ASSESSING THE RISK, PROTECTING THE CHILD

VIEWS OF THE MEN AND PROTECTIVE PARENTS/CARERS ASSESSED

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Impact and Evidence series

This report is part of the NSPCC’s Impact and Evidence series, which presents the findings of the Society’s research into its services and interventions. Many of the reports are produced by the NSPCC’s Evaluation department, but some are written by other organisations commissioned by the Society to carry out research on its behalf. The aim of the series is to contribute to the evidence base of what works in preventing cruelty to children and in reducing the harm it causes when abuse does happen.
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Assessing the Risk, Protecting the Child (ARPC) is an NSPCC service that assesses men who may be a risk to children. Social workers who are worried about a child use the service to see if the man is a danger, and whether the parent/carer can keep the child safe from harm. The NSPCC workers also speak to the child to check how they are feeling about things at home. They then write a report about whether they think the child is safe and give it to the social worker.

This report looks at what the men and parents/carers who used the service thought about it. This was done by interviewing them after they had been seen by the NSPCC.

The interviews showed that:

• The men and parents/carers found the things they talked about with NSPCC staff hard. Some of them thought the NSPCC worker had tried to make it easier for them to talk and helped them if they got upset. Others felt they needed more help if they got upset when they went home after the sessions.

• Some men and parents/carers agreed with everything the report said about them. Others thought that some of the things they said had not been written down properly in the report. They thought that the meetings with the NSPCC should be recorded to make sure you can check what has been said.

• Sometimes the reports were long and could be hard to understand. Men and parents/carers found them easier to understand if the NSPCC worker explained what had been written. Not everyone had time to read the report and talk about it before it was used at a meeting. The NSPCC is now looking at how it can make sure everyone understands the report.

• Some men and parents/carers thought they had learnt new things about how to keep their children safe, and that it helped having someone to talk to. Others did not think the meetings with the NSPCC had helped them.

• Sometimes the reports suggested other services that could help the men and parents/carers. Not everyone was able to get this help if it cost too much money or you had to wait a long time to be seen. The NSPCC is now starting to run some new services that may help more people.
KEY FINDINGS

Assessing the Risk, Protecting the Child (ARPC) is an NSPCC service that assesses men who pose a sexual risk to children and are not in the criminal justice system. The service includes an assessment of the man deemed to be a risk as well as the capacity of the non-abusing parent/carer to protect the child, and the views and wishes of the children involved. The service has been delivered at nine NSPCC sites since 2011.

The views of the men and protective parents/carers who have been assessed and the implications for further service development are:

• Although men and protective parents/carers felt that NSPCC assessors had explained the purpose of the assessment clearly at the start of the process, some felt that it had changed over time, or that the man’s historical convictions predetermined its outcome. Assessors should therefore reiterate the nature of the assessment throughout the process and make it very clear that they may have a different view on risk levels to that of the men and protective parents/carers involved.

• The men and protective parents/carers found the topics discussed in the sessions difficult to talk about. Some felt that the practitioners had tried to make the process as comfortable as possible and given the support they needed to cope with the sessions. Others felt that the assessors had not understood their background or culture, or prejudged them. It is not known if these views are a reflection of differences in practitioner style affecting the assessment dynamics. However, the learning points from these interviews should be built into future training and discussed in staff supervision and mentoring meetings.

• Some participants agreed with the assessment report and recommendations and felt it reflected everything discussed in the sessions. Others disagreed with the report and felt the information they had given had been taken out of context or misinterpreted. Men and protective parents/carers should therefore be given regular feedback throughout the assessment to minimise the risk of unexpected surprises at the end of the process. Report conclusions and recommendations should also link back to the things the men or protective parents/carers have actually said, and to the men’s known previous behaviours.

• There were variations in how the assessment report had been shared with those assessed. Some participants found it difficult to see their life history in writing and thought the report was lengthy and hard to digest. They had benefited from having time with the NSPCC practitioner to discuss it and give their feedback. Others
had not been given much time to read the report before it was used at a conference meeting, and did not get a chance to give feedback or discuss the content with the practitioner. The way in which reports are shared with those assessed is currently being reviewed by the steering group, but the NSPCC assessors should in any case ensure they use clear, simple verbal and written language.

- Some reports made recommendations about other support or services that would be useful for the men and their families. However, not all participants had been able to access this support, either because of long waiting lists or funding restrictions. The NSPCC Women as Protectors programme may help address the current lack of further support and guidance for protective parents/carers who need it.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

• It is believed that the majority of men who pose a sexual risk to children are not in the criminal justice system. Without specialist input, these men have often not been assessed or treated, yet they can be living with or have contact with children.

• The responsibility for assessing risk and making decisions about protecting children in these cases falls to children’s services departments. But staff in these departments do not always have the specialist skills or knowledge to conduct such assessments.

• The NSPCC commissioned the Sexual Behaviour Unit in Newcastle to develop a good practice guide for assessing men who are not in the criminal justice system. The assessments include the views of the children, the capacity to protect of the non-abusing parent/carer and an assessment of the man deemed to be a risk.

• The NSPCC has been conducting assessments using the guide at nine service centres since 2011.

Methodology

• This report focuses on the views of men and protective parents/carers who have been assessed by the service to understand more about their experience of the assessment and their views on the assessment report.

• Consent rates for taking part in an interview were not high, and there was further attrition as some of those who had initially agreed to be contacted about taking part in an interview later withdrew their consent.

• The final sample consisted of 26 telephone interviews with men and protective parents/carers who had been assessed. Despite the difficulties in contacting participants for the interviews, the sample was diverse in terms of where the assessment report was used, the decision taken as a result of the assessment, and views about the assessment process.

Key findings

• Participants were clear about the reason for and purpose of the assessment when the sessions started. However, some felt that it had changed over time when the recommendations in the assessment report were not what they had expected.
• Participants felt that NSPCC practitioners had been accommodating about setting up assessment sessions around their work and family commitments. Some felt that the assessment was done in an acceptable timeframe, but others felt it took too long, particularly if there had been delays in arranging follow-on meetings with children’s services.

• Some men accepted their partner being seen as part of the assessment; others felt that they should not have been made to take part, as they had not done anything wrong. Parents had mixed views about their child being seen as part of the assessment. Some thought it was good that the child’s thoughts were included. Others had concerns about the work and thought it might be upsetting for the child.

• Participants found at least some of the sessions difficult or embarrassing. Some felt that staff had tried to make the process as comfortable as possible and given them the support they needed. Others found the sessions stressful and did not feel they got the support they needed outside of the sessions.

• Participants found it easier to talk to the practitioner when they felt there was a good rapport, when the practitioner was open, honest and not judgmental, and they could go at their own pace and take breaks when needed. However, others found it difficult to talk to staff, especially if they felt the practitioner did not understand their background, culture or religion, or prejudged them. Some of the men assessed had found it difficult to talk to two female practitioners about their sexual behaviour.

• Some of the men questioned why the sessions had focused so much on their past convictions or behaviour and not on their current circumstances. Sometimes they had found it difficult to remember details from their past or had not understood all the terminology used in the sessions. Some participants felt that the questioning style in the sessions had drawn out details about their past, in a gentle way. Others had perceived the questioning as aggressive, particularly if they said something the practitioner did not agree with.

• Some participants agreed with the content of the assessment report and felt it was a thorough, fair document. It helped if the report only covered recommendations that the practitioner had already discussed with the service user. Others did not agree with the report and felt that the topics discussed had been taken out of context, or that things they said had been taken too literally. Some agreed with the factual information in the report, but not with the way it had been interpreted. Those who disagreed with content of the report felt strongly that the assessment sessions should be recorded to provide proof of what has actually been said.
• There was variation in how the assessment report had been shared with participants. Some had had a meeting to discuss the report with staff and give their feedback. Others felt they were not kept updated about the progress of the assessment. They had received the report from their solicitor, or just before a case conference meeting, which meant they had not had the opportunity to give comments on the report or to highlight any perceived inaccuracies. Some participants found it difficult to see their life history in writing. They needed more time to digest the long reports and did not always understand all the words.

• The assessment process could help participants be more open and discuss things as a family. However, some felt that nothing had changed as a result of the assessment process while for others, things had actually got worse, for example if their relationship had ended.

• For some of the men assessed, the sessions had helped them to confront their problems and understand more about the reasons for their behaviour. Protective parents/carers learnt more about the man’s behaviour, sexual abuse in general, and how to protect their children. It had also been useful to talk about their past experiences and how these affected their current relationships.

