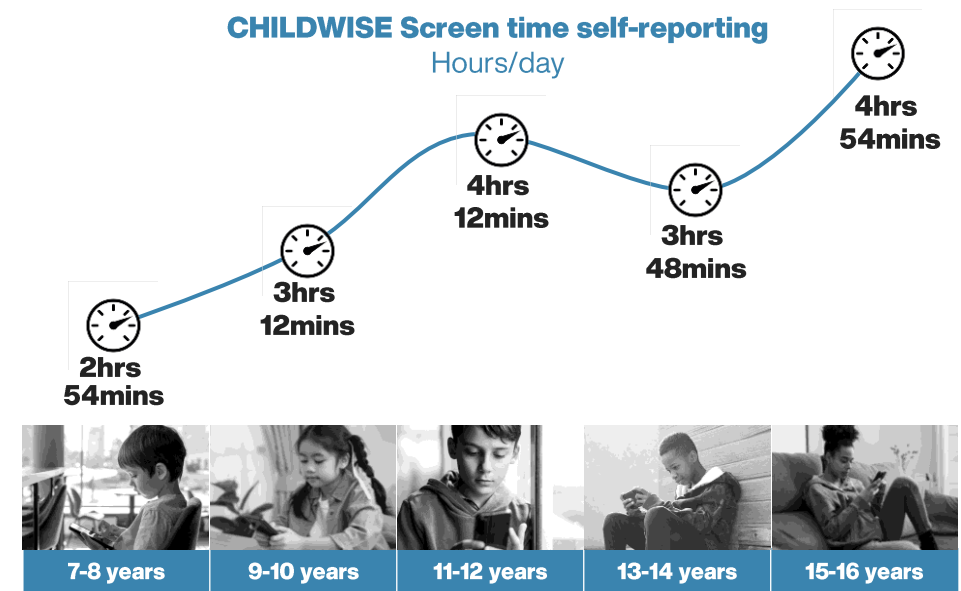
94% of 10-year-olds use a messaging site or app; 99% a video sharing platform; 73% a live streaming site/app; 81% social media

Of social media users aged 10, 90% view YouTube, 53% Tik Tok and 43% Snapchat, all of which can pose a danger of grooming and viewing inappropriate content.

Gaming plays a significant role in the life of 3 in 4 10-year-olds... and 96% have their own social media profile with 1 in 6 including a photo of themselves which anyone can see – a risky practice.

Those aged 4-15 spend over 18 hours per week video viewing in-home.

Perhaps of more concern is reported screen time which 2 in 5 parents admit to finding it hard to control – carers even more so.



Children are owning smartphones progressively younger;

screen time can start as early as 6 months. It is increasing and peaks at almost 5 hours daily in 15-year-olds self-reporting.

This is well above the level at which a myriad of international academic studies have shown significant physical and mental harm to children – more of this shortly.



There's no denying a smartphone is a gateway to harm

But it's not all downside... powerful tangible benefits should not be withheld from children in care

The answer cannot be simply to remove access. Denying a looked after child a phone also denies them the digital tools that are now essential to everyday life, learning, and connection

Instead, what is needed is a more thoughtful response: robust, phone-based safeguards tailored to each child's specific vulnerabilities, alongside active support to help them navigate and avoid the heightened risks they face

At the same time, there is a clear opportunity to harness smartphones as tools for progress - particularly in education. For children in care, who often face significant academic disadvantage, these devices can become a bridge rather than a barrier

This matters deeply when 39% of care experienced adults have been classified as NEET in the years immediately post-care

Offline means left behind.

Digital inclusion matters

In many ways children today are reasonably internet savvy. 3 in 5 are aware of algorithms and how they work, 3 in 4 can spot an influencer advert and there is a high level of mistrust of news sourced on social media or apps. Teens are rightly wary of social media and video sharing apps to some extent (although 1 in 3 still trust them).

A significant minority worry about social media and messaging apps. 31% of 8-17s have experienced someone being 'nasty or hurtful' to them via technology and 25% believe that there is pressure to be popular on social apps all or most of the time.

1 in 3 have seen worrying content online.

A high proportion of teens are wary about sharing personal data online.

However, there is a wake-up call here. The 3 in 5 children who feel safe all or most of the time when using their phone (and this proportion increases with age) conflicts with the high proportion viewing inappropriate material, contacting strangers, having multiple profiles ... and so on.

There are important safeguarding insights for those caring for children.

Ofcom reports that if the incentive is big enough, teens in particular go against their instincts. This includes setting up multiple profiles to maintain a 'secret' online life, particularly those with an impacting condition who are therefore more vulnerable.

A picture that anyone can see is posted on the profile of 12% of children 7-12 and 21% of teens. The grooming journey and sextortion processes show the sophistication of predator research, gaining trust through 'mirroring' the child – age, interests, location, school etc. A photo gives strong clues to age and is key in abusers setting up an empathetic false profile for themselves.

Despite these dangers UNICEF UK argues persuasively that a child without connectivity is disadvantaged ... in learning, participation and their digital competence.

As they say, *"Digital inclusion must be seen as the cornerstone to ensuring social justice and equitable life chances for every child."*

Similar arguments were made by the **Children's Commissioner in 2019** in calling for *"a digital world for children that is safe by design."*

Ofcom recognises that internet access is now an essential for schoolwork and an important part of a child's learning. Children themselves recognise the smartphone is the gateway to three benefits:

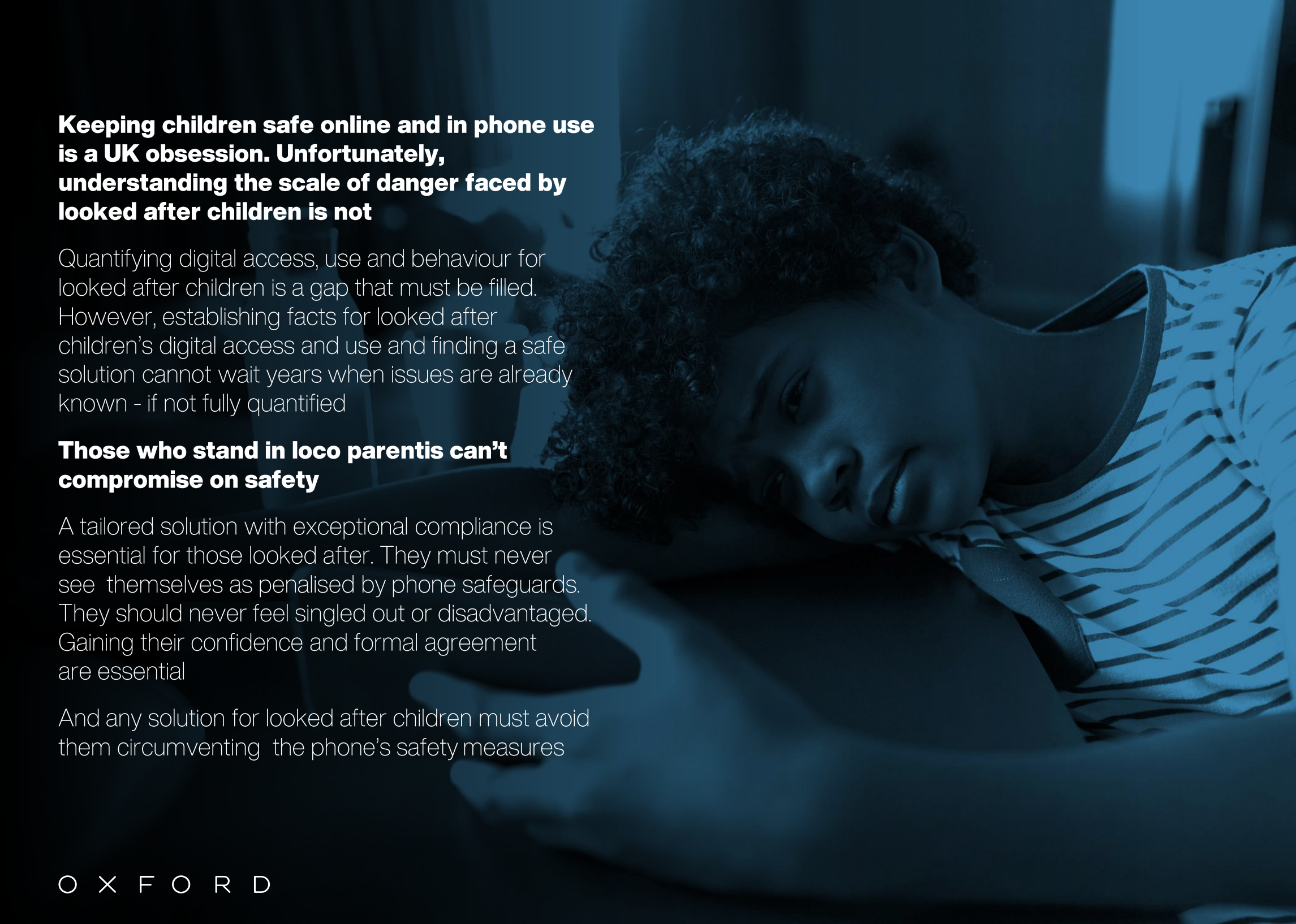
Information gathering benefits: 4 in 5 teens access the internet for school and homework; 3 in 5 to research a personal issue; almost half to access news; 1 in 4 to understand what others think.

Developing skills: Over half of all teens use the internet to learn a new skill; Just under half to develop creative skills; 2 in 5 develop reading and numbers skills.

Making and maintaining social connection: 2 in 3 use the internet to build and maintain friendships.

Looked after children are in even greater need of these benefits and digital life skills.

Furthermore safety-by-design in telecommunication is a child's right and in its best interest...both of which must be protected. The more disadvantaged the child ... and looked after children are at proven greater risk ... the more important it is not to add a digital divide.



Keeping children safe online and in phone use is a UK obsession. Unfortunately, understanding the scale of danger faced by looked after children is not

Quantifying digital access, use and behaviour for looked after children is a gap that must be filled. However, establishing facts for looked after children's digital access and use and finding a safe solution cannot wait years when issues are already known - if not fully quantified

Those who stand in loco parentis can't compromise on safety

A tailored solution with exceptional compliance is essential for those looked after. They must never see themselves as penalised by phone safeguards. They should never feel singled out or disadvantaged. Gaining their confidence and formal agreement are essential

And any solution for looked after children must avoid them circumventing the phone's safety measures

But online can be a frontier with no sheriff

Digital data for looked after children may be muddy but risks are crystal clear. In 2019 the Children's Commissioner noted that looked after children have largely been excluded from broader research on digital lives and online activity.

Seven years later, that gap still exists.

A new and potentially valuable study is being undertaken by the Oxford Internet Institute, but with a project completion in May 2028 .

Several academic studies have explored smartphone benefits and risks of contact for looked after children.

All studies raise the specific challenges and unintended consequences of communication, particularly with the birth family, resulting in destabilising of placements. More of this later.

Any smartphone solution for looked after children should take account of current data which, although imperfect, is qualitatively consistent and robust. It should ensure looked after children are not digitally disadvantaged and can benefit from educational advantages in particular which are enjoyed by the overwhelming majority of UK children.

It is also essential that specific contacts can be controlled where restriction or prohibiting of contact with their birth family is required .

When this is necessary, it must be explained sympathetically to the child.

