

# Consultation: Exploring the feasibility of a survey measuring child abuse in the UK

21 January to 30 April 2021



# Contents

<b>Overview</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>General information</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>How to respond</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Confidentiality and data protection</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Consultation details</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Questions</b>	<b>9</b>

## Overview

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has published an [article](#) presenting findings to date on whether a new survey to measure the current prevalence of child abuse in the UK could be effective.

The article provides information on why we are doing a feasibility study, the aims of the study, the research questions explored and our approach to answering these. For each research question we also present a summary of our findings to date along with recommended next steps. The key aim of the article is to share our findings and proposals so far for you to let us know whether the aspects important to you have been considered, whether you support the recommendations made and whether the proposed survey would meet your needs.

This document provides further explanation around the aims of the consultation, a summary of the key findings and proposals presented in the article and a list of the consultation questions in full.

# General information

## Why we are consulting

The purpose of this consultation is to invite feedback to inform a feasibility study exploring whether a new survey to measure the current prevalence of child abuse in the UK could be successful.

## Consultation details

**Issued:** 21/01/2021

**Respond by:** 30/04/2021

### Enquiries to:

**Email:** [ons.consultations@ons.gov.uk](mailto:ons.consultations@ons.gov.uk)

**Phone:** 0845 601 3034

### Audiences:

This consultation will be of interest to anyone with an interest in child protection and child protection policy.

### Territorial extent:

This consultation relates to the UK.

## After the consultation

We will publish a summary of the comments made approximately 12 weeks after the consultation closes.

## How to respond

We encourage you to respond online wherever possible when submitting responses as this is our preferred method of receiving responses.

However, responses in writing or via email submitted to the below addresses will also be accepted. Should you wish to submit your main response via the e-Consultation platform and any supporting information via hard copy or email, please be clear that this is part of the same consultation response.

**Respond online at:** <https://consultations.ons.gov.uk/external-affairs/child-abuse-survey-consultation>

**Email to:** [ons.consultations@ons.gov.uk](mailto:ons.consultations@ons.gov.uk)

When responding, please state whether you are responding as an individual or representing the views of an organisation. Your response will be most useful if it is framed in direct response to the questions posed, though further comments and evidence are also welcome.

## Accessibility

All material relating to this consultation can be provided in braille, large print or audio formats on request. British Sign Language interpreters can also be requested for any supporting events.

## Confidentiality and data protection

ONS may contact you in the future to discuss your response regarding this consultation or to contact you about other consultations. Please let us know if you do not want to receive these communications by emailing [ons.consultations@ons.gov.uk](mailto:ons.consultations@ons.gov.uk).

We would like to know as much as possible about what you think of ONS and our proposals. We aim to be as open and transparent as possible, so we will publish an anonymised summary of the responses to this consultation – comments will not be attributed to specific organisations or individuals. We will list all of the organisations that participated in this consultation. As a public authority ONS is subject to the Freedom of Information Act, and while we would never voluntarily release personal information from responses to this consultation we are not able to provide a guarantee of confidentiality. Please see our [privacy notice](#) for full details of how we will handle your data.

## Quality assurance

This consultation has been carried out in accordance with the government's consultation principles, available here <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance>.

If you have any complaints about the way this consultation has been conducted, please email: [ons.consultations@ons.gov.uk](mailto:ons.consultations@ons.gov.uk).

## Consultation details

Child abuse is an appalling crime and can have a lasting effect, with research suggesting that outcomes can be experienced in the short-term and the long-term following abuse. In recent years, numerous reports of non-recent child sexual abuse in particular have come to light, highlighting cases unidentified for many years, and therefore children who did not receive appropriate support at the time. Since then, the issue of child abuse has risen up the social policy agenda. This led to the establishment of an Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) and numerous policy interventions to both tackle and prevent child abuse.

In September 2015, the National Statistician's Crime Statistics Advisory Committee established a Child Abuse Statistics Task and Finish Group to make recommendations for improvements to the official statistics. One of the group's main recommendations was that government should commission a new UK-wide prevalence study of all forms of abuse and neglect of children to establish a reliable time series of data.

Given there is no single source reporting the current scale of child abuse in the UK, we do not know how many children are experiencing abuse today therefore it's vital that statistics are improved to help measure the current prevalence of child abuse. A national prevalence survey would provide crucial information that would be widely used by policy makers, service providers,

and practitioners to hopefully, over time help reduce the prevalence of child abuse, and improve the experience of victims.

ONS are conducting a feasibility study to explore whether a new survey to measure the current extent and nature of child abuse in the UK could be effective. The aim of the feasibility study to date has been to determine whether there is enough evidence to support that a prevalence survey could be successful and that there would be value in conducting a pilot survey. We have explored user needs for such a survey and possible design options to determine whether it would be feasible to achieve.