• Some parents felt that the work with children had been handled sensitively and it was helpful for the child to understand more about some of the changes that had gone on at home and to learn about protective behaviours. Other parents had concerns about how the sessions with children had been carried out and were worried about them being given information about the man’s behaviour.

• The assessment reports sometimes recommend other services or support for participants. Not everyone had been able to access these, however, due either to funding restrictions or long waiting lists.

• Some protective parents/carers had attended NSPCC educative programmes and had found these useful. Others had been told they could contact the NSPCC in the future if they wanted advice, which they found reassuring.

**Conclusion**

• Although participants said they had found the assessment sessions difficult or embarrassing, some also felt that the NSPCC assessors had made the process as comfortable as possible for them. However, others felt that they had not understood their background or culture, or had prejudged them. These findings should be built into future training sessions on carrying out assessments, and discussed in staff supervision and mentoring meetings.
• Some participants agreed that the assessment report was an accurate reflection of what had been discussed in the sessions and that the NSPCC assessors had already explained the recommendations to them before they saw the final report. However, others disagreed with the report and felt that the information they had given had been taken out of context or misinterpreted. Assessors should provide regular feedback during the assessment to avoid any unexpected surprises in the report. They should also ensure that the report conclusions and recommendations link back to the things the man or protective parent/carer has actually said, and to the man’s known previous behaviours.

• There were variations in the way the final report had been shared with participants. It was difficult for some of them to see their life history in writing, and the length of reports and language used made them difficult to digest. Some participants had met with a practitioner to go through the report and give their feedback. Others had been given a copy by their solicitor, or before a case conference meeting, and had not had the opportunity to go through it in detail or give their comments. The way in which reports are shared with men and protective parents/carers is currently being reviewed by the steering group.

• The learning from this report is being considered alongside the findings from the interviews with referring social workers and with NSPCC assessors who use the assessment guide. The steering group will consider what further changes need to be made to the service in light of these findings.
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Developing a new guide to assess men without convictions

There are approximately 30,000 registered sex offenders in England and Wales. However, some estimates put the proportion of sexual abuse incidents that are not reported as high as 95 per cent (NCIS, 2005). As a result it is believed that the majority of adults who pose a sexual risk to children are not in the criminal justice system. This includes persons who:

- have historical convictions (including those that predate the Sex Offences Act 1997) or are no longer subject to registration requirements
- have never been convicted of sexual offences against children but have a ‘finding of fact’ from a family court against them
- are alleged to be perpetrators of sexual abuse but have not been prosecuted due to insufficient evidence.

Without any specialist input from the criminal justice system, they have often not been assessed or received any treatment, yet they can be living with or having contact with children (Hebb, 2005, Fisher and Beech, 1998). Alongside the risk posed by the adult, it is also important to determine whether the protective parent or carer is aware of the risks posed and able to take the necessary action to protect the child. The responsibility for assessing risk and making decisions about the actions needed to protect children falls to local authority children’s services departments. However, staff in these departments do not always have the specialist skills and experience required to carry out such assessments.

Sexual offences can be committed by both men and women, but the focus of the NSPCC service has been on men who pose a sexual risk to children. The factors that need to be considered to assess risk and take protective action for children are well known (Craig et al, 2009), but few resources are available for assessing men without convictions. The NSPCC therefore commissioned the Sexual Behaviour Unit in Newcastle to bring together the existing research in this area and to develop a good practice guide for conducting such assessments. The guide Assessing the Risk: Protecting the Child –The Assessment of Men’s Sexual Risk in Child Protection Settings (NSPCC and Sexual Behaviour Unit, 2011) was written by the Sexual Behaviour Unit with additional
input from the NSPCC to ensure the views and wishes of children (obtained through ‘voice of the child’ work) were included in the assessment. The guide is aimed at local authority and voluntary sector social workers to assist them in undertaking assessments of the risk to children posed by a known or alleged adult male sex offender who is not in the criminal justice system.

The guide is based on the latest knowledge and best practice in sex offender assessment, drawing on cognitive behavioural therapy, attachment therapy and the Good Lives (Ward and Stewart, 2003) approach.

The assessments include the views of the children, the capacity to protect of the non-abusing parent or carer as well as the assessment of the man deemed to be a risk, and so focus on risk in a family context.

1.2 How we implemented the guide

The guide has been used by NSPCC practitioners since 2011 and is being delivered by nine teams across the UK. Another two teams who were initially delivering the service had to stop due to implementation problems – one because of a low number of referrals and the other because of difficulties encountered in running the service without experienced staff in post.

Referrals to the service are made by local authority children’s services departments. The assessments are undertaken through individual sessions with the man who poses a risk, the protective parent or carer, and the child or children involved. Other sources of evidence are also examined, for example previous social services case files. Usually about eight individual sessions are held with both the man and the protective parent or carer. In addition, approximately six hours of direct work are undertaken with each child included in the assessment. Sessions with the man and protective parents/carers are co-worked, but sessions with children are usually delivered on an individual basis.

The work is usually staggered: the assessment sessions start with the man; partway through his assessment, sessions start with the protective parent or carer, and then with the child, which means that it can take around four months to complete the assessment sessions and write the report. The assessment report will make recommendations about risk and actions needed to protect the child. This is given to the referrer and used to inform their decision making about the case. It is also shared with the men and protective parents/carers who have been assessed.
1.3 Using multiple data sources in service evaluation

The evaluation of the Assessing the Risk, Protecting the Child (ARPC) service is following both a qualitative and quantitative approach. In-depth interviews have been carried out with:

- NSPCC assessors, to seek their views on using the guide and how it could be improved
- referrers, to ascertain their views on the quality of the assessment reports and how these have been used to inform decision making
- the men and protective parents/carers who have been assessed, to explore their views on the process.

In addition to this qualitative part of the evaluation, quantitative data is being collected through surveys that investigate the views of men, protective parents/carers and children at the end of the assessment. A tracking exercise is also being completed for each assessment report to determine whether the suggested recommendations have been implemented, and what has happened as a result of the assessment. Data from these quantitative elements of the evaluation will be presented in the final evaluation report due for publication in October 2015.

This report focuses on the views of the men and protective parents/carers obtained through interviews.

1.4 Method

The interviews with the men and protective parents/carers were used to find out more about their experience of the assessment. The interviews focused on:

- the way assessors carried out the assessment
- how the participants experienced the assessment sessions and the factors that influenced this experience
- participants’ views on the final assessment report and the reasons for these views
- participants’ understanding of the impact the assessment had on them and their family.
1.5 Using practitioner knowledge to tailor the recruitment process

All men and protective parents/carers who were asked to take part in the evaluation. NSPCC practitioners informed the men and protective parents/carers of the evaluation at the start of the assessment process and asked for their consent to be contacted about taking part in an interview. Consent was discussed again at the end of the assessment process to check whether they had changed their mind.

Before contacting those who had given consent to be interviewed, the research team had an initial discussion with the practitioner who had carried out the assessment. This gave them some background information about how the participants had responded to the assessment, how they had felt at the end of the assessment process and any other issues the interviewer should be aware of, such as mental health concerns. In some cases, the practitioner was still in contact with the man or protective parent/carer – for example, at core group meetings (a regular meeting of family members and professionals when a child is on a child protection plan) – and would check if they still consented, asking when would be a good time for the research team to call. In other cases, the research team made direct contact with the man or protective parent/carer by telephone.

Interviewing started in October 2012 and finished in October 2014. Participants were offered either a face-to-face interview at the same venue that had been used for their assessment, or a telephone interview. Most participants preferred the latter, often straight away, rather than booking a future date. The initial face-to-face interviews that had been set up were not attended by participants and so a decision was taken to carry out all the interviews by telephone instead. Interview length ranged from 15 to 50 minutes.

1.6 Moving from opportunistic to purposive sampling strategies

Initially an opportunistic sampling strategy was adopted, with all those who had consented to an interview being interviewed, provided they could be contacted. During the last six months, the sampling strategy was more purposive, however, as only cases that would add to the diversity of the sample were approached for interview.
The final sample consisted of 26 interviews: 12 with men who had been assessed and 14 with protective parents/carers. Despite the research team only being able to sample towards the end of the interview period, the final sample was diverse in terms of:

- the service centre that carried out the assessment
- whether the team had previous experience of completing assessments
- where the assessment report was used (for example court proceedings or child protection conference)
- the relationship to the child of those assessed
- the decision made by children’s services as a result of the assessment
- the participants’ overall view of the assessment process.