Concern about children's online safety exceeds other key concerns of the day for UK adults, outranking issues such as access to education, knife crime and refugees. Rule of thumb suggests the bigger the concern, the greater the win in taking effective action... policy or practical.

Smartphones and social media use are repeatedly highlighted by 90% of worried parents as sources of harmful content, mental health issues and distraction from education.

A majority of parents set rules for phone (81%), internet use (93%) and gaming to keep their children safe, happy, healthy and in control. Similarly, many schools have rules about phones in the best interest of the child and his/her education (82% of primary school age have school use restrictions).

The conundrum is that high concern for risks and awareness of safeguarding tools does not translate into parental action. Of those with children 3-17 64% said they were 'very concerned' and a further 30% 'concerned' about online safety, 89% are aware of phone safeguarding methods but just 62% use a safeguard of any kind.

Where Local Authorities stand in loco parentis, the level of safeguarding used by most parents is simply not good enough for children in their care.

A high proportion of UK children themselves claim to use safety measures such as blocking on social media or Xbox and changing settings. More worrying are the measures Ofcom defines as 'risky'... the 1 in 2 children who delete history or use incognito mode, 1 in 5 who find a way around safety controls and 1 in 10 who use a proxy server. Early Australian experience with their social media ban demonstrates many ways children circumvent rules.



Robust Voop-sponsored research among looked after children proves both desire for and value of phone safeguarding

Cared for children see the benefits. Younger children are very much on side, as are older children and those in residential care when they understand they remain in control. They know their phone is both a blessing and a curse

Carers are overwhelmingly positive to the concept. They are united in wanting to keep children in their care safe whilst using a smartphone

A balanced and mindful relationship with technology is second only to safety in the minds of those who stand in loco parentis. A solution to phone battles is also welcomed through taking emotion out of phone conversations and guiding responsible use versus punishing. It is positive parenting for the digital age

Trust in a safeguarding phone system will be shaped by relationships, making effective carer and child onboarding critical to successful adoption

Safeguarding phones: Demanded by children. Supported by carers.

In a seminal study sponsored by Voop which explored the viability of a safeguarding phone, there was near-universal support from looked after children. Some older children were initially resistant due to their reliance on unrestricted access, but virtually all ultimately expressed a desire for a healthier relationship with their device and were open to adopting a safeguarding phone.

Their reasoning reflects lived experience - an understanding that phones are both a blessing and a curse.

Phones carry heightened emotional significance for a child in care. They are vital conduits to the child's world, maintaining connections to birth parents, siblings, and other key relationships, even where these are complex. Devices are sometimes gifted by family members, reinforcing emotional attachment in line with attachment theory.

Those cared for are also acutely aware of phone-related harms. Those in residential care report near-constant use affecting sleep, while foster children are more likely to have phones removed at night, sometimes leading to conflict and anxiety. Residential children tend to be more attached and use phones more broadly, whereas foster children use them mainly for entertainment and appear less dependent.

Social media drives much of this dependence. Children recognise that more apps mean more use, with platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram, Messenger, Facebook and Bet365 prominent among teenagers.

They also recognise the darker side. TikTok blends entertainment and communication but exposes them to harmful content - misogyny, toxic masculinity, negative body image, cyberbullying, and unregulated mental health material, especially risky for those with trauma. They are aware of addictive design features, inappropriate content, and risks including grooming, exploitation, and criminal involvement.

In short, a safeguarding phone tips the balance between the phone as both a blessing and a curse, heightening blessings and eliminating worst curses.

The strong appeal to looked after children in research is driven by:

1. **Child-led control:** With carer support, children can personalise settings to suit their needs and adjust them over time.
2. **A high-quality device:** A good camera and ample storage were highly valued.
3. **Unlimited calls and texts:** Particularly attractive for those who had not previously had this access.
4. **Blocking unwanted contact:** Universally important, reflecting past experiences of persistent or unwanted communication.
5. **Protection from harmful content and scams:** Seen as a key safety benefit, though older children noted differences in what adults deem "inappropriate." For carers, this is a top priority.
6. **Managing screen time and apps:** Views varied by age, but most recognised the benefit given their high usage.
7. **Location sharing in emergencies:** Foster children were generally comfortable; some in residential care questioned it ("like Big Brother"), though an emergency alert function appealed to all.

High voluntary uptake depends on transparent, adult-led conversations focused on safety and protection. Many children value the stability it can bring, but success also requires training, clear demonstration, and - especially for older children - negotiation, co-design, and peer/agency endorsement.



Up to 225,000 children in and on the edge of care could benefit from an ultra-safe and personalised phone ... but those who are looked after is a good place to focus any safeguarding investment

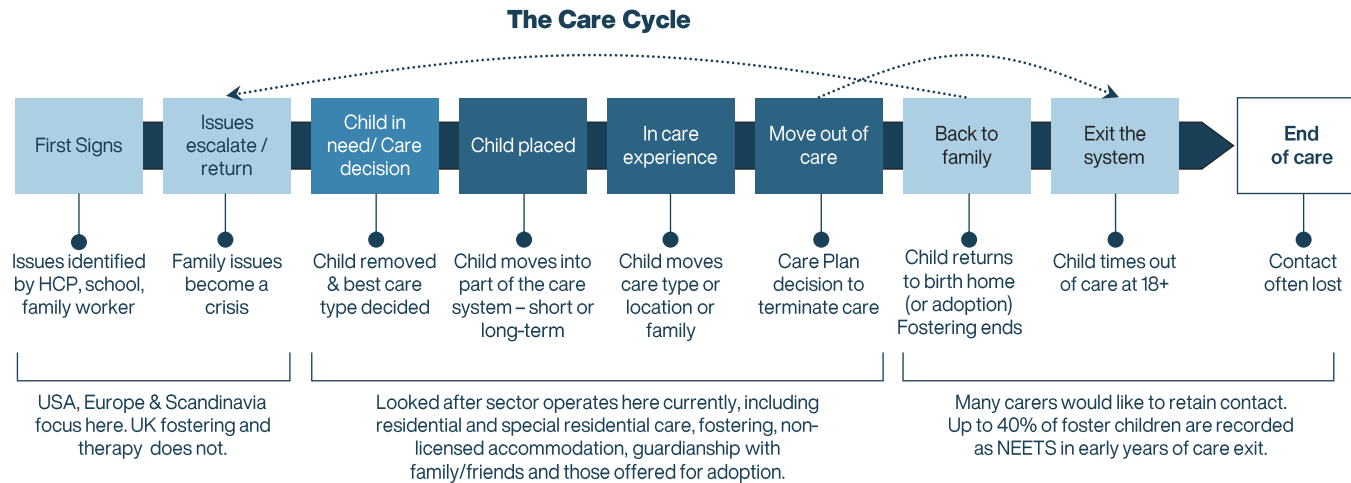
A superior smartphone safeguarding technology and system of introduction must be tailored to the specific needs and higher level of vulnerability of looked after children

The 67% of children taken into care for reasons of abuse or neglect, 60% who have a high trauma index and the one in ten in residential care are priorities

Cost of care, particularly residential, have escalated. At £3.1bn per year this is double the cost of care five years ago

Ability to stabilise placements and reduce missing episodes should be the subject of aggressive targets to help pay for investment that moves focus to prevention

Looked after children the first ripple...



The UK care system is under growing pressure, with around 105,000 children looked after at any one time - a number that has steadily increased over the past three decades and is expected to rise further despite significant investment and efforts to keep children within family networks.

Among them, those in residential care are especially vulnerable. Around one in ten go missing, often repeatedly, and are at heightened risk of grooming and exploitation.

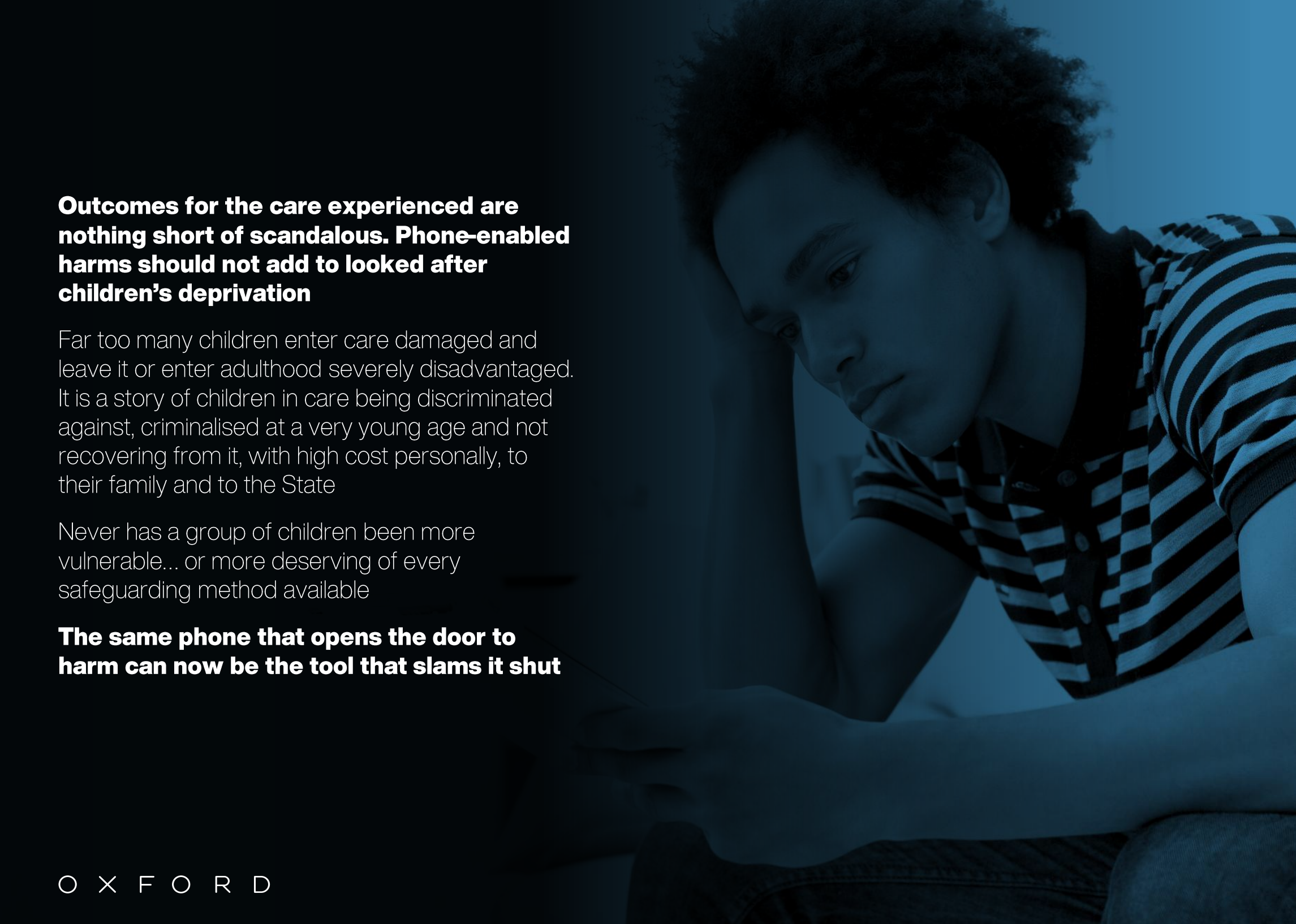
A smartphone designed with advanced, tailored safeguarding features could play a critical role in detecting, preventing, and disrupting this abuse.