To do this we have focused on four areas:

- what a survey of child abuse should cover
- what a suitable methodological approach would be
- ethical procedures
- the accuracy and reliability of data that could be collected by such a survey

The feasibility study has been separated into two phases:

- phase one – includes carrying out research to determine whether a survey could be successful (including desk research, literature reviews, stakeholder engagement and qualitative research)
- phase two – includes designing the survey methodology, designing and testing questions and conducting a pilot survey

Based on our research to date in phase one we have not found evidence that a UK survey to measure child abuse would be infeasible. Our findings suggest that in order to be successful a survey should:

- be broad in coverage and cover six types of abuse: neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, child exploitation and exposure to domestic violence or abuse

- ask about lifetime and past year experiences of abuse
- interview children aged 11 to 17 years and young adults aged 18 to 25 years
- take place in schools for children aged 11 to 15 years
- sample schools from each of the UK country school censuses
- be self-completed electronically
- be relatively large, with a minimum of 45,000 respondents needed to produce useful estimates
- allow parents to remove their child from being included
- be partially anonymous and adopt a flagging safeguarding procedure, which would be used to assess the level of risk a child is in and apply different levels of safeguarding depending on the circumstances of the abuse disclosed
- be framed as a survey of child safety

However, we have identified some important areas that would need further investigation before a conclusion can be made on whether a survey could be successful. The main areas that would need to be explored further are:

- whether children or young adults with experiences of abuse would agree to take part in a survey of this nature
- whether parents or guardians who have children with known experiences of abuse would give permission for their child to take part in a survey of this nature
- whether schools would be willing to participate in a survey of this nature
- whether children or young adults can recall experiences of abuse
- whether children or young adults with experiences of abuse would report these in a survey

To address these, we are looking to complete further qualitative research to understand the views of young people aged 18 to 25 years and children aged 11 to 17 years with past experience of abuse, as well as parents or guardians of such children. The research should also include engaging with teachers



and head teachers to understand their views on schools participating in a survey of this nature.

If the conclusions to these questions support the feasibility of a child abuse survey and resource is available, there are several other areas that would subsequently need further investigation as part of phase two.

Research would need to be carried out to understand:

- how the survey could be inclusive of those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), which would allow us to understand whether extra processes or mechanisms could be put in place to include this group
- how and if the survey could include those aged 16 to 25 years, such as the sampling frame and method, the mode of the survey and appropriate safeguarding procedures
- whether all countries in the UK could be included

Phase two of the feasibility study would also involve determining:

- the question wording and questionnaire design, including cognitive testing
- the design of the safeguarding flagging system
- the logistics of how the survey would be completed by children in schools
- the sampling method to select schools, children and young adults to participate and sample sizes needed for each
- the design and operation of a pilot survey

The purpose of this consultation is to gain feedback on the proposals presented from phase one of the research and our next steps from anyone with an interest in child protection and child protection policy. All feedback is invited and appreciated; we value all perspectives.

We have plans to continue work on phase one of the feasibility study and, provided the further qualitative research needed is completed, we aim to

make a conclusion on the overall feasibility and publish our findings, along with our response to the consultation, in summer 2021.

For this decision it's crucial we understand your needs for a survey and we want to invite your views on our proposed recommendations for what a survey could look like. We have also outlined next steps and further research that would form part of phase two of the study, should we proceed, which we welcome feedback on.

The questions that are asked in the consultation are included in an annex below but broadly, the types of feedback that would be particularly useful are:

- what the need for improved statistics to understand the prevalence and nature of child abuse in the UK is
- what the impact of not having this data would be
- whether the proposed survey includes the elements that you feel are important and would meet your needs
- whether there are any important considerations missing from phase one or from the plans for phase two that should be explored in the research

The main publication should be used to provide the information to help you to comment on the proposals. This document summarises the key recommendations and proposals that we are seeking feedback on.

## Questions

### Questions for the general public

- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very unhappy and 5 is very happy, how happy or unhappy are you with the concept of a survey as a way to measure the current prevalence of child abuse?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very unhappy and 5 is very happy, how happy or unhappy are you with the proposed survey as a way to measure the current prevalence of child abuse?

- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all important and 5 is very important, how important is it that survey data on the current prevalence of child abuse is collected?
- How would you want others to use data collected from a prevalence survey?
- What do you like about the proposed survey?
- What don't you like about the proposed survey?
- The proposed survey would cover six types of abuse; neglect, physical, emotional, sexual, child exploitation and exposure to domestic violence or abuse. What specific types of abuse within these do you think should be included?
- What additional information about a prevalence survey would you need to increase your support for it?
- Do you have any other comments?