The full characteristics of the sample can be found in Appendix 2.

Consent rates at the start of the assessment process to being contacted about taking part in an interview were 38 per cent of all men assessed and 33 per cent of all protective parents/carers. However, attrition caused by the factors shown in Table 1 resulted in only 12 men and 14 parents/carers actually taking part in interviews. Numerous attempts were made to contact the prospective participants, calling at different times of the day and evening and leaving phone or text messages for them. The reasons for not being able to interview included them:

- not being contactable by phone
- changing their mind about taking part in an interview
- agreeing to an interview, but then not being contactable at the agreed time.

Table 1 – Attrition between consent to interview and interview completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Protective parents/ carers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial consent to be contacted about an interview</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not approached as advised by practitioner case is too high risk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not approached as did not fit later sampling criteria</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed their mind about taking part</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unable to make contact</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreed to interview date, but did not attend or respond to follow-ups</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview completed</td>
<td>12 (36% of those initially consenting)</td>
<td>14 (42% of those initially consenting)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.7 Limitations of the research

The original evaluation design set out to interview the men and protective parents/carers who had been assessed, along with children and young people who had taken part in ‘voice of the child’ sessions. However, early monitoring of consent levels showed that very few protective parents/carers gave consent for their child to be approached about taking part in an interview and that this part of the evaluation would therefore not be viable. The design was changed to focus on in-depth interviews with the men and protective parents/carers, and surveys with children and young people. This meant an in-depth exploration of the views and experiences of children and young people would not be possible.

The demographic profile of those interviewed was broadly similar to the profile of all men and protective parents/carers who had been assessed (see Table 1 in Appendix 1). However, there were some differences between the two groups. The interviews with the men did not include anyone aged 18-25 or 60 and over, nor did they include any men from a minority ethnic background – 4 per cent of all cases. The situation was similar for the interviews with protective parents/carers, whose profile was broadly similar to the total population of those involved in assessments. However, the interviews did not include any carers over the age of 51 (see Table 2 in Appendix 1) and again, the number of interviews of minority ethnic participants was low. As it was not possible to include the full range and diversity of the all those who had been involved in the assessments, some views and experiences may not be reflected in this report.

This report presents the views and experiences of the assessment process from the perspective of the men and protective parents/carers who participated in interviews (the participants). However, their personal circumstances, the context of this service, as well as the possible differences in opinion between assessors and those assessed increases the chance of the latter having a negative view about the service. This presented some challenges in how to carry out and analyse the interviews. Assessing sexual risk is very challenging and requires considerable skill on the part of the assessors (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2010). Sexual offenders can routinely use denial and minimisation of their actions to confuse assessors (Webster et al, 2006). They can also use information they have about the assessment to manipulate assessors and try and work the system (McNaughton Nicholls et al, 2010). Some of these traits may have come into play during the research interviews. The interview process itself can also be a challenge and result in men attempting to manipulate and control the interview, particularly with a female interviewer (Roberts, 2011). It is therefore not possible to verify whether some of the views given by the men involved represented genuinely negative perceptions.
of the service or an attempt to manipulate the research interview. Because of this, the focus of this report has been to draw out the learning for operational practice.

1.8 Applying the framework approach to interview analysis

With the consent of participants, interviews were recorded and transcribed. If they did not consent to the interview being recorded, notes were taken instead, which were written up in detail afterwards. The interviews were analysed using the framework approach in Nvivo. This involves identifying emerging themes from the data and using these to organise the material, which enables an analysis of those themes both within and across cases, and cases to be compared to each other.

1.9 Ethics

The study was approved by the NSPCC research ethics committee, which follows Government Social Research Guidelines.
Chapter 2: Preparing for the assessment

This chapter describes the expectations participants had of the assessment, their views on how the assessment sessions had been set up and their experience of other members of their family being involved in the assessment.

2.1 The importance of addressing historic offences or allegations in the assessment

Both the men and protective parents/carers interviewed felt they were clear about the reason the assessment had been asked for, and that NSPCC assessors had clearly explained how the assessment process would work.

They talked me through what would happen each week, each part of the course and what the end result would be. So I felt I was kept up to speed. [...] both of them explained the process and when I did ask questions [they] answered my questions. So as far as giving the information, they were both very good at that.

[Protective parent – case 11]

Although they had understood why they were being assessed, some participants questioned why it was necessary when the concerns related to a historical offence or allegation.

I was annoyed, to be honest, but I went along anyway because it had to be done. The charges were there, but I was found not guilty in a Crown Court and that was 18 years ago, and they’ve just brought it up again and I thought it was done and dusted.

[Man assessed – case 3]

Others felt they had been clear about the assessment when it started, but that the purpose of the assessment had changed over time. These participants felt that the nature of their previous convictions had predetermined the outcome of the assessment and meant that they would always have been classed as a risk. They felt that this had not been clear to them when the assessment started.
I felt when the recommendations were made that I wasn’t expecting that kind of thing, as it’s not what I’d been told at the beginning. We were told the recommendation was about any child, but it was made gender-specific. We were told the assessment would reveal if there were gender-specific tendencies, but at the end we were told it had to be gender-specific because of the conviction. There’s no point in an individualised assessment if it was always going to come out that he was a risk to girls because of the conviction.

[Protective parent – case 7]

2.2 Flexibility in all aspects of assessment session set up is key

Participants felt the NSPCC had been accommodating about fitting the assessment sessions around times that were convenient to them. This included arranging appointments around their work commitments or fitting the meetings into a short period, so that, for example, the report could be completed before the birth of their child.

Not all participants felt the venues used for the assessment sessions were suitable, particularly when social services buildings were used. Some protective parents/carers did not feel happy about being asked to attend a social services office for their sessions as it made them feel like they had done something wrong. In some cases, there had been problems with the soundproofing in social services offices, and this had impacted on how comfortable participants felt about discussing things.

It is when you’re talking about personal issues and stuff. I mean you can basically hear what was going on in the next room as well. I wouldn’t want to hear somebody else’s conversation next door. I didn’t know who was next door and what was going on; basically they could hear what I was saying.

[Man assessed – case 7]

For some participants, the time taken to complete the assessment felt acceptable. For others, the process had taken longer than expected and had been a worrying time for them and their family. This had been made worse when there were also problems with arranging meetings with social services, which had added to the length of the process.
After I did my assessment, then my ex-partner had to do her assessment. And then there was all the messing about and to-ing and fro-ing and people not turning up for interviews and not turning up for meetings when they should have done ... so it did drag out a long time.

[Man assessed – case 4]

2.3 Holistic approach to assessment is valuable but can be questioned by those involved

Not all the partners of the men assessed had been seen as part of the assessment. This was usually because another family member had been identified as the protective carer, for example a sister or mother. Where the man’s partner had been seen, some men accepted this, but others felt it was unfair that their partner had to be involved when they had not committed an offence. They were concerned that the process was upsetting for their partner. These men had continued to feel like this throughout the assessment process.

I was angry at first at my wife being assessed as in my eyes, the way I looked at the situation, I felt she did everything to protect the children. I felt that it was wrong she had to do it.

[Man assessed – case 12]

Some parents/carers said they thought it was good that the children were included in the assessment and that their views were considered. These parents also welcomed someone checking that the child was coping with the situation at home. However, others were worried that the experience would be upsetting for the child. They felt that the child had already been made to speak to children’s services social workers and did not want them to have to repeat the process with someone new. Sometimes these concerns had been allayed once the work commenced and the child seemed settled with the NSPCC practitioner and not upset by the sessions.

I wasn’t happy about it at the start as my girl was very shy. So like new people ... coming in she wouldn’t settle, really. But here the worker was amazing, she came round to the NSPCC worker so quick.

[Protective parent – case 14]
Summary of key findings

• At the start of the assessment sessions, participants felt clear about the purpose of the assessment and the reason it had been asked for.

• Some felt the purpose of the assessment had changed over time. They also felt that the nature of the man’s previous convictions had predetermined the outcome of the assessment, and they had not been clear about this at the start of the assessment.

• Participants said that the practitioners had been accommodating about arranging the assessment sessions around their other commitments. Some did not feel comfortable using social services offices for the assessment sessions, or had concerns about the soundproofing of the interview rooms.

• Some participants had accepted the time taken to produce the assessment report. Others felt that the process had taken too long, particularly if there were also delays arranging meetings with children’s services.