There is a new risk curve.

While all age groups can benefit, early intervention is essential. With 38% aged 10–15 and 27% aged 16+, these groups represent significant targets - and children are going online earlier than ever. Pre-teens are increasingly exposed to phone-mediated harm.

Investing in safeguarding before adolescence - including for the 18% aged 5-9 - offers the greatest opportunity to prevent harm before it escalates.

	Classified as 'in need' 2024	On a CIN/CRCS plan*	Looked after 2024/25	
England	404,310 children	130,440 with CIN	81,770	31,120 2024/5
Wales	246,454 'contacts'	19,803 care support plan	7,208	c. 2,000 Mar 2024
Scotland	10,197 'referred'	NA	11,844	3,414 July 2024
N.Ireland	22,450 'in need' Mar 2024	2,334 on protection register	3,999	c. 1,000 Mar 2024
	>680,000 children 'in need'	>125,000 children on the edge of care	c.105,000 children placed as looked after in UK at any one time	c.37,000 children moved out of care in UK and therefore 'care experienced'



Outcomes for the care experienced are nothing short of scandalous. Phone-enabled harms should not add to looked after children's deprivation

Far too many children enter care damaged and leave it or enter adulthood severely disadvantaged. It is a story of children in care being discriminated against, criminalised at a very young age and not recovering from it, with high cost personally, to their family and to the State

Never has a group of children been more vulnerable... or more deserving of every safeguarding method available

The same phone that opens the door to harm can now be the tool that slams it shut

Enough is enough

Outcomes are well known and widely reported for those who are care experienced.

They experience abuse, neglect and trauma.

For children in the care system, 3 in 5 end up as looked after because they have suffered abuse or neglect in their family home.

60% will have experienced significant trauma or their trauma index indicates they are at high risk of future trauma.

They are educationally harmed.

39% recorded as NEETS when 19-21 years of age compared with 16% of those not looked after.

They have poorer emotional wellbeing.

They are up to 5 times more likely to self-harm in adulthood and 4 times more likely to have a mental health issue than those who are not care experienced.

Their mental health is an issue.

Almost half of those children in care have a diagnosable mental health disorder compared with 10% of peers.

They are criminalised.

Their histories of abuse and trauma are well known - acknowledged across government. Yet too often, the response is not protection, but prosecution.

By age 24, more than half (52%) of care-experienced young people have a criminal conviction, compared with just 13% of their peers.

15% receive an immediate custodial sentence - ten times higher than those who have not been in care. A further 37% receive fines or cautions, versus 12% outside the care system.

For many, this trajectory begins early. Those who have been in care typically enter custody at around 18 - years earlier than their peers.

The pattern is stark. Between 24% and 27% of the prison population have been looked after children.

This is not a coincidence. It's a pipeline - from care to custody.

A significant minority of children in care today are being pulled into criminalisation and substance misuse.

In 2025, 800 were convicted or cautioned. 1,760 were identified with drug misuse. Among those aged 16+, almost one in twelve - around 1,300 children - are affected.

These are not isolated cases. They are signals of acute vulnerability - and of exploitation. These children are not choosing risk; they are being drawn into it. And in too many cases, the system responds after the harm is done.

The pattern is gendered.

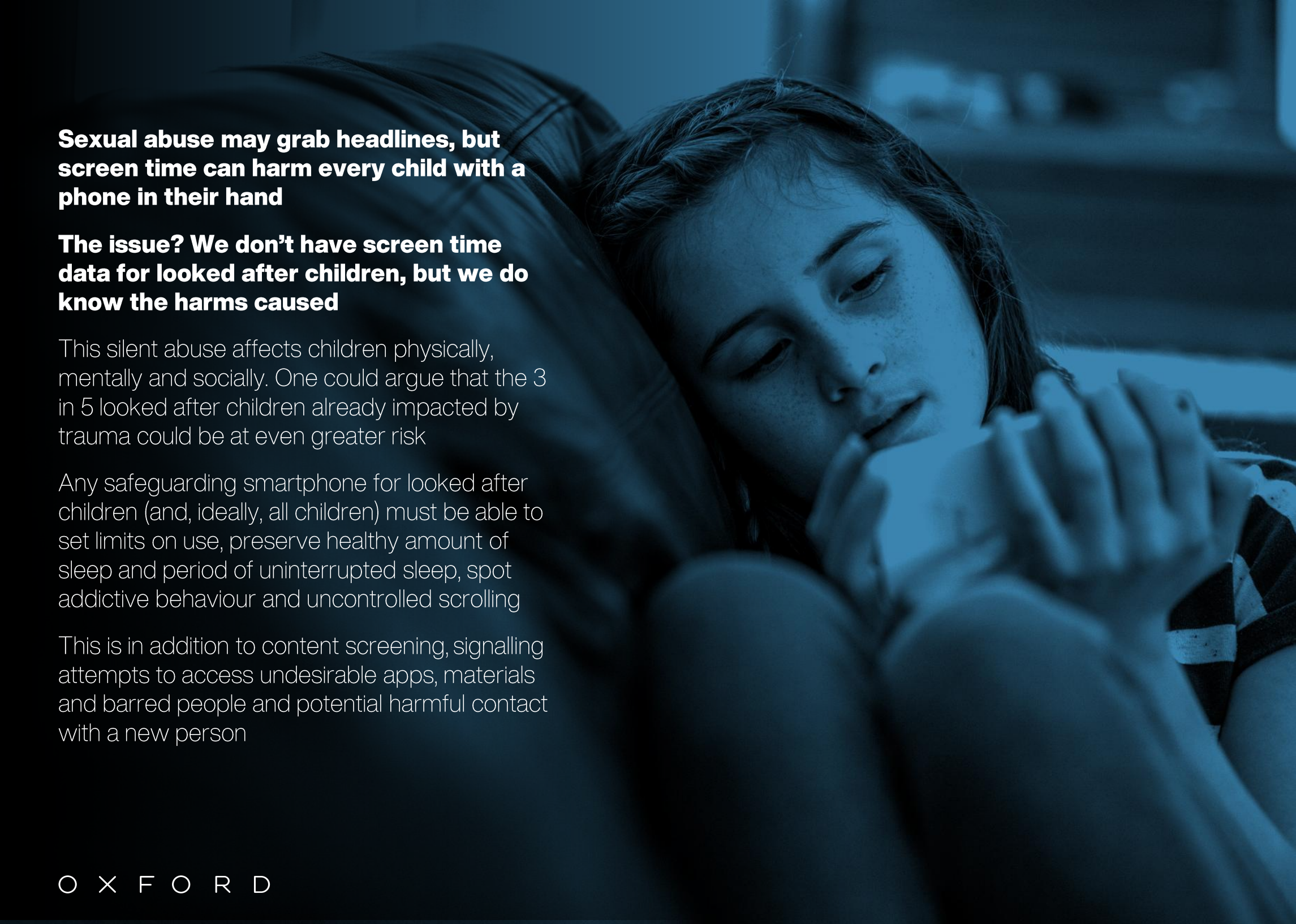
Boys are more visible in crime and drug misuse. Girls, less so - but no less at risk. Almost half of looked after girls (47%) have very high safeguarding needs. They face disproportionate risks of sexual and online exploitation, early sexualisation, and early motherhood. At least two-thirds leave care having experienced abuse or neglect. Many carry deep trauma. In a residential care study, nearly a third report self-harm.

Geography compounds risk.

In areas such as the North-East, Inner London and the East of England, vulnerability and exploitation are more concentrated - and the consequences more severe.

Two truths must shape our response. Most children enter care through no fault of their own. And no child can ever consent to their own abuse.

This is not a problem of behaviour. It is a failure of protection.



Sexual abuse may grab headlines, but screen time can harm every child with a phone in their hand

The issue? We don't have screen time data for looked after children, but we do know the harms caused

This silent abuse affects children physically, mentally and socially. One could argue that the 3 in 5 looked after children already impacted by trauma could be at even greater risk

Any safeguarding smartphone for looked after children (and, ideally, all children) must be able to set limits on use, preserve healthy amount of sleep and period of uninterrupted sleep, spot addictive behaviour and uncontrolled scrolling

This is in addition to content screening, signalling attempts to access undesirable apps, materials and barred people and potential harmful contact with a new person

Small screen. Big effect.

Physical health risks

Positive association of excessive screen time with obesity, eating disorder, cardiovascular, back and other musculoskeletal issues

Attention/ engagement

Rapid scrolling and short-form reward cycles damage attention span.

High levels of TV/video viewing in pre-school linked to increased ADHD symptoms

Over 4 hours daily screen time increases risk:
Anxiety +45; Depression +65; Behaviour problems +17; ADHD symptoms + 21;
Impaired cognitive functioning; poorer educational outcomes

Vision, physical effects, and myopia

Digital eye strain, compulsive use and physical inactivity.

Searching sensitive identity questions

Personal data sharing – often inadvertently, is a grooming and targeting risk. Algorithms that magnify and target content feeds.

Sleep disruption/displacement

Screen use before bed shortens sleep duration and disrupts quality in adolescents

Children 8–16: 38% had a sleep problem 3+ times in the previous 7 nights.

Children with problematic smartphone use are 2x as likely to have poor sleep quality, anxiety, depression and insomnia leading to difficulty concentrating

Behavioural addiction and compulsive use

Persuasive design heightens compulsive scrolling/ inability to escape the screen:

11% of adolescents show problematic, addictive-like social media use.

12% at risk of problem gaming behaviour

1 in 3 show increasingly addictive screen use patterns over time

Mental issues

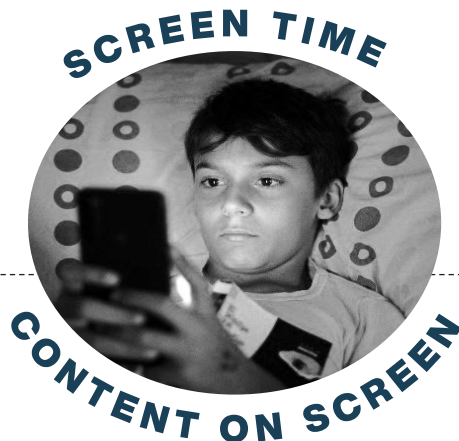
13–16-year-olds with excessive phone use: 44% report anxiety; 56% depression – considerably above those without high use

Those with 4 hours+ screen time daily 45% more likely to experience anxiety

Higher screen time associated with higher emotional issues and 20% higher odds of developing a mental disorder

Addiction to pornography

Early exposure, violent behaviour if content is restricted and unwanted sexting – extremely distressing for girls – are all signs and outcomes.



Harmful content and disorders

Social media linked to risk factor for image concerns/disordered eating in young people.

Those with addictive screen use patterns had 2–3 x higher risk of suicidal ideation and behaviours.

Numerous studies link excessive screen time with a range of issues.

Looked after children face the same dangers as all children from screen time proven to be harmful.

Expert evidence globally in numerous academic and longitudinal studies has uncovered harms of excessive and night-time internet access.