## Questions for decision or policy makers

- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very unhappy and 5 is very happy, how happy or unhappy are you with the concept of a survey as a way to measure the current prevalence of child abuse?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very unhappy and 5 is very happy, how happy or unhappy are you with the proposed survey as a way to measure the current prevalence of child abuse?
- To what extent do you feel the proposed survey would meet your needs?  
(completely, to some extent or not at all)
- In what ways does the proposed survey meet or not meet your needs?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all important and 5 is very important, how important is it that survey data on the current prevalence of child abuse is collected?
- If a survey was not implemented, what would the impact of this be to you, and more generally?

- What additional information about a prevalence survey would you need to increase your support for it?
- The proposed survey would cover six types of abuse; neglect, physical, emotional, sexual, child exploitation and exposure to domestic violence or abuse. What specific types of abuse within these do you think should be included?
- The proposed survey would focus on capturing lifetime and past year experiences of abuse, which may result in less scope for collecting detailed information on the nature of abuse. To what extent would this meet your needs? (completely, to some extent, not at all)
- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all important and 5 is very important, how important is it to you that a prevalence survey includes children aged 16 and 17?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all important and 5 is very important, how important is it to you that a prevalence survey includes young adults (from age 18)?
- What are your views on the proposed lower age limit of 11 and upper age limit of 25?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 is not at all important and 5 is very important, how important is it to you that a prevalence survey covers the whole of the UK?
- Do you have any other comments on the proposed survey's coverage?
- Do you have any other comments on the proposed survey's methodology?
- Do you have any other comments on the proposed survey's ethical procedures?
- How often should a prevalence survey be carried out to meet your needs?
- Do you have any other comments?

## Questions for:

- people who work with or represent children, or have experience of working with those who have experienced abuse as a child
- researchers with an interest or expertise in using data and statistics to research children and young people

All questions for decision or policy makers plus these additional questions:

- The proposed survey would be completed by children under 16 in a school environment, what additional considerations should be taken into account or researched around how a survey should be conducted in schools?
- What additional evidence or further research should be considered around whether schools would be willing to participate in a prevalence survey?
- We need to conduct further research into whether children and young people would be willing to participate in the proposed survey, and whether they would be able to recall, or willing to report, instances of abuse. What additional evidence or considerations should we take into account when exploring this?
- We need to conduct further research into whether parents or guardians would give permission for their child to take part in the proposed survey, what additional evidence or considerations should we take into account when exploring this?
- The proposed survey would be framed as a child safety survey, what do you think about this?
- The proposed survey would not be completely anonymous, what do you think about this?
- The proposed survey would implement a flagging safeguarding procedure which would be used to assess the level of risk a child is in and apply different levels of safeguarding depending on the

circumstances of the abuse disclosed. What additional factors should be considered in the design of a flagging procedure?

- Which key referral services do you think should be included within our opt-in support option and safeguarding flagging procedure?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very unhappy and 5 is very happy, how happy or unhappy are you with older children and young adults completing a prevalence survey online?
- What factors should be considered in determining the survey mode for older children (aged 16 and 17) and young adults who would not complete the survey in a school environment?
- What additional research questions should be investigated, or further research should be carried out before making a conclusion on whether a prevalence survey would be feasible?
- If the conclusion to phase one of the study supports the feasibility of a child abuse survey, there are several other areas which would require further investigation before a pilot survey could begin (see 'More Information' for details). What other areas should be considered in phase two?

## Questions for analysts with survey expertise

All questions for:

- decision or policy makers
- people who work with or represent children, or have experience of working with those who have experience abuse as a child
- researchers with an interest or expertise in using data and statistics to research children and young people

plus the additional question:

- Findings on whether a representative sample of children aged 16 and 17 and young adults aged 18 to 25 can be achieved are so far

inconclusive. What additional sampling frame options could be explored in the next steps?

## Additional questions for all

Understanding the views of people who have experienced abuse as a child is important to us and we know that some people may want to share their experiences. The final section of the consultation includes a question on whether you have any personal experience of abuse as a child.

You may find being asked this question upsetting. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to. **Please skip this final section if you do not wish to continue to these questions, or answer 'prefer not to say' for any questions you are not comfortable with.**

Information on support services and how to contact them is listed at the end of the consultation should you wish to seek help and advice after completing this consultation.

We want to understand the views of both people who have or have not experienced abuse as a child.

- Have you any personal experience of abuse as a child?
- Do you know someone personally who has experience of abuse as a child?
- Is there anything else you want to tell us that you think would be helpful for us to consider



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