

Briefing paper

Grooming (United Kingdom)

Published: 18th July 2025

Summary

Grooming is often the precursor to abuse and is a process used to prepare children for sexual abuse and exploitation, radicalisation (Department for Education, 2017)ⁱ or criminal exploitation