Government and academic reviews also repeatedly point to strong links in mental health as well as safeguarding concerns. Most studies measure 4+ hours per day as ‘problematic screen time’ – a daily period which many children exceed.

The relationship between screen time and mental health problems in children has been associated but a causal relationship has not been fully proven. However, it is sufficiently worrying for it to be raised in Parliament.

The Parliamentary Review of Internet Use in May 2024 was at pains to point out that it’s not screen time alone that causes harm; it is also content viewed.



Contact with birth family is a fundamental right for looked-after children but a policy vacuum in how it occurs in a digital world

When that contact is mediated through smartphones, it becomes far more complex for both child and carer. Despite this, there is no clear national or local guidance on how mobile phones should be used in contact arrangements. Practice is therefore fragmented and reactive, often only addressed once problems surface

In this vacuum, risks linked to unsupervised digital contact frequently go unmanaged, even as phones simultaneously offer comfort and connection while also carrying the potential to distress children and destabilise placements

Research has begun to acknowledge this tension, calling for a more deliberate approach

Mobile-enabled contact should be formally recognised as a valid form of contact within care planning. Plans must explicitly address how it will be used - balancing its emotional value against its risks

Carers and residential staff, in turn, need access to safe devices, alongside training and support that equips them to manage this form of contact confidently and safely

Smartphone contact: Lifeline or liability?

Lifeline

Research consistently finds that smartphones can play a powerful role in sustaining relationships for looked-after children.

They enable more frequent, informal contact than scheduled visits alone, helping children maintain emotional bonds with family and friends. This kind of everyday connection can ease feelings of loss, reduce distress, and restore a sense of control.

Studies therefore recommend that digital contact be built deliberately into care planning, with carers and residential staff actively supporting calls, messages, and video contact.

Crucially, the evidence suggests these benefits are not automatic - digital contact works best when it is structured, supported, and thoughtfully managed.

Liability

The same technology, however, can just as easily undermine stability.

Carers themselves report that **60% of family contact** is problematic or stressful, with foster carer surveys estimating **1 in 2 children** in their care experiencing inappropriate contact with family and friends -underscoring that, unmanaged, digital connection can quickly tip from support into risk.

Without clear boundaries and support, smartphones open the door to unregulated, unplanned contact that can strain relationships and destabilise placements.

Foster carers report gaps in digital access, skills, and safeguarding confidence, while also navigating some of their most stressful challenges - allegations, missing incidents, and difficult family dynamics - often intensified by mobile contact.

Research highlights a stark tension: the phone that soothes a child's sense of loss can also disrupt placements, a critical concern given placement stability is a key policy priority.

A young person with curly hair is sitting on a windowsill, looking out a window. They are holding a smartphone in their hands. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window. The overall tone is somber and reflective.

Turning to abuse, 'red flags' in grooming of looked after children are consistently identified by academics, police and child protection experts

Abuse crimes against children reported to police – both contact and non-contact – are recorded by NPCC data & insight hub. These data are not specific to looked after children, but the looked after child's increased vulnerability has been established without doubt over at least 15 years.

It was explicitly noted in 2009 DfE statutory guidance and in a dozen reports and inquiries ... from Rotherham to Oxford, Peterborough to Bradford and in seminal Baroness Casey and Prof. Alexis Jay reports, with the latter noting in her enquiry that 1 in 3 victims of gang abuse were in care

Any safeguarding phone should be able to prevent abuse by identifying risk red flags along the grooming and abuse 'journey':

New and persistent contacts; changes in phone behaviour suggesting a second phone has been gifted to the child; late night calling; location detection – particularly when a child is missing; isolation or control through change in contact preferences; change in demeanour coupled with new phone behaviour; visits to known unsafe environments

Flipping the phone 180° from threat to shield

CSE Risk Factors

01 **Missing from care**

Unexplained absence from home or school, especially repeatedly



02 **Online grooming/social secrecy**

Secretive phone/internet use. Contact with unknown people. Being pressured to send images



03 **Older 'boyfriend' / 'girlfriend'**

Older partner. Controlling behaviour. Isolation from friends. Taken to unknown locations



04 **Unexplained gifts or money**

New clothes, trainers, phone, drugs, alcohol... with no clear explanation



05 **Substance/alcohol misuse**

Increased use, coming back drunk/drug affected. Frequency with which it happens



= smartphone the enabler or with ability to detect 'red flags' and to signal changes in phone patterns of use, contacts or location

06 **Mental health. Trauma. Low esteem**

Self-harm, anxiety, depression. Trauma and/or abuse history



07 **Being in care/extra vulnerable**

Looked after child. Disrupted attachment. Unstable home

08 **Sexual health indicators**

STIs, pregnancy and/or seeking repeat emergency contraception

09 **Behaviour change**

Aggression or withdrawal. Decline in school attendance/performance. New peer groups. Secrecy. Staying out late



10 **Networks/unsafe environments**

Associating with older peers or adults involved in crime. Party attendance in houses with unknown adults. Links to gangs/county lines groups



There is universal agreement among police, policy makers and child protectors that missing from care should never be ignored

... but there are other red flags that must be picked up. The majority of these have been phone-enabled.

An advanced safeguarding smartphone should be able to detect most, if not all, risk signals, including those in the new Police CERl risk index.

This would reframe the phone from being an enabler of abuse to a detector and disruptor of potential threats.



**Children going missing is the biggest abuse
'red flag' warning, particularly to police**

Numbers of looked after children missing or absent per year are truly staggering ... as is the cost of recovering those missing children

In locating missing children today, mobile location data and social media checks are part of police missing person investigations

A smarter phone safeguarding system could change the equation.

By detecting danger earlier and helping police find children faster without the dog-leg of referring to the system operator, it could prevent or shorten many missing episodes so closely tied to abuse

It could also reduce substantially the £27,000 per child per year spent on the 10,000 children who go missing repeatedly – and help bring abusers to justice

Our 'red flag' moment

The signal to act

15,620 looked after children go missing annually in 100,000+ incidents.

That's 11% - and growing - of all looked after children every year.

2 in 3 children who go missing in a year do so more than once.

On average, missing incidents per child average 6.8 – up from 6.3 in 3 years.
70% of children who were sexually exploited also went missing.

The result? Police and care providers must devote resources to tracking down c. 280 of the most vulnerable children per day.

The phone plays a key role in enabling abusers and traffickers to target, entice or coerce children to go missing and in arranging meet ups.

This was described as long ago as 2009 by Barnardo's in their seminal 'Puppet on a String' grooming and abuse journey description.

The cost alone – both human and financial – is one of the most powerful arguments for investing in safeguarding technology.

Any system must have the potential to find missing children faster in collaboration with police forces.

Using the University of Portsmouth study and at today's cost, with an average of 6.5 missing episodes per year, annual cost for recovering a looked after child is as high as £27,000 per child per year.

The cost to the child remains high in risk and trauma.

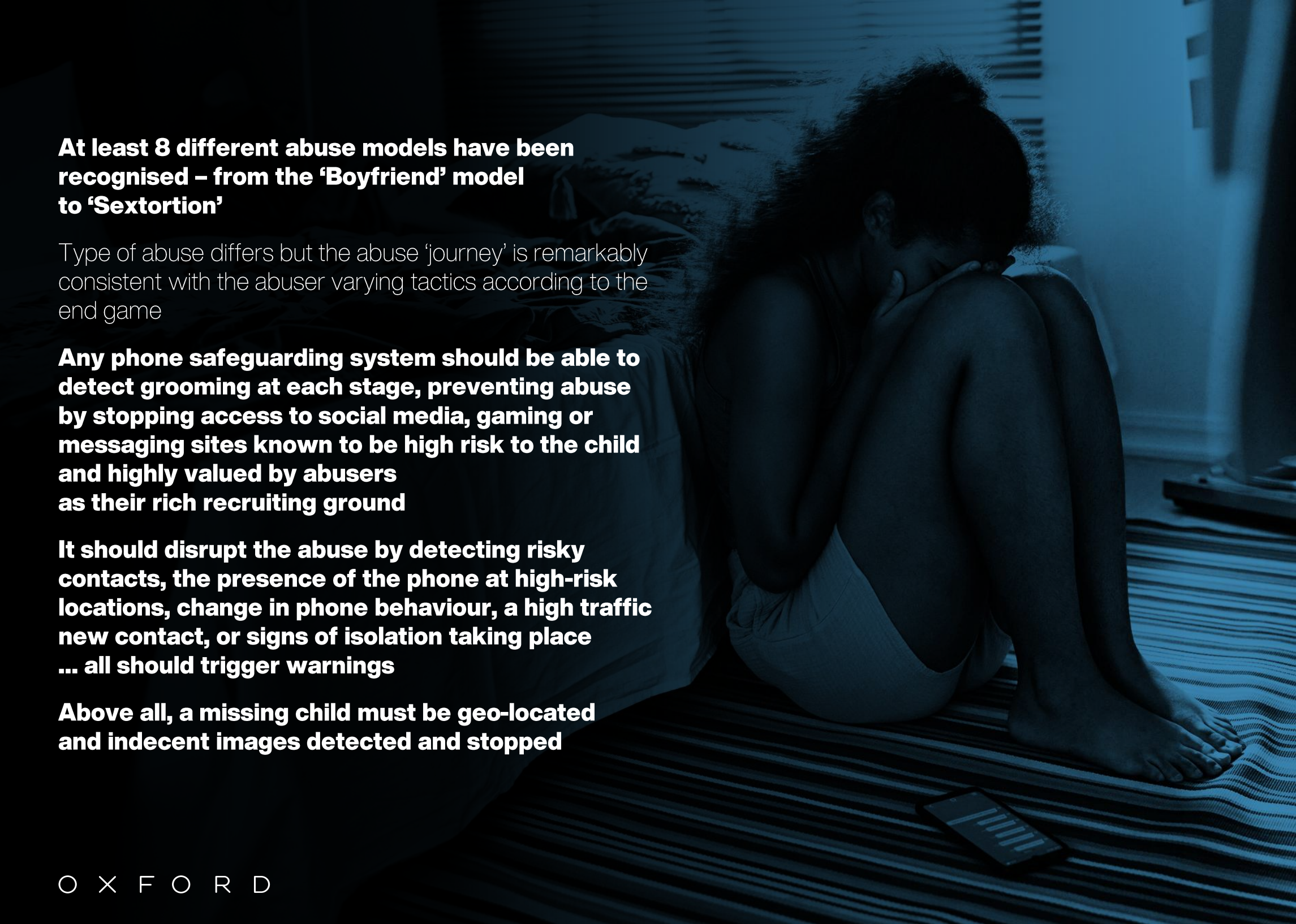
Police also have an interest in phone meta data to pinpoint locations of abuse and an individual child's data to aid prosecution if they are subjected to abuse while missing.

It is therefore not surprising that going missing is at the top of the list of signals of a child's vulnerability to abuse.