• Some of the men assessed were not concerned about their partner also being seen as part of the assessment. Others felt their partner should not have been made to take part, as they had not done anything wrong.

• Similarly, views were mixed on the children being included in the assessment. Some parents/carers thought it was good that the child’s views were included. Others had concerns about it and felt it would be upsetting for them. For some, these concerns had been allayed once the work with the child had started.
Chapter 3: Views on the assessment sessions

This chapter describes the views of participants on the assessment sessions and the factors that made it easier or difficult to talk to NSPCC practitioners. It also presents their views on the topics they were asked about in the assessment and the style of questioning.

3.1 Some participants find the assessment sessions difficult and stressful

All participants had found at least some of the sessions difficult or felt embarrassed by the personal questions they were asked. Some of the men and protective parents/carers had accepted that it was going to be a difficult process they just had to get through, and felt that the NSPCC assessors had tried to make the sessions as comfortable as possible for them. Others had found the process more upsetting, particularly when it involved going back over things that had happened in their past that they did not want to talk about. It also involved some of the men having to face up to things they had done, or in the case of protective parents/carers, things their partner had done that they had not always been aware of before the assessment.

The sessions had sometimes been experienced as draining or stressful and some of the participants had felt angry about having to answer intrusive questions, or questions about their past. In some cases the assessors had helped to manage these emotions, but where this was not so, participants described how they had continued to feel upset or stressed after the session had finished.

I felt they could have done more to support you during the process. I’m prone to anxiety and depression and after the sessions I’m on my own in the house and on the verge of cutting myself or hitting the bottle, but there is no support in the process after the sessions. They said it was about the child but it affected me as well. How do you cope with this when you go home and have to cope with it on your own? They need to give you a number to phone if you are depressed.

[Man assessed – case 12]
Protective parents/carers had also found the process difficult, particularly when they felt they were being made to feel guilty or ashamed but believed they had not done anything wrong and were only attending for the sake of their children. There were also concerns that saying they did not believe the allegations could be interpreted as them not protecting their child.

One criticism that was made of me was that I said I didn’t feel my husband was a risk to my son, and they said that was a problem as part of the recommendations at the end of the assessment. [...] because I got the impression they wanted me to say, ‘Yes, my husband’s a danger’ and to me, I would be lying if I said that, and I explained that, but I felt that’s what they wanted me to say. [...] I feel they let me down in the final assessment.

[Protective parent – case 7]

3.2 Conversations with practitioners are not always easy

Some of the men and protective parents/carers felt they had been well treated by the NSPCC practitioner and that it was easy to talk to them. They felt that despite the difficult nature of the assessment and topic discussed, the practitioner had tried to make the process as comfortable for them as possible. However, others felt there were a number of factors that had made it difficult to talk to them, or that they had not been well treated.

3.3 What helped in talking to the practitioner

The factors that helped the men and protective parents/carers to feel comfortable talking to the practitioner included:

- having a good rapport
- not feeling judged
- practitioner being open and honest
- practitioner being supportive
- being given breaks
- being able to answer questions at their own pace.

They found it important to have a good rapport with the assessors they were working with and that the assessors were friendly and welcoming towards them.
I had no issues with the people doing the sessions. They were very professional and very caring people. The staff were very pleasant. The staff at reception were nice and the people doing the assessment were lovely, very helpful and supportive. They seemed personally interested.

[Protective carer – case 4]

Some of the men and protective parents/carers had initially felt anxious about coming to the assessment sessions, particularly if they had not had a good previous experience with staff from local authority children’s services departments. However, these participants said they had been treated fairly and had not been judged by NSPCC assessors, and they felt that their approach had differed from that of children’s services staff.

The participants appreciated that NSPCC assessors were open and honest with them about what was happening in the assessment, and how their information would be used. This had encouraged them to be honest, too. Some of the protective parents/carers found it reassuring that staff had talked about confidentiality with them, so that they knew that what they said would not be shared with the man assessed.

I have a lot of respect for the way they managed everything and way they presented themselves. They explained everything. They do their job well and don’t mess about or take anyone’s side. They did me and my ex-partner and they don’t come back and tell me about him and vice versa, it’s all confidential. They don’t judge or put you down, they help you.

[Protective parent – case 8]

Participants were also positive about the support they got from NSPCC practitioners during the assessment sessions, particularly if they found the topic difficult or upsetting. It helped that they listened to what the participants had to say and showed some understanding of the issues they were facing. Participants appreciated the practitioners showing sensitivity in the way they asked questions or responded to particular issues.

You just felt as if they actually listened to you and could be bothered, and that they were actually wanting to help you and be more positive and have a positive outcome with things.

[Protective parent – case 2]
When the topic was getting difficult, participants found it helpful that they knew they could take a break or have a drink if they needed to clear their head or regain their composure. It also helped that they were able to answer questions at their own pace and take time to think about things if they needed to.

Everyone was very patient. Being through a bad [experience] it’s a lot harder, so she took her time at it and took it at my pace. It didn’t matter how long it took, it was at my pace. The worker made me feel very welcome, it wasn’t the fact that she was an NSPCC worker, it was more … I’m a friend. It wasn’t on a professional thing it was more like having a cup of tea and having a chat. She wasn’t just coming in and saying, ‘Come in and just tell me this,’ but, ‘You tell me what you want when you’re ready.’

[Protective parent – case 14]

Not only the men and protective parents/carers who got a positive outcome felt that staff had carried out the assessment sessions well and treated them fairly. Even some of those who disagreed with the assessment report or did not feel that the assessment had helped them still said they felt well treated by staff during the assessment.

3.4 What made it difficult talking to NSPCC practitioners

Not all participants felt as positive about the assessment process: some felt there were a number of factors that made talking to the assessors difficult. They sometimes found it very hard to talk about their personal experiences and to answer very personal questions, describing the assessors as ‘strangers.’ For some, it had become a little easier once the assessment got underway, but for others it remained difficult.

When they thought that the assessors were prejudging them because of the nature of their offence or allegations, it made them feel that they were not getting a fair assessment and question whether it was worth attending the assessment sessions.

They wouldn’t listen to what I had to say; had already made their minds up. They were just looking down at me and everything I said they didn’t believe, and I couldn’t see the point in going because they’d already made their minds up.

[Man assessed – case 8]
Some of the participants felt that the assessors did not fully understand their background, culture or religion and had not spent enough time exploring this as part of the assessment sessions. This meant that they felt the assessors were not able to undertake a fair assessment.

I felt they need to do more introductions and have more knowledge about me and where I come from and my environment to understand me before they start giving me questions. I come from a different country with a different mentality, language and culture. You need to have knowledge about what you are talking about if you are doing a report.

[Protective parent – case 8]

It had been difficult for some of the men to talk to female assessors about their sexual behaviour. They felt that it would have been difficult even if one of the assessors had been a man, but that it had been even harder with two females.

When you’re in there and you’ve got two people there it’s awkward to talk, especially when it’s all female and they’re asking you questions that you’d prefer not to answer, even with a male person let alone a female.

[Man assessed – case 5]

Talking to female assessors was difficult for those men who perceived these women to have negative attitudes towards males. According to some of the men, they even defined acceptable behaviour differently for men and women, and this had affected the assessment. While this may be what these men actually believed, it may also be a cognitive distortion, which came out in the interview discussions.

Not all men felt they had been offered breaks when they needed them. Sometimes the topic of discussion had made the men feel angry, particularly if it related to the allegations made against them or their views on sexual abuse. These men felt it would have been useful to be able to have a break to go outside and let off some steam.

3.5 Ensuring clarity of understanding around the topics to be discussed is important

An accurate assessment often requires a detailed discussion on a range of topics relating to the family and, in the case of the men and safe parents/carers, about their attitudes and experiences. For those assessed it was important that the relevance of the topic was explained and the questions phrased in a way that they could understand. Participants
mentioned a number of examples where this had been done well. They said that the assessors had explained the topics they would be asked about in detail and given them an opportunity to ask any questions beforehand.

It surprised me a bit that they needed to ask so much information, but I suppose they needed to get a full picture to build a picture of my background. It was all explained very clearly and if you had points you wanted to bring up they were happy to discuss it as part of the assessment work.

[Protective parent – case 1]

However, other participants said they had not been clear why they were being asked questions on certain topics, or they had found it difficult to answer the questions. This was for three main reasons:

- the questions did not focus on areas that the men thought relevant to the assessment
- the questions related to events that happened a long time ago
- the language used was difficult to understand.

Some men felt the sessions had focused primarily on what they had done or were alleged to have done, rather than the man’s own past experience of abuse or victimisation, which they felt was relevant to the assessment.

Others felt that the majority of the assessment sessions had focused on things that had happened in their past. They felt that not enough weight had been given to their current lifestyle and the changes that had occurred in their life since the offence or allegations had taken place.

My crime was between 1999 and 2003. I had six sessions. Five of those sessions were based on four of those years and what happened before, and when I was a child; one session about my life in the last ten years, my life with my wife and with my children. So essentially all of their focus was on my history, my past, my crime. My point is that the mistakes I made ten years ago, I’ve learned from, I’ve grown from. I’ve changed my life. I’ve been rehabilitated... And they spent one session talking about that and how is that a reflection of me? How can they assess me?

[Man assessed – case 6]
Where the assessment had focused on historical convictions or allegations, some participants said that they had found it difficult to remember as much detail as they were being asked for, particularly when the events had taken place a long time ago.

It was something [the alleged risky behaviour] I did a lot when I was 18; I’m 35 now. Half the things I can’t remember … I’ve smoked weed since I was nine years old. […] Because I can’t remember they [say] ‘Well you should be able to remember’. Somebody like me should be able to remember. It got quite irritating at the end of the day.

[Man assessed – case 9]

Other men had struggled with some of the language that assessors had used in the assessment or the way they had described the assessment methods they were using. Some men had asked for this to be explained and then understood what was being talked about. Others either did not ask for further guidance or still did not understand some of the sessions.

You don’t normally analyse yourself. They were using these different methods and things and it went over my head. I mean, I’m not the thickest bloke and I’m not the cleverest bloke, I thought it was a bit over the top for Mr Average. I think it needs to be brought back into layman’s terms, not using all these different systems and whatnot. It might have been just me but I thought it was a bit intense sort of bombardment with … it was these methods they were using.

[Man assessed – case 7]

3.6 Service user perception of questioning style varies considerably

Those who had been assessed by experienced practitioners recognised that the questioning was very thorough and that the assessors had managed to draw out details about their history and its impact on their current behaviour that they would not have thought of themselves. However, some of the men and protective parents/carers who had been assessed by relatively inexperienced practitioners appeared to have noticed this, and said that it had come across in the assessment.
The men and protective parents/carers assessed had sometimes noticed differences in the questioning style of the two assessors. Sometimes it had seemed to them that one took a firmer approach, or was more experienced. From a practice perspective, this could have been intentional, the assessors using a range of styles to draw out more information. However, it had made the participants question the difference in approach between the two.

Others felt there had been a more consistent approach to the questioning. Some of the men and protective parents/carers thought the questioning style had been encouraging and they had not felt pressurised in any way.

Although it was quite an intensive situation, they made it as easy as they could. It was gentle, probing questions rather than very in-your-face questions.

[Protective carer – case 4]

However, others had perceived the questioning style as harsh or aggressive, particularly if they had said something the staff member did not agree with.

She was supposed to be somebody who records, takes everything, asks the key open-ended questions to lead somebody to open themselves up and bring all that information out, but she was very judgemental and very harsh in her responses if I gave an answer that she wasn’t happy with. So I found that very difficult to deal with; it made me kind of suffer. It may be a tactic, but it’s not healthy as it should be an assessment.

[Man assessed – case 6]

Sometimes this had resulted in the men feeling pushed to give an answer that the assessor wanted, or feeling that the staff member was trying to catch them out.

I tried to be as honest as I could whether I was recorded or not, but sometimes I felt they forced me to say things I did not want to say that were not true. I feel I said things to get them off my back or I felt the process would just be continuous if I didn’t.

[Man assessed – case 12]
For some, the initial perception of assessors as welcoming and friendly had changed as they began to feel this was just another tactic used to get them to reveal more in the assessment.

Some participants had tried to ask questions about the assessment process, particularly if they did not agree with what was being proposed, but felt that staff discouraged this.

When asked if we could all be together with supervision I was told I had to stop questioning. I asked why my in-laws were allowed to supervise contact when they hadn’t done a capacity to protect and I was told that if I questioned it any further contact would be stopped altogether so I felt slightly emotionally blackmailed.

[Protective parent – case 7]

Summary of key findings

- All participants found some of the sessions difficult or the topics discussed embarrassing. Some felt that the assessors had tried to make the process as comfortable as possible and had given them enough support. Others had found the process quite stressful and did not feel they had received the support needed outside the sessions.

- Participants who had found it easy to talk to the assessors felt that having a good rapport with them had helped, as well as the assessors being honest with them and not judging them. They also valued the support they got from the assessors, being allowed to take things at their own pace and being able to take breaks when needed.

- Sometimes participants found it difficult talking to strangers about their personal lives. For some this got easier as the assessment progressed, but for others it remained difficult. It remained hard if they felt they were being prejudged, if the assessor did not fully understand their culture or background, or if they did not feel listened to.
• Some of the men assessed had found it difficult to discuss their sexual behaviour with two female assessors.

• Some participants felt that the assessors had explained the topics that would be discussed in the assessment well. Others questioned why the discussions focused heavily on their previous convictions or the allegations rather than their current lifestyle. Some had found it difficult to remember details from things that had happened in the past, or they had not understood all the language used in the assessment.

• Participants felt that the questioning style used in the assessment had been very thorough and drew out details from their previous history. However, some participants had noticed a difference in style between the two assessors, or felt that one assessor was more experienced than the other.

• Some participants felt the questioning style used had been gentle and did not put them under pressure. Others had perceived the questioning style as aggressive, particularly if they gave an answer the assessor did not agree with, which made some participants either reluctant to ask questions, or say things that they did not actually believe.
Chapter 4: Views on the assessment report

This chapter presents the participants’ views on the content of the final assessment report and looks at the way the reports were shared with other professionals and participants.

4.1 Not all service users agreed with report content

While some men and protective parents/carers agreed with their assessment report, perhaps unsurprisingly others were less happy with the reports’ conclusions and recommendations. Those who described the reports as balanced, fair and thorough characteristically felt the report reflected things that had been discussed in the assessment sessions and that the recommendations had already been explained to them, and so they did not feel they were reading anything new in the report.

The recommendations were already made at case conferences as NSPCC came to them all. It was things we already knew, it had just been finalised and put in report. It was all just basic and accurate so I can’t complain. I knew what they were going to put in the report, they never kept anything from me.

[Protective parent– case 9]

Recommendations that outlined practical things the participants could do were also well received.

The recommendations were things for me to do with our social worker. It was practical things that could be put in place without any sort of action really on my part. I wasn’t expected to go off on my own back and do things, it was things I did with support. So realistic expectations, really.

[Protective parent– case 11]

However, not all participants agreed with the content of the report, the assigned risk level of the man assessed or the recommendations made. There were five main reasons why men and protective parents/carers disagreed with the assessment report:
• **They had been misquoted:** sometimes participants felt they had been misquoted in the report and things had not been written down in the way they had said them.

• **Things had been taken out of context:** for some, seeing things in writing made them feel that they sounded worse than the way they remembered describing them in the assessment session, or that the report had taken the things out of context or only included some of the details.

  The things we talked about in the assessment, the assessors have heard what we’ve said but they haven’t actually listened to what was said. It’s as though they’re picking little bits here and there and putting them together to make a negative statement instead of putting down everything in its entire context and purposely missing bits out or adding little bits on that weren’t actually said and that’s the assessors opinion.

  [Man assessed – case 10]

• **Things they said had been taken too literally:** there were cases where the men assessed felt that what they had said in the sessions had been taken too literally by the assessors, and did not reflect what was really meant. The men felt this also made things appear worse than they really were.

  I said at one point, if anybody touched my daughter I’d ‘kill them’, and so they took that literally … […] And they did that with a few things … it’s obvious I wasn’t going to … So they seemed to think that I’ve got an anger management problem because I’ve said that and a few other things that was kind of aggressive but … it wasn’t meant as aggressive.

  [Man assessed – case 9]

• **The report only focused on some of the issues discussed:** sometimes the men assessed felt that the report focused on only a few elements of their life – for example, on their previous background or convictions. It did not pay enough attention to other aspects of their life, or what had happened since the allegations were made or the offence was committed, reflecting concerns raised by some about the nature of the questioning during the assessment.