It is recorded as the key 'red flag' of vulnerability to drugs, criminal exploitation, trafficking and sexual abuse by:

- Department for Education – *Statutory Guidance on going missing*
- Home Office: *Working Together to Safeguard Children*
- UK Parliamentary briefing which highlighted the strong link between missing episodes and sexual/criminal exploitation of children in care
- College of Policing - *Child Abuse Investigations*
- National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) – *Missing Persons Guidance*
- National Crime Agency – *Child Exploitation and Online Protection CEOP safeguarding materials*
- Metropolitan Police / UK Police *Missing Persons Units guidance*
- CERl *vulnerability index* being piloted by the Police.
- NSPCC – *Child Sexual Exploitation guidance*
- Barnardo's – *Child Sexual Exploitation risk indicators*
- The Children's Society – *Runaway and Missing Children research*
- University of Manchester and University of Bournemouth *policing research on repeat missing incidents*

The Jay Report, Casey Review, IICSA reports, Rochdale/Rotherham investigations also explicitly identified children going missing as a precursor to exploitation in major abuse scandals. The 2022 IISCA Enquiry reported that 50% of children in care who experienced abuse had also gone missing.



At least 8 different abuse models have been recognised – from the ‘Boyfriend’ model to ‘Sextortion’

Type of abuse differs but the abuse ‘journey’ is remarkably consistent with the abuser varying tactics according to the end game

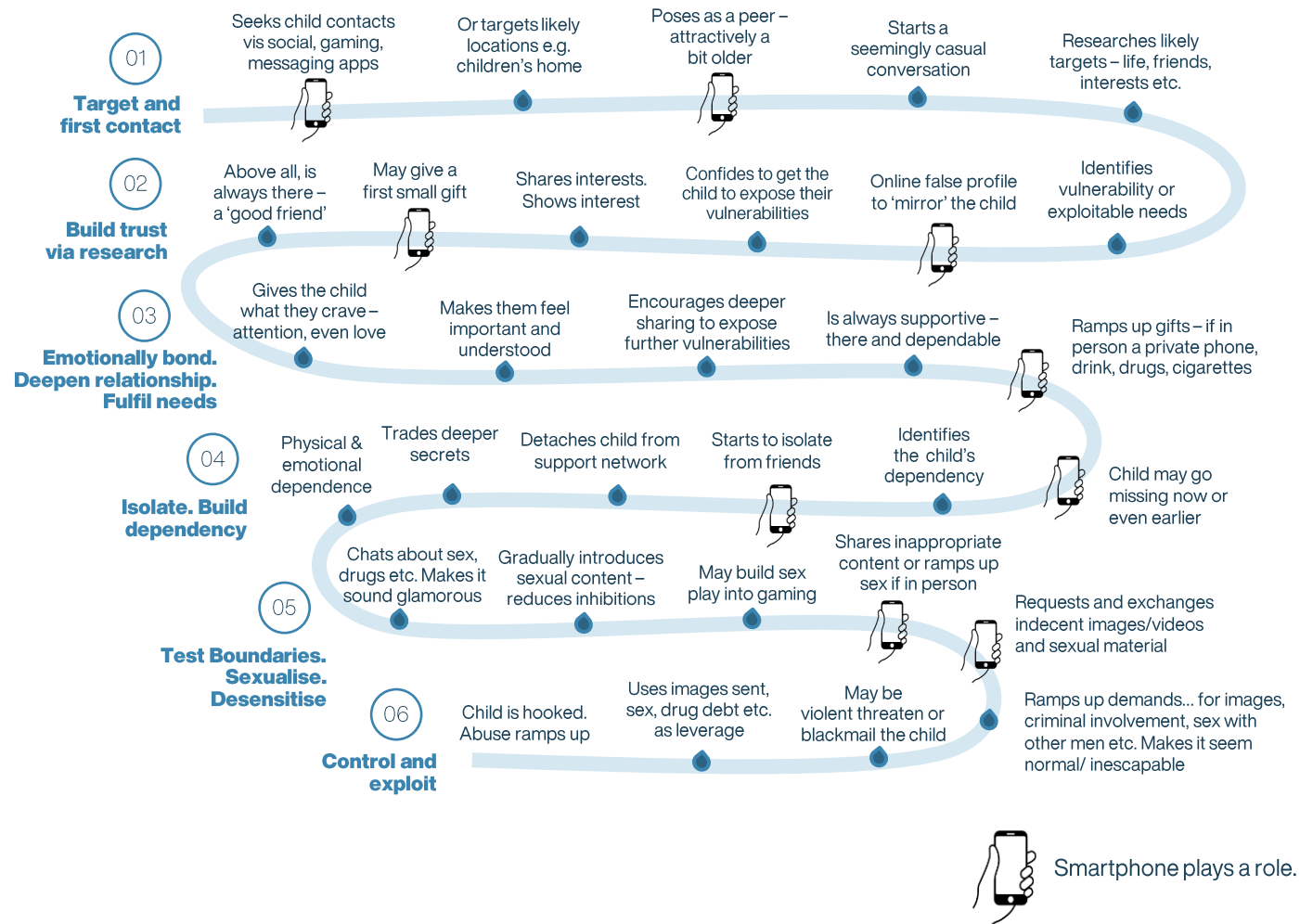
Any phone safeguarding system should be able to detect grooming at each stage, preventing abuse by stopping access to social media, gaming or messaging sites known to be high risk to the child and highly valued by abusers as their rich recruiting ground

It should disrupt the abuse by detecting risky contacts, the presence of the phone at high-risk locations, change in phone behaviour, a high traffic new contact, or signs of isolation taking place ... all should trigger warnings

Above all, a missing child must be geo-located and indecent images detected and stopped

Journey interrupted

Stopping abuse in its tracks



Every academic, abuse expert and child advocate, not least Bernado's and NSPCC, describe a 5 or 6 stage journey for both contact and online abuse.

Wherever the phone has played a central role as gateway to and enabler of abuse, a safeguarding phone should seek to detect, disrupt and stop abuse.

This will apply to online and in-person abuse.

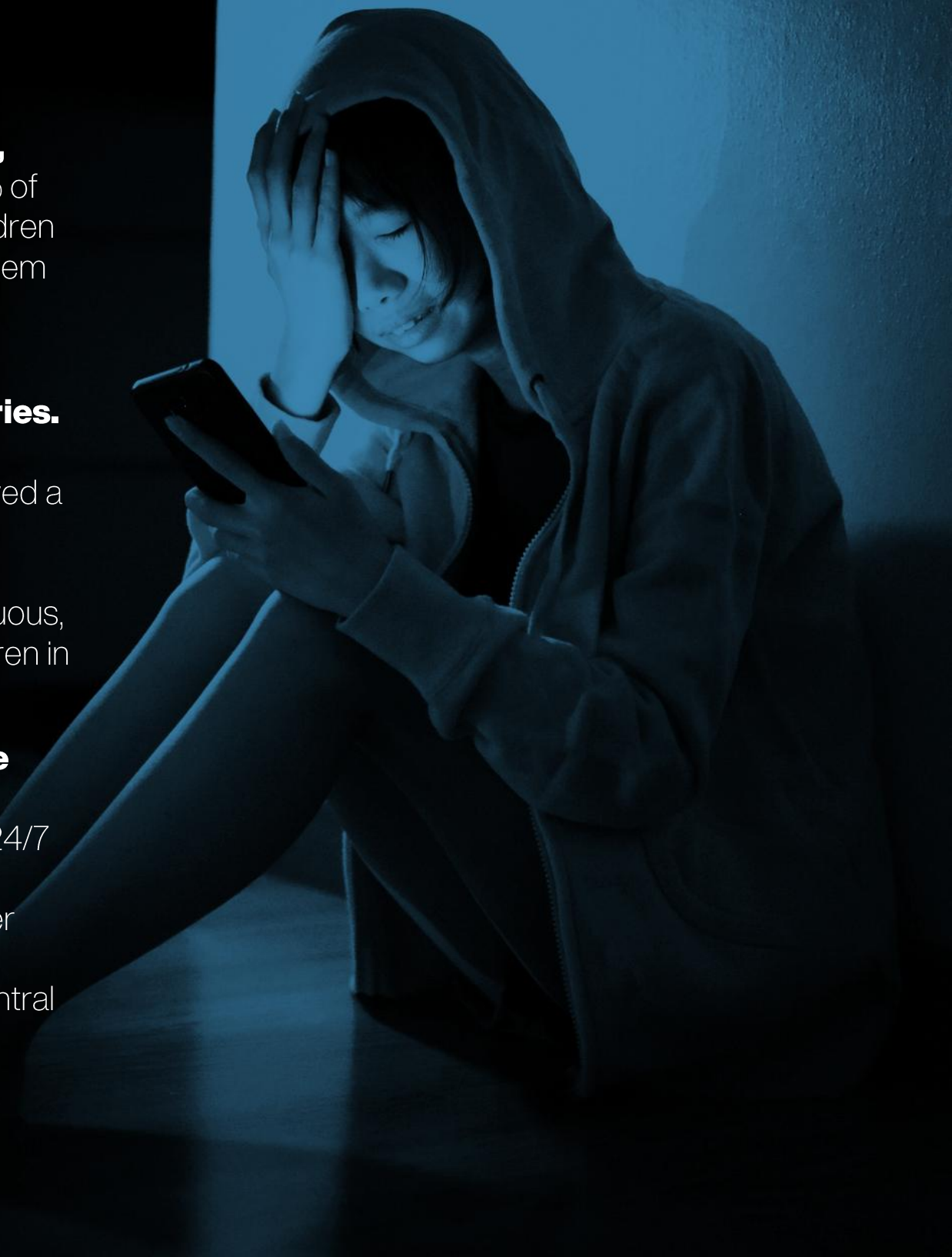
It should be effective for all models of abuse – the boyfriend model, gang grooming and county lines recruitment, child trafficking, online sextortion, live streaming ... **and whatever new abuse playbook emerges.**

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is deeply pervasive, affecting an estimated 500,000 children- around 4% of all children in the UK. Its impact is not evenly felt. Children in care face a starkly disproportionate risk, making them among society's most vulnerable

CSA has been repeatedly examined through Government Reviews and Independent Inquiries.

While these have generated numerous recommendations, the outcomes have largely followed a familiar pattern - procedural adjustments, additional training, the creation of task forces, or pledges of increased funding. Yet none have delivered a continuous, practical solution capable of actively protecting children in real time

Crucially, no approach has fully embraced the potential of technology to provide a vigilant, round-the-clock safeguard - one that operates 24/7 to protect those most at risk. This gap is especially concerning given what is already known: looked-after children are 15 to 20 times more likely to experience sexual abuse, and smartphones frequently play a central role at multiple stages of grooming and exploitation



“If they were our children there would be outrage”

Operation Hydrant noted 101,000 recorded cases of child sexual abuse in 2022 but noted it was the tip of an iceberg. It is the Hydrant estimate of 500,000 incidents of CSE that is oft quoted.

In 2024 the NPCC recorded 78,000 cases of contact abuse.

In 44% of cases the victim was not a complete stranger.

Close to 38,000 cases were non-contact abuse.

Numbers per thousand children vary considerably by geography with worst counties peaking at close to 15 cases per thousand (9 sexual and 6 with indecent images of children) and counties with lowest record having 5 case per thousand (3 sexual and 2 IIOC). This may partly be due to inconsistencies in recording or different crime focus by region.

Four types of child sexual abuse and exploitation account for over 90% of recorded CSAE: sexual assault on a child (29%), indecent imagery of a child (27%), rape of a child (18%) and sexual activity involving a child (17%).

These are serious abuses having lasting effect on a child.

Group based child sexual exploitation is high profile, high impact but smaller in case numbers. It is memorably described as ‘multiple sexual assaults by multiple men on multiple occasions’

The prolonged nature of grooming and exploitation make it a target for any smartphone safeguarding solution.