• **The information given had been misinterpreted:** participants sometimes felt that the information had been manipulated to match the argument or recommendation the assessors were trying to make, rather than giving a true reflection of what the respondent described.
I am an open person and do not feel I have done anything wrong. I wanted to be open and give honest answers. I think the examples I gave were manipulated and interpreted how they wanted. The interpretation was wrong, it was not what I wanted to say.

[Protective parent– case 3]

4.2 Recording discussions could prevent disagreements around report findings

In many of the service centres, practitioners took notes during the discussions with participants, rather than recording the session. Those participants who disagreed with the report content felt strongly that the assessment sessions should have been recorded, instead of the practitioners taking notes. They felt that the practitioners would not have been able to capture everything discussed in handwritten notes, and that this could lead to some of the things discussed not being recorded or the context around a particular event being left out.

I spoke for two hours, I’m a very talkative person. I talk quite fast, I would have been deeply impressed if she’d got everything I said and she didn’t, because there were specific cases that they brought out to say that they feel that this is a risk; and I said, well I didn’t say that. … […] And I said, “Well you’ve missed about three stages.” And she said, “Well that’s what you said!” I didn’t, but I can’t prove it, she can’t prove it, and she’s got longhand notes … […] They must record. It’s not right. They are making decisions on people’s lives and they are doing it on longhand notes.

[Man assessed – case 6]

If participants did not agree with what was said in the assessment report, they felt there was no way for them to prove what had actually been said in the session, as it was their word against that of the assessors. They felt that being able to go back and listen to the recording of the session would have cleared up areas of disagreement in the report. Some of the men assessed also felt there should be checks on the way the assessments were carried out, to ensure they were being done appropriately.
4.3 Reports should be communicated in person and in non-technical language

The assessment guidance followed by teams does not set out a clear process for how the assessment report should be shared with those involved. This was reflected in the feedback from the men and protective parents/carers who were assessed. Some participants described a meeting with the assessors in which they had been given the report and the content and recommendations were explained. Others reported receiving the assessment report from their solicitor, and some said they had been given the report to read by their social worker just before a case conference meeting.

The reports themselves contained detailed descriptions of the men’s experiences and actions, and reading it for the first time had been a painful experience for some of them. Parents/carers whose capacity to protect the child had been questioned also found the reports very difficult to read. Participants felt they had needed time to go through the report, but sometimes they had been given it just before a meeting and had had no time to read it.

The reports were often lengthy, and there were concerns that there was a lot of information to read through. Not all participants had understood all of the language used in the report, which affected their understanding.

There was a word in the report that I had no clue what it meant whatsoever, so I had to look it up online and I put that in my response to the report which they again questioned. I said: ‘I haven’t been to university, I have no clue whatsoever as to what this word meant.’ After I’d looked it up in my response to the report I put it in plain English as I understood it, but then they tried to sort of backlash and say well no, that’s not how it’s used, but that was given in the online dictionary for this word.

[Man assessed – case 10]

The men and protective parents/carers who were still in a relationship, and so discussed their respective experience of the assessment together, sometimes felt that staff had said different things to the man compared to the protective parent/carer. There may be legitimate reasons why different information was discussed with the men and protective parents/carers during sessions, but to the participants this was often perceived as contradictory. Some participants were also upset that the recommendations for the protective parent/carer had not been shared with the man.
Recommendations were on my report, but not my husband’s. He was upset. We are together so we don’t hide things from each other and we need to move on and deal with our situation together.

[Protective parent – case 3]

In some teams, participants had been given the opportunity to add their comments to the report and this was welcomed.

It related back to every session, the things I said were put in there and there was an option at the end for me to give my opinion or disagree with anything they’d written, so I had an opportunity for my voice to be heard.

[Protective parent – case 11]

However, this did not mean that the final report would be changed if the respondent did not agree with the content, only that there was the opportunity from them to record their disagreement. Not all participants seemed clear about this, as some had been disappointed when their feedback had not resulted in the report being changed. Sometimes participants had not felt comfortable about adding their comments to the report, in case this would have a detrimental effect on the decision made on the basis of the report. Participants felt that there had been no opportunity to comment on the report if they only received it shortly before case conference meetings. They felt that by this time, it was too late to be able to highlight any perceived inaccuracies.

4.4 Reports need to be shared quickly to enable recommendations to be used in decision making

Once the report was finalised, it was important to participants that relevant professionals used the report to inform their decision making, and that the way NSPCC assessors presented the report to professionals facilitated this process.

In some cases, a shorter summary of the full report had been prepared for conference meetings. Participants found it helpful that the details about their background or personal relationships would not be shared with other professionals.
They made a shorter report for my social workers so it meant they didn’t have to read it all in the meeting as well, which is quite embarrassing when you’re in a meeting and everyone else is reading your story.

[Protective parent – case 14]

However, some participants had observed other professionals being given a copy of the assessment report just before a case meeting and felt that this did not give them time to digest the information before making a decision.

And the professionals only got it half an hour before the conference as well; mine was about 30 pages, two reports, say the result was 100 pages. How can the professionals possibly read that, digest it, understand it, make recommendations and decide our future on something they read 20 minutes before a conference!

[Man assessed – case 6]

Participants also felt that although NSPCC assessors had said the report was just to guide the decision making of social services or the case conference, in reality it was very heavily relied on to make decisions. This made it even more important that the report was accurate and shared in a timely way with both decision makers and those assessed.

Summary of key findings

• Some participants agreed with the content of the assessment report and felt it was a balanced, fair reflection of what had been discussed in the sessions. NSPCC assessors had often discussed the recommendations with the participants before they saw the final report, so there were no surprises in it.

• Others did not agree with the content of the report, the risk level of the man assessed or the recommendations made. These participants felt they had been misquoted in the report and that things had been taken out of context or taken too literally.

• Some participants felt that the report had not covered all the issues that had been discussed, or that although it contained the right information, the interpretation of the information was wrong.
• Participants who disagreed with the report content felt strongly that the sessions should be recorded rather than the assessors relying on handwritten notes. They felt that this would provide proof of what has been discussed in the sessions.

• The way in which participants received a copy of the assessment report varied. Some had had a meeting with staff to discuss the report. Others had received their copy from a solicitor or only shortly before attending a case conference meeting. This variation in practice will be reviewed by the steering group.

• Some participants found it difficult to read their life history in detail, particularly if the report concluded a child was not being protected. They felt that there was a lot of information in the report for them to digest and they had not always understood all the words used. This shows the importance of participants having time to go through the report with staff.

• Some participants had been offered the opportunity to give their comments on the report. Some had done so, but then expected the content of the report to be changed. Others had not, either because they had not felt comfortable giving their comments or because there had been no chance to do so as they had been given the report quite late.

• In some cases, participants had observed that other professionals did not get a copy of the report until just before a meeting. Participants felt concerned about this, as they had been told the report was only a guide to decision making, but felt that in reality other professionals relied heavily on the reports.
Chapter 5: Impact of the assessment on the men and protective parents/carers assessed

This chapter gives participants’ views on the benefits of taking part in the assessment for them as well as their family. It also describes other services that were recommended as a result of the assessment and whether they had been able to access those services.

5.1 Impact on families

Going through the assessment process had brought about a range of benefits for some of those involved. For some participants, the process had made the family discuss the man’s behaviour, get things out in the open and be more honest with each other. This sometimes included other relatives learning about the man’s behaviour, so that the protective parent or carer no longer felt that they had to keep everything to themselves. This often helped bring families closer together as they supported each other through the process.

In cases where a final decision had been made about contact with the child, this could also help the family move forward and bring a sense of closure to the whole process.

I was rather nervous, because as soon as you hear NSPCC you think you’re a bad parent … but I found them very useful and they have helped us move on with our lives, really, and put a lot of closure to things. And they don’t judge and they don’t put you down, they do help you.

[Protective parent – case 8]

However, other participants felt that nothing had changed for them as a result of the assessment, and that the nature and frequency of their contact with the child had remained the same. This made them question whether the assessment had been a good use of time and resources.
It’s changed nothing. We were told the purpose of the assessment was to help us towards a common goal. There’s no attempt to say well you need to do this or do that to get this goal, it’s just your report says no, so we don’t want to help you or we don’t see why we should help you.

[Man assessed – case 10]

Others felt that their situation had become worse as a result of the assessment. For some this was because they found the process very stressful and upsetting, particularly when they did not get the outcome they had hoped for, and children were removed from home or contact was restricted. For the men assessed, sometimes their relationship had ended during the assessment, either because of their partners’ feelings about the information they received about the man’s behaviour from the assessment, or because the only way the partner could keep the child at home was to end the relationship with the man.