In high profile cases in Rochdale, Rotherham, Oxford, Telford, Newcastle, Huddersfield, Derby and Halifax 2,561 girls were specifically identified in court cases , with thousands more potentially abused.

Looked after children being disproportionately targeted and girls being taxed from children’s homes for rape were repeatedly mentioned.

The IISCA independent enquiry which reported in 2022 noted looked after children appeared 15 to 20 times more often in CSE risk assessments than expected, based on population share.

16% of assessments involved children in care despite them representing only 1% of the population. Teens in care were at 6 times greater risk than younger children. Twelve percent of children in care aged 13 and over had sexual exploitation identified in their assessments.



More than a third of these children were previously known to services because of child protection and neglect.

Girls living in residential care settings were among the earliest identified victims.

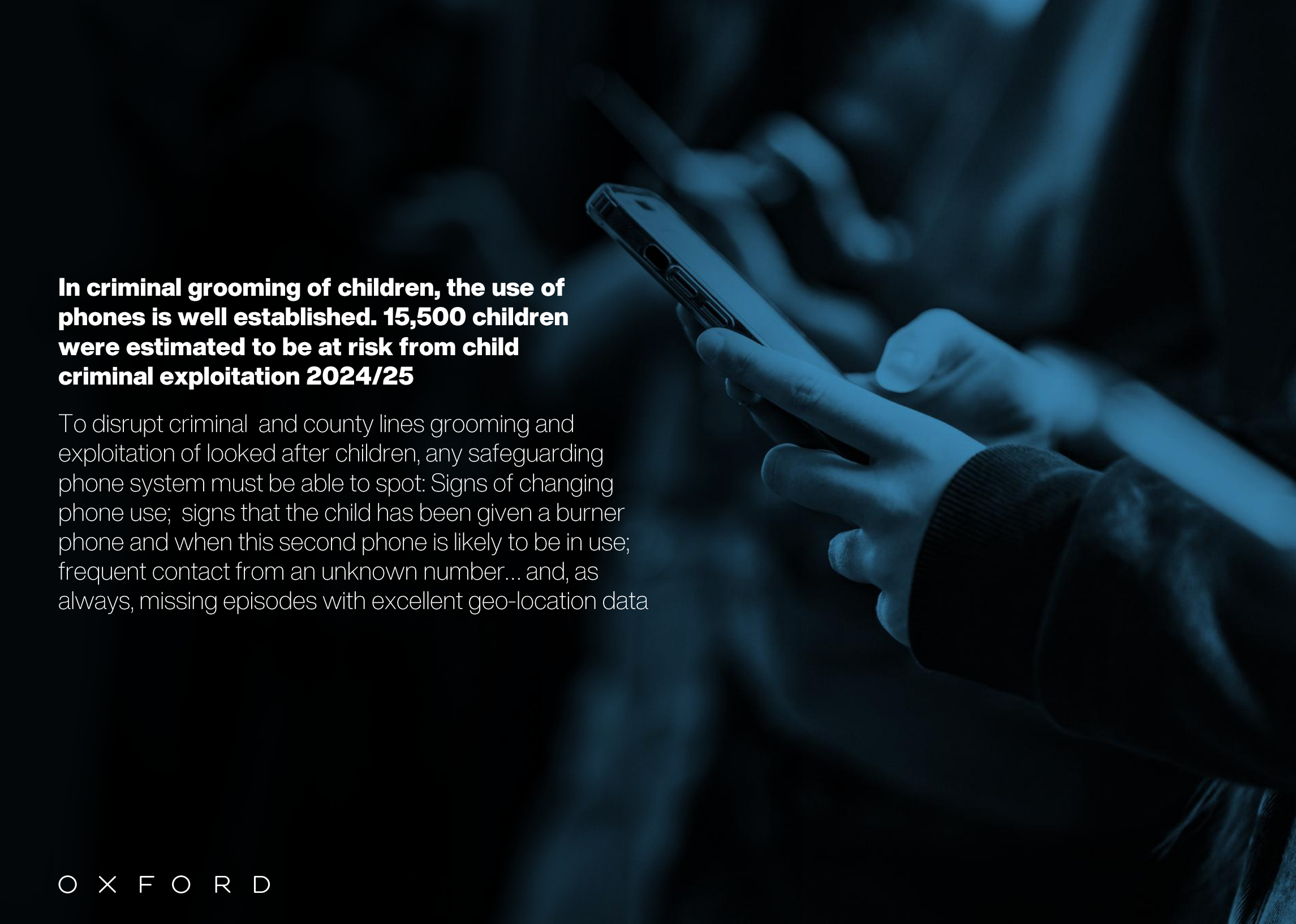
Professor Alexis Jay. OBE Child Sexual exploitation in Rotherham. 2014



Adult abusers targeted children, mainly girls, some as young as 10 and some of whom were in care.

If they were our children... there would be outrage.

Baroness Louise Casey. National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. January 2026



In criminal grooming of children, the use of phones is well established. 15,500 children were estimated to be at risk from child criminal exploitation 2024/25

To disrupt criminal and county lines grooming and exploitation of looked after children, any safeguarding phone system must be able to spot: Signs of changing phone use; signs that the child has been given a burner phone and when this second phone is likely to be in use; frequent contact from an unknown number... and, as always, missing episodes with excellent geo-location data

The child pipeline into crime

Children are being pulled into criminal worlds long before they understand the danger. Groomed by gangs and organised networks, they are drawn into operations like county lines - a business model where children are the delivery system.

This is not choice. It is coercion. Adults and criminal groups use threats, violence, manipulation, and the lure of money to trap them.

The phone in a child's hand becomes both a badge of belonging and a weapon of control - used to recruit, direct, and exploit. They are made to deal drugs, carry weapons, and move cash - risking their lives while others profit.

The scale is deeply underestimated. Experts warn that the widely cited figure of 15,500 affected children barely scratches the surface. In 2023/24 alone, 2,888 children were identified as involved in county lines activity, with 1,914 arrested for dealing heroin, cocaine, and amphetamines - some as young as 11.

This exploitation follows a chilling trajectory: Early grooming begins in primary school; 11-13 they are couriers in low-risk roles; 14-15 involvement deepens, transporting drugs and money across regions; 16-17 exploitation peaks.

Children are targeted deliberately - approached in person or online, often through messaging apps and fake identities. Recruiters look for vulnerability: boys, in particular, who feel disconnected, uncertain, or overlooked. They offer whatever the child is missing - money, status, protection - **needs that are especially common among looked-after children.**

At first, it is made to feel exciting. Powerful. "Cool." Then the trap tightens. Debt, threats, violence, and blackmail replace the promises. Children cannot escape.

In just 15 months, a national County Lines policing programme shut down over 3,000 criminal lines, triggering **4,323 safeguarding referrals.**

Behind every number is a child being used, controlled, and put in harm's way.

The children most likely to be exploited are not random - they are predictable. And they are disproportionately those already in care.

The NSPCC identifies clear risk factors. Each one is far more common among looked-after children:

- unstable family lives, poverty and deprivation, or time in the care system
- prior trauma or abuse or mental health struggles
- exclusion from school or time in pupil referral units

These are not just background conditions - they are signals. Signals that offenders actively look for.

Police and academic research into County Lines operations reveals how precisely children are targeted. The patterns are stark:

Boys seeking connection are offered a "friend" or mentor

Those drawn to rewards are tempted with money, clothes, cigarettes, phones

Those craving status are made to feel important

Those who are easily pressured are pushed beyond the point of refusal

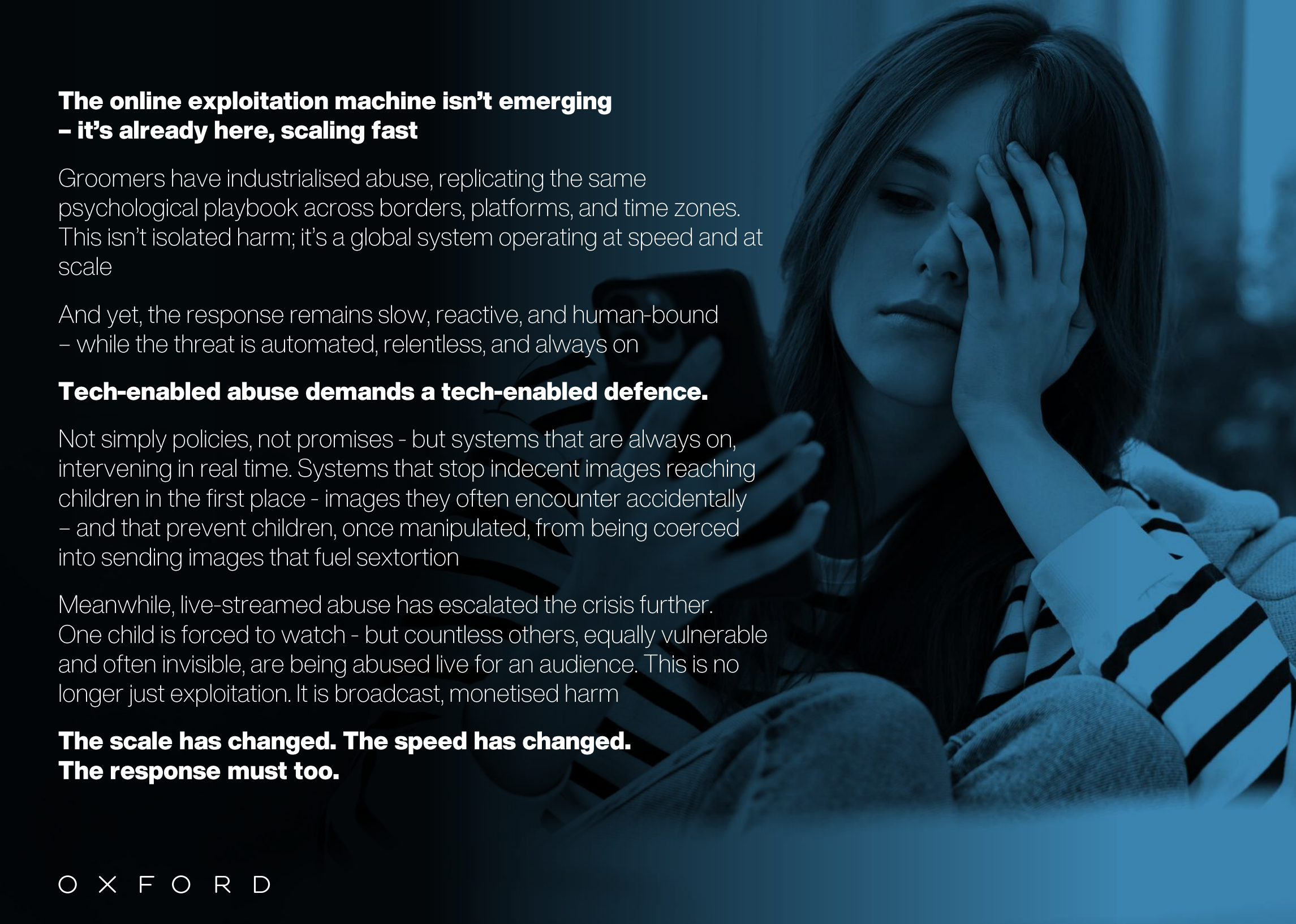
And, for some, debts are deliberately created - locking them into exploitation

This is not opportunistic crime. It is systematic targeting of vulnerability.

The Crest Advisory review of County Lines in 2020 nails the risk:



Looked after children are disproportionately represented in county lines networks. The 'traditional' model of county lines involves gangs grooming and exploiting looked after children from care settings. When looked after children are placed in settings at distance from their home area, or in unregulated settings, their vulnerability to exploitation is amplified.



**The online exploitation machine isn't emerging
– it's already here, scaling fast**

Groomers have industrialised abuse, replicating the same psychological playbook across borders, platforms, and time zones. This isn't isolated harm; it's a global system operating at speed and at scale

And yet, the response remains slow, reactive, and human-bound – while the threat is automated, relentless, and always on

Tech-enabled abuse demands a tech-enabled defence.

Not simply policies, not promises – but systems that are always on, intervening in real time. Systems that stop indecent images reaching children in the first place – images they often encounter accidentally – and that prevent children, once manipulated, from being coerced into sending images that fuel sextortion

Meanwhile, live-streamed abuse has escalated the crisis further. One child is forced to watch – but countless others, equally vulnerable and often invisible, are being abused live for an audience. This is no longer just exploitation. It is broadcast, monetised harm

**The scale has changed. The speed has changed.
The response must too.**

Online... Built to connect. Used to hunt and exploit.

Child exploitation is no longer confined to physical spaces. It has moved online – becoming more coercive, more remote, and more scalable.

In 2024, 51,672 online child sexual abuse offences were recorded - accounting for 42% of all child sexual exploitation cases. Behind these figures is a relentless, always-on threat.

Police recorded 38,685 offences involving child sexual abuse images in England and Wales in 2023/24 - an average of 106 every single day. Where platforms were identified, around half of cases involved Snapchat, underscoring how mainstream apps are being used to facilitate abuse.

The scale is expanding. The Internet Watch Foundation identified 291,273 webpages containing indecent images of children in 2024 - a 6% rise in just one year. Each page can host multiple images and videos, often involving multiple victims.

A disturbing shift is accelerating this growth: the rise of “self-generated” abuse. Up to 92% of identified imagery now involves children being coerced, manipulated, or deceived into creating sexual content of themselves.

Perpetrators do not need to be physically present. They direct abuse remotely - through screens, messages, and live interactions - turning devices into tools of control.

This is no longer isolated offending. It is industrialised. Globalised. In 2024, 62% of webpages hosting such material were traced to EU countries, spread across dedicated abuse forums, file-sharing networks, image-hosting services, and even mainstream platforms. Increasingly, this illegal content is not hidden in dark corners - it is embedded within the everyday infrastructure of the internet.

The result is a system where abuse can be produced, distributed, and consumed at scale - faster, cheaper, and harder to stop than ever before.

Sextortion is not an emerging threat - it is escalating fast, and children are already paying the price.

The UK's National Crime Agency received 380 reports in 2024, while police were handling well over 100 cases every month involving under-18s. In just six months, reports rose by nearly 20%. And the trajectory is steepening. IWF noted a 70% surge in cases in 2025, with hundreds of children needing direct counselling support.

This is not random. It is targeted, systematic, and ruthlessly effective.

Boys are being disproportionately hunted - making up 97% of confirmed child sextortion victims. Offenders exploit speed, shame, and scale: posing as girls, pushing for instant image exchanges, and running mass scams against hundreds of children at once. Victims are manipulated into sending images quickly - then coerced into paying to stop exposure.

And the threat is evolving again.

AI is now amplifying abuse - generating hyper-realistic images, manipulating real children's likenesses, and multiplying exploitative content at scale. What once required time and access can now be manufactured instantly.

Vulnerable children are at even greater risk. Those in care, or those who appear isolated or in need of connection, are actively sought out. Groomers embed themselves on social media, gaming platforms, and messaging apps - posing as peers, building trust, and then turning that trust into exploitation.

This is not opportunistic crime. It is engineered, adaptive, and accelerating.

And it is happening now.

In summary, looked after children go through life with a target on their backs

They are already among the most traumatised

They continue to face unacceptable outcomes

Now risks are intensified by screen time harms to their wellbeing and online threats - grooming, sextortion, and harmful content

They do not just face the same online risks as their peers - they are singled out for harm and abuse

They face risks more often, more intensely, and with far greater odds of harm. What may be a passing threat for other children can, for them, escalate into serious and lasting damage, compounding vulnerabilities they already carry

Yet more is on the horizon

AI-driven deep fakes. Synthetic CSAM. Impersonation and weaponised persuasion. Sextortion with fast shame-pressure cycles. Addictive by design apps. Privacy by default. AI-scaled cybercrime and identity theft

Providing looked after children with stronger protection is not optional. It is the minimum required to improve their life chances



In summary- it's risk multiplied

For looked after children most safeguarding risks are magnified through abusers targeting...

1. vulnerable children, particularly those in residential accommodation
2. children made vulnerable through circumstance or need – need for love, for attention, to be made to feel special and wanted, need for money, gift, alcohol or drugs
3. children with trauma making them more susceptible

Risk area

Problematic screen time affects all children, but for children in care compounds stress and disrupts education further.

Grooming for abuse heightened by looked-after children's existing insecurities and need for attention.

Going missing a key red flag of vulnerability for children in care, often preceding and accelerating further abuse.

Online grooming targets looked-after children through profiles and posts that signal vulnerability or neediness.

Placement instability via contact - unique to children in care - places strain on the child, foster parents, and carers.

Top 20 phone-mediated harms for looked after child

Physical health risks – obesity, musculoskeletal, cardio-vascular, eye strain

Sleep disruption and displacement

Attention and engagement impairment

Compulsive use & behavioural addiction

Mental issues – anxiety, depression

Child sexual abuse in person

Child gang grooming, rape and exploitation

Child trafficking and exploitation

Criminal grooming for county lines, drug running and other crimes

Missing school

Meeting with abusers

Accelerating sexual/criminal activity

Indecent image receipt or exchange

Sextortion

Live streaming

Viewing pornography

Set up for in-person abuse – sexual or criminal

Unmediated contact with a birth parent

Unmediated contact with other family

Undesirable contacts

Against this is the stark reality of phone policy

Schools have clear, national guidance on mobile phones. Children's care homes - housing the most vulnerable and traumatised young people - do not

There is no dedicated policy. No single rule. No clear line

Ofsted does not regulate smartphones directly.

Instead, they are buried across four separate standards. This is a dangerous gap

At the same time, the inspection framework is shifting.

New Ofsted priorities for 2025/26 are designed to deliver placement stability and the management of complex needs - both areas where smartphones play a critical and often unregulated role: Unmonitored communication. Increased risk of children going missing. Exposure to exploitation and abuse

And yet, there is still no clear national guidance.

Worse still, ambiguity around a child's "right" to a phone - and associated risks - may deter providers from taking on the most complex placements

The system is asking homes to manage one of the biggest modern safeguarding risks ... without giving them the tools, clarity, or authority to do it properly ... or the data that informs standards.

No wonder they shy away from children with complex needs



Protected in school. Abandoned in care.

There has been no law banning phones in schools - because one has not been needed. Over 90% of schools already restrict them using existing powers.

The government has made its stance clear: schools should be phone-free by default. Guidance issued in 2024 sets the expectation...

Phones handed in at the start of the day.

Locked in lockers or phone pouches.

“Never seen, never heard” policies.

Phones banned from school premises.

The risks are real.

40% of students report being exposed to distressing content during the school day - often via another student’s phone.

64% say phones distract them from real-life interaction.

31% believe their GCSE results would have been higher without them.

Education leaders are unequivocal: phones fuel bullying, disrupt learning, damage mental health, and amplify social pressure.

There is official phone Guidance for schools but no such guidance about mobile phones for care facilities.

Neither does Ofsted have an evaluation specific for phones.

Instead, inspections check that services consider smartphones under 4 NMS Standards:

Standard 4: Safeguarding children.

Standard 9: Promoting & supporting contact.

Standard 3: Promoting positive behaviour and relationships.

Standard 5: Children missing from care.

Ofsted framework effectively treats phones as part of “**safeguarding and contact management**” rather than as a standalone regulatory issue.

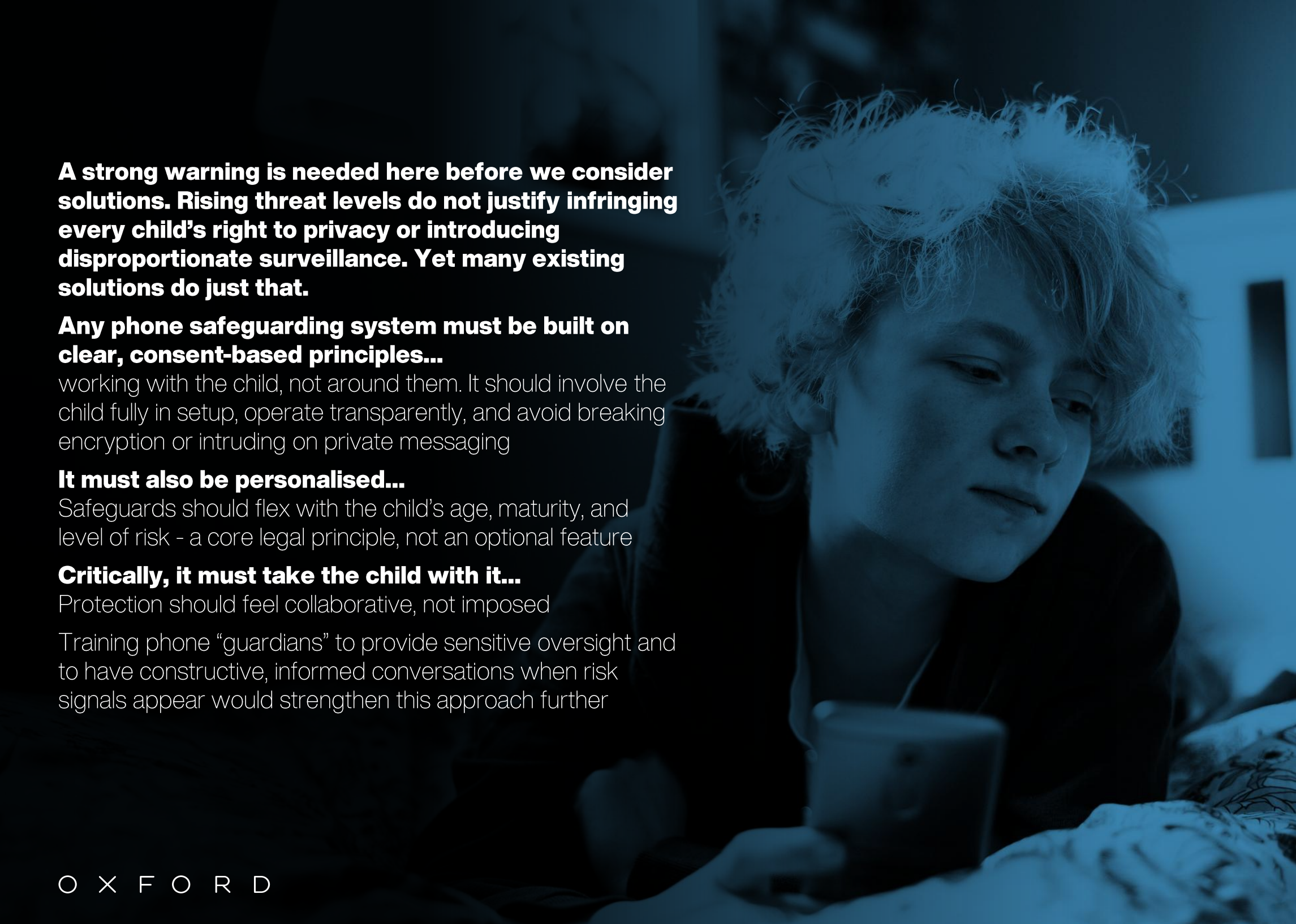
2025/26 changes to social care inspections are underway. There are two outcomes with high relevance to smartphone provision:

Stability of placements and relationships.