It was made clear to my ex-partner on many occasions that if me and her continued to have a relationship then it would be a lot harder for her to keep hold of our daughter. So the decision was made more so from my ex-partner’s point of view that our relationship would finish. And that was very upsetting for both of us, and we feel that if things had been handled differently the outcome might have been different.

[Man assessed – case 4]

5.2 Changes for the men assessed

For some of the men, the assessment had helped them to confront some of their problems and gain a better understanding of the reasons for their behaviour. This led some to be more aware of why their behaviour could be interpreted by others as risky, and the steps they needed to take to refrain from it.

If the person being assessed has ... the right attitude towards the assessment and actually wants to gain something from it, there is a lot to be gained from these assessments. I went into it wanting to understand a bit more as to why I offended, my reasons for it, my triggers, what caused me to do it ... it’s never happened since ... but obviously there was something there at the time that triggered it all. I understood a bit more about it when I’d been in prison and I went to the course there ... I was picking up on bits and pieces again, picking up more reasons for why it happened
and how to avoid it happening in the future, dangerous situations to get into or not to get into, and how to basically conduct myself. So I would say the assessment was worthwhile in that respect.

[Man assessed – case 4]

Some of the men with historical convictions felt bad about what they had done in the past and that the assessment had helped them to identify what they needed to do to move forward.

5.3 Changes for protective parents/carers

One of the main benefits for protective parents/carers of becoming involved in the assessment was learning about the nature of the man’s offending. Protective parents/carers learnt more about the man’s behaviour, often hearing details they had not been aware of before. This helped to give them a greater understanding of the risk the man could pose to children.

I got a different understanding. I found out more about what my husband was up to, I suppose, because things that he has said in his assessment, they’re allowed to say things to me. So when we were discussing … his actions … it gave me an insight into him a bit better. I actually read his completed report and that was a bit of an eye-opener as well.

[Protective parent – case 11]

The process had also given them a more general understanding and awareness of how people who pose a sexual risk to children may behave and risk factors they should be aware of, which could be useful for future relationships.

It helped me to be a bit less naïve … because I was very naïve before. The discussions and the questions they were asking made me think about things differently, and that I probably hadn’t wanted to think about. I learnt a lot more about the realities of child abuse and how they can be subtle.

[Protective parent – case 12]

Both these elements helped protective parents/carers become more aware of the actions they needed to take to protect their children and understand more about the concerns children’s services had. It also helped make them more aware of how they could demonstrate to children’s services that they were capable of protecting their children.
For some protective parents/carers, another benefit of the assessment was having someone to talk to who could help them come to terms both with their current circumstances as well as things they had experienced in their past.

It was useful. To be honest, my NSPCC worker got a lot more information out of me than anyone else ever did. There were things even my social worker was learning...[...] I've never ever spoken to anyone about my past, so to actually get it out on paper helped me. It helped me understand it, understand why all these things happened and come to deal with it.

[Protective parent – case 14]

5.4 Involving children in the assessment

Not all the children of the participants interviewed had been involved in the assessment. For those parents/carers whose children had been seen, some were very positive about the way the work was carried out and the benefits for the child. Others had concerns about the way the work with the child was done.

Parents/carers who felt that the work with the child had been done well said they thought that the sessions had been carried out in a way that was appropriate for the child’s age, for example through play or art work. They also thought it was helpful when the sessions were done at the child’s home or in a child-friendly room at the service centre. Parents/carers felt that staff had enabled children to take their time and made sure they were not upset. They reported that children had enjoyed the sessions and found them positive.

These parents/carers also identified a number of educational benefits of the sessions for the children:

- gaining more awareness of what had been happening at home
- learning more about the man assessed
- learning more about protective behaviours.

In some families, the man had moved out of the family home while the assessment was in progress. This caused confusion for some children who were unsure why their dad had to leave. Protective parents/carers felt the sessions had provided an opportunity for children to get more understanding about why things had changed. It also gave an opportunity to hear how the children felt about their home situation.
Some children had specific input to help them learn more about the man assessed or the nature of the man’s historical convictions or the allegations against him.

She learned a lot around a family tree to make her aware of who her father was. She made a family tree book and she got a lot out of it, explained a lot more than I could explain. When you’re a parent you don’t know what way to put it, whereas … they know the way to put it and they put it the right way. She loved the sessions and would go back again.

[Protective parent – case 14]

Children were also given information about protective behaviours and what to do if they were worried about anything.

However, other parents/carers were concerned about the work with the children. Sometimes they felt that the process had alienated the child from their parent.

My partner was not pleased with the way they went about things and asked questions. She felt they were trying to alienate her from the children: instead of calling her ‘mum’ they were calling her by her first name and instead of calling the ‘dad’, dad they were calling him by his first name. It was as if it was a competition between my partner and her ex-husband and what side the children were on.

[Man assessed – case 10]

Others were worried about having to explain the nature of the man’s historical convictions or the allegations against him to the child and felt that they did not want their child to know these details.

They want us to explain things to the kids that I know they won’t understand properly. In a way, we don’t want them to know anything relating to sexual abuse as they won’t understand. As they are young they don’t question things, we just told them daddy was naughty when he was younger. Their dad has been out of the house for a year and they’ve had lots of disruption. The local authority said we should tell the children.

[Protective parent – case 10]
In some cases, the parent or carer reported that the child did not want to continue coming to the sessions as they were uncomfortable with the questions asked and felt they had already spoken to children’s services staff about how they felt.

5.5 Assessment identified and enabled further support for families

One potential benefit of the assessments for families was that the assessment reports suggested other support they might benefit from. Some were encouraged to see their GP for help with anxiety or depression. For others there were recommendations that they should receive counselling or anger management. However, participants had not always received these services by the time they were interviewed, or had sometimes been told that they were not eligible.

Protective parents/carers had sometimes been told that they could contact the NSPCC if they had any further concerns about their child or the man assessed, or wanted advice on how to explain the man’s behaviour to the child as they got older. These participants found it reassuring to know that they could get in touch if they needed to.

I have [the practitioner’s] phone number and they said to pop in and see them if I need anything. I don’t need to see them at the moment, but it’s given me a level of assurance I’ve got the contacts if I do.

[Protective carer – case 4]

Sometimes protective parents/carers had been referred back to children’s services or other voluntary organisations for some educative work on how to keep their children safe. Not all had received this service and some were aware that there was a waiting list before they could attend. Some NSPCC service centres offer an educative programme for protective parents/carers, and women who had attended one of these after the assessment described finding it helpful to be able to talk to other women in a similar situation. They also found the programme gave them more understanding of what they needed to do to protect their child.
The group gave us the information we needed. They were organised, really encouraging and sympathetic. I found it supportive, as I’d been with other women who’d been through similar things. The assessment was more or less they were asking me things to ascertain my feelings and understanding on what had happened whereas the group was very much explaining things and talking through things to help us protect our children. So it was a very different purpose, so it felt very different from the beginning.

[Protective parent – case 11]

5.6 Difficulties accessing further treatment for the men assessed

The possibility of attending a treatment programme had been discussed with some of the men assessed. However, this had not always resulted in them being offered a place on a programme by children’s services. If children’s services would not fund the treatment, the men found the cost too high to fund it themselves. The waiting lists for attending the programme were often long, and the men felt this had not helped their situation. Others felt that the level of contact they were able to have with their child was unlikely to change and did not feel there was much incentive to attend.

And at the end of it, I’m not going to gain any more than I’ve already got now. What I’ve got now – seeing my daughter twice a week with my ex-partner supervising – that is the best I’m ever going to get, and I’ve accepted that now. So doing any further work, I don’t feel I need to and I’m not going to gain anything from it. It’s going to cost me money, and I’m going to have to take time off work.

[Man assessed – case 4]

Some of the men did not want to go to meetings if this would bring them into contact with convicted sex offenders during group work.

The NSPCC has developed an intervention programme for men whose assessment has identified a need for treatment. This has been running in some of the service centres that deliver the assessment service.
Summary of key findings

- For some participants, the assessment process had helped them to become more honest as a family and to discuss things more openly. This helped them to move forward after the assessment. For others, things seemed worse after the assessment, either because they had found the process very difficult or because their relationship had ended as a result of the information discussed. Others perceived that nothing had changed as a result of the assessment.

- Some of the men assessed felt the sessions had made them confront their problems and helped them to understand more about the reasons for their behaviour.

- The protective parents/carers had learnt new information about the man assessed from the sessions and also gained more awareness of risk factors for sexual abuse and how to protect their children.

- Some parents/carers felt that the sessions with the children had been done in an appropriate way. They had helped them to better understand the man assessed and some of the changes that had happened at home.

- However, others had concerns about the way the sessions with the child(ren) had been carried out and did not want them to be told about what the man assessed had done.

- Some protective parents/carers had been told they could contact the NSPCC in the future if they had any concerns, and found this reassuring.

- Sometimes recommendations had been made for further educative work or support, but participants had not always been able to access this support or were on waiting lists. Some NSPCC service centres run educative groups for protective parents/carers, and the women who had attended these were positive about these groups.

- Some of the men assessed had recommendations that they attend a treatment programme. However, the cost of attending was prohibitive if social services would not fund it. Some men questioned whether anything would improve for them even if they did attend the group.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of the assessment must remain clear throughout the process

When they started the assessment sessions, the men and protective parents/carers involved were clear about the reason the assessment had been asked for and what the assessment would cover. However, some participants felt that the purpose of the assessment had changed over time, and that its outcome had been predetermined by the man’s historical convictions. This had caused some to feel upset or annoyed at the assessment outcome and to question the relevance of the assessment process. It is therefore important that assessors continue to be clear about the purpose of the assessment with men and protective parents/carers, and to reiterate that once all the evidence has been reviewed, the assessors’ view on risk level may be different to that of the participants. This message should be repeated throughout the assessment process.

Some participants accepted the time taken to complete the assessment report, but others felt the process had taken too long, particularly when there were also delays in arranging follow-up meetings with children’s services departments. Similarly, the feedback from referrers (Belton, forthcoming), indicates that they felt that the time taken to produce the assessment reports was too long for the families involved. The steering group are currently reviewing the assessment process to see whether and how the time taken can be reduced.

Coping with assessment sessions can be difficult without adequate support

Both the men and protective parents/carers found the assessment sessions difficult or felt embarrassed by the personal questions they were asked. However, some felt that staff had tried to make the process as comfortable as possible for them. The things that had made talking to staff easier were having a good rapport, not being judged, the assessors being honest and open, being able to take things at their own pace and take breaks when needed. Participants also valued practitioners being supportive when the topic discussed was difficult. Some participants felt they had been well treated even though they did not always agree with the assessment report recommendations.
However, others continued to find the sessions difficult or did not feel they had been treated fairly. Some of the men and protective parents/carers assessed felt that the NSPCC practitioners did not fully understand their background or culture; that they were being judged or not listened to. Some of the men assessed also found it difficult to discuss their sexual behaviour with two female assessors.

Participants felt that the questioning style was thorough and drew out details about their history. Some felt that the questioning had been gentle, but others perceived it as aggressive, particularly if the assessors did not agree with what the man or protective parent/carer was saying. Some participants had also found it difficult to remember details from their past or struggled with some of the terminology used in the sessions.

Some participants felt they had been given the support needed to help them cope with the content of the assessment sessions; others felt they had needed more support outside of the sessions.

The assessment guide is still in draft format and has only been in place for three-and-a-half years – with some teams only having implemented it partway through this period. It is recognised that assessing sexual risk is a very challenging area of work that requires considerable skill. The stakes are often high for the families involved in the assessment and this can make them defensive during the assessment sessions. Feedback from assessors who use the guide has shown how difficult the work can be. It is particularly difficult for those without previous experience in this area, as they do not feel confident about the work initially and need more practical guidance on how to conduct the sessions with men and examples of questioning techniques they can use (Belton, forthcoming).

It is not surprising that the interviews have given such a range of views on the assessment sessions. Some of this diversity may reflect different interviewing styles affecting the dynamics of the assessment, but it may also have something to do with participants’ distorted thinking. The potential learning points about how the assessment is conducted should be built into future training on using the guide and be reflected on in staff supervision and mentoring arrangements.

**Recording interviews will help prevent disagreement with report findings**

Some participants felt that the assessment report was an accurate reflection of everything they had discussed in the sessions. The assessors had already discussed the recommendations with them, and so these participants were not surprised by anything in the final report.
Others did not agree with the report content and felt that they had either been misquoted in the report; things had been taken out of context and only certain information from the discussion had been included in the report, or that the things they said had been taken too literally and so sounded worse than the respondent had intended. Some of the men and protective parents/carers assessed agreed with the factual details in the report, but disagreed with the way the information had been interpreted.

Participants who disagreed with the assessment report felt strongly that the assessment sessions should be recorded, rather than relying on handwritten notes. They felt this would mean that any perceived inaccuracies in the report could be checked, whereas without a recording it is the participants’ word against the assessors.

Referrers felt that the assessment reports received were thorough accounts of the men’s lives and that the reports helped them to get a more detailed understanding of their behaviour to inform their decision making (Belton, forthcoming). It is understandable that some of the men disagreed with the assessment report when they did not receive the outcome they had hoped for, and some of their comments about the accuracy of assessment reports may reflect this. Assessors should provide regular feedback to men and protective parents/carers during the assessment to reduce the chance of any unexpected surprises when they see the assessment report. Assessment reports should also explain the conclusions and recommendations clearly, linking them back to what the man or protective parent/carer has actually said and to the participant’s known previous behaviours.

Reports should be shared by the assessor in person

The way in which the final assessment report is shared with participants has varied. Some of the participants met with a practitioner to discuss the report and recommendations, and to have an opportunity to comment on the report. Some participants had found it difficult to see their life history in writing. They also found the reports quite long, hard to digest and did not always understand all the words in the report. They needed some time to go through the report to process it properly. Referrers also had some concerns about whether the language used in assessment reports was clear to the men and protective parents/carers involved. Assessors should ensure that both verbal and written communication is clear, specific and simple enough for the men and protective parents to understand.
Not all participants felt they had been kept updated about what was happening once the assessment sessions had ended. Some had only received a copy of the report from their solicitor, or shortly before a case conference meeting. This did not give them any chance to comment on the report or to make staff aware of any perceived inaccuracies.

The way in which reports are shared with those involved in the assessment is being considered by the steering group.

**Men can understand more about the reasons for their behaviour and protective parents/carers learn how to better protect their child**

For some participants, nothing had changed as a result of going through the assessment. In some cases, things had become worse, for example if their relationship had ended. Others found that the process had helped them to be more open with other family members and get on with their lives.

For some of the men assessed, the process helped them to confront their problems and to understand more about the reasons for their behaviour. The benefit for protective parents/carers was more educational, as they learnt more about the behaviour of the man assessed, how to become more aware of sexual abuse and to protect their children. For some protective parents/carers, having someone to discuss their own experiences with had also helped them to understand more about their lives and the impact on their current relationships.

Some parents/carers felt that the sessions with children had been done in an appropriate and sensitive way, and helped the children understand more about the changes in their home situation and protective behaviours. Others had concerns about the way the sessions with the child had been carried out and felt it was upsetting for the child and that they did not need to know the details of the man’s behaviour.

The report recommendations sometimes suggest that participants access other support or treatment services. Not all participants managed to do so, either because of funding issues or long waiting lists. Some NSPCC teams run their own educational programmes for protective parents/carers, which were well received. The NSPCC will be operating a ‘Women as Protectors’ programme more widely from January 2015. The NSPCC intervention programme for men whose assessment has identified treatment needs has been operating in some of the assessment sites and is currently being reviewed.
Implications for practice and next steps in the evaluation

These findings will be used in conjunction with findings from the views of practitioners on using the assessment guide and the views of referrers who receive the assessment reports to inform future service delivery.

This report has highlighted that some participants felt that their culture or background was not fully understood by the assessors, which affected the assessment. The small number of minority ethnic cases made it difficult to explore this theme more fully. This will be worth further research, which is, however, viable only if the service is able to work with a greater number of minority ethnic cases.

The final evaluation report is due to be published in January 2016. This will bring together findings from all the qualitative work and also report on the quantitative data on what happens as a result of each completed assessment.
Bibliography


# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Profile of participants compared to all service users

Table 1: Profile of all men assessed compared to sample

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Table 2: Profile of protective parents carers assessed compared to sample

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Appendix 2: Profile of participants

Profile of men interviewed

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## Profile of protective parent/carer interviews

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<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>White-British Mum</td>
<td>Ex-partner</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>White-British Mum</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>White-British Mum</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>White – other white background Mum</td>
<td>Man not seen</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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