This requires evaluation of factors that affect stability. Role of the smartphone in unregulated communications, children going missing and abuse should come into play.

Defining complex needs.

The child’s rights to a phone and the role of the smartphone in monitoring these children could affect willingness of providers to take on a more challenging placement.

A young person with curly hair is shown in profile, looking down at a smartphone held in their hands. The scene is dimly lit, with a strong blue tint. The person is wearing a dark top. The background is out of focus, showing what appears to be a bed or a piece of furniture.

A strong warning is needed here before we consider solutions. Rising threat levels do not justify infringing every child's right to privacy or introducing disproportionate surveillance. Yet many existing solutions do just that.

Any phone safeguarding system must be built on clear, consent-based principles...

working with the child, not around them. It should involve the child fully in setup, operate transparently, and avoid breaking encryption or intruding on private messaging

It must also be personalised...

Safeguards should flex with the child's age, maturity, and level of risk - a core legal principle, not an optional feature

Critically, it must take the child with it...

Protection should feel collaborative, not imposed

Training phone "guardians" to provide sensitive oversight and to have constructive, informed conversations when risk signals appear would strengthen this approach further

Safeguarding. Not spying.

Many current solutions are a risk to children's rights and privacy. Any smartphone for looked after children must preserve the Rights of the Child enshrined in law and meet every Deprivation of Liberty (DoL) safeguard... without question.

Phone safeguards that are generally allowed

These safeguarding controls do not normally amount to deprivation of liberty if they are proportionate.

Courts have indicated these can fall within parental responsibility or safeguarding powers if they are necessary to protect the child:

- Monitoring phone use with safeguarding apps
- Limiting data, credit, or WiFi access
- Turning internet access off at night
- Removing the phone temporarily (e.g., bedtime)
- Checking device activity for safety concerns
- Restricting harmful social media contact

DoL risks when designing safeguard systems

For a situation to be considered a deprivation of liberty, three conditions are generally examined:

Time: Confinement or restriction for more than a negligible period

Consent: The child has not consented or cannot consent

State involvement (e.g., school, care provider, local authority).

Controls which could create legal risk if too restrictive or coercive:

Using force/constraint to remove a phone from a child

Continuous surveillance of communications

Excessive monitoring may breach Article 8 privacy rights if it is not proportionate. e.g., Recording and logging all calls or messages without clear safeguarding justification.

Blocking contact with family or support networks

Safeguards that stop communication with parents or trusted contacts may interfere with family life rights.

Restrictions forming part of a wider confinement regime

Even if phone controls alone are not DoL, they could contribute to one if combined with constant supervision and other restrictions.

State-imposed restrictions without legal authority.

If the system is used by schools, care homes, or local authorities, restrictions must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate.

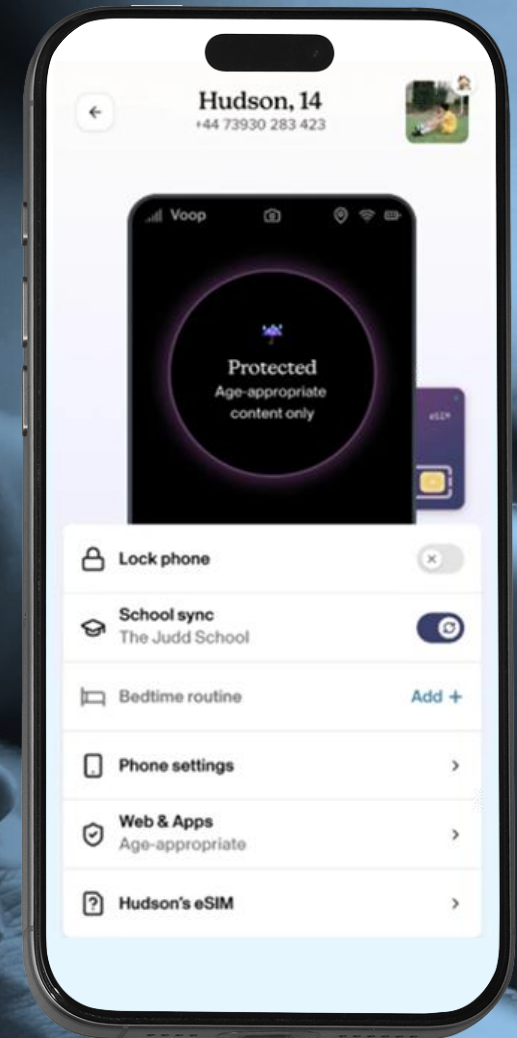
The solution? Looked after children must be afforded enhanced, specialist protection to address the demonstrably higher threats to their health and wellbeing and distinct risks facilitated by digital and mobile technologies

This protection must be mandated through robust state guidance, specific oversight of that guidance, and the deployment of advanced, child-centred technological solutions

It must be precisely tailored to each child's circumstances, needs, expressed views, and assessed level of risk so their rights are fully respected

In short, our ambition must be to transform the smartphone from a conduit of harm into a frontline instrument of protection and developmental asset

In doing so, it should actively reduce the systemic costs of safeguarding by dramatically driving down missing episodes, placement instability, carer attrition, and the escalating burden on policing resources



An ecosystem. Not an object.

Meeting the safeguarding ambitions set out in this White Paper requires far more than placing a device in a child's hand. **It demands a fully integrated smartphone ecosystem** - one that actively protects, rather than passively exposes. It must combine intelligent technology, oversight, and accountability to create a protective environment around the child while empowering carers and professionals with the tools, visibility, and control they need to act decisively.

The smartphone becomes more than hardware. It is a coordinated system of protection - designed around the child.

Smartphone technical specification

Phone agnostic. Workable on iOS and android. To gain acceptance by teens in particular needs an Apple compatible offer

Ability to personalise

Barring danger apps and stop them being loaded by the child

Barring numbers and signalling locations which present a danger

Setting access time and bedtime for uninterrupted sleep and healthy use

In-use facilities

Remote on/off switching

Identifying unsafe profile or practices deemed by Ofcom to be 'risky'

Location finding without the dog-leg of consulting the system operator so police can locate a missing child fast

Detecting unusual patterns of use using AI to spot early stages of grooming, potential groomer contacts or use of a second phone

Camera disabling if needed

Stopping indecent images being sent to the child or by them

Identifying risky content that invites harm to the child

Preventing potential livestreaming and pornography viewing

AND stopping a child from circumventing agreed safeguards (learning from the Australian experience)

Smartphone operational protocols

Exemplary and transparent contracting with each child.

No breaking of encryption and similar threats to a child's privacy e.g., on time restrictions, what is barred in contact numbers or apps, use of location finding etc. This must not make the child feel penalised. Any exclusions e.g., contact with birth parent, must be explained.

Default setting, if used to help scale phone set up, must be age appropriate and capable of personalisation.

Phone hand over accompanied by education for the child, both age and gender appropriate, to help them spot grooming and unsafe practices

Outstanding protocols for the guardian in the phone set up process and having productive conversations when warning signals occur.

A monitoring system which is efficient, effective and DoL compliant.

Recovery protocol, ideally agreed with police for finding missing children, aligned with the Philomena protocol

Feedback mechanisms to ensure both child and guardian are satisfied

Data provision e.g. to help police with identifying risk hot-spots and in evidence for prosecution; Meta data for the provider or children's home to aid Ofsted inspection; Data for the guardian to help reporting. Meta data to fill gaps in understanding how looked after children use phones to innovate in safety procedures.

We began with the observation that a safeguarding smartphone system offers a rare window into behaviour providing insight akin to uncovering a hidden “secret life,” revealing patterns and risks at the system level that would otherwise remain unseen

We end with data-driven insight - the unique ability for the smartest of smartphones to fill the gaps in understanding the relationship between looked after children, their smartphone behaviour and harms they face ...

Their phone behaviour ... what's safe and what isn't

AI-enabled prediction of harms - existing and new

Controlling unmediated risky calls for benefit of child and carer

Their screen time to avoid harmful levels

Indecent imagery and how to disrupt it

How grooming works and can be stopped in its tracks

Predicting missing episodes

Slashing time to find a missing child

Helping refine police missing child and abuse protocols

Recording data to make reporting easier. More insightful



O X F O R D

About Oxford

OxfordSM is a consultancy that for 45 years, has worked at the point where human behaviour meets change that sticks. Based both in the UK and USA, we have built our reputation on a simple belief: **nothing changes until people change**. Strategies, systems and policies succeed when people want to change and believe that they can. That conviction helps organisations create change that lasts, not just that looks good on paper.

For more than two decades, we have carried that expertise beyond the private sector into public service. Across countless projects in both the public and third sectors, we have applied the same rigorous insight into human behaviour to tackle complex social challenges with empathy, clarity and measurable impact.

Oxford is a certified B Corp

We believe organisations should leave the world in better shape than they found it, balancing people, planet, and profit.

Every year, we apply our expertise and invest in initiatives across UK, USA and beyond that reflect those values.

In 2025, Oxford undertook a pro bono review of the UK care sector. What we uncovered was impossible to ignore. Behind the statistics were children living with extraordinary vulnerability, facing risks and outcomes no young person should endure. The experience did more than inform us. It sparked a determination to contribute meaningfully to the health, safety, happiness and wellbeing of children in care and beyond it.

It led to this 2026 review

Our brief was ambitious: to use evidence to define independently what an ideal safeguarding phone system should look like and the role it could play in protecting looked after children.

We combined lessons learned from previous work in the sector with Oxford's deep expertise in telecommunications and insight tools that understand how people behave, decide, adapt.

Our conclusions are data-informed and insight-led.

We accessed thousands of documents, reports and academic studies to understand the realities of life for looked after children - their vulnerabilities, their relationships with technology and the role smartphones now play in both risk and resilience.

We learned from safeguarding models within the US care system, independently reviewed Voop research and piloting, and tested our key assumptions with experts across government, policing, third sector and care providers to formulate a way forward for the UK.

The opportunity to change lives

Oxford's sincere hope is that this work becomes more than simply words on paper. We hope it becomes a catalyst. A way to reduce the extraordinary number of looked after children who go missing. To interrupt abuse before it escalates. To give young people safer access to the digital world while reducing pressure on carers and support teams. Most importantly, we hope it helps looked after children feel something they are too rarely given - a sense of control, dignity and safety in their own lives.

Every child deserves our protection. They deserve to thrive.

O X F O R D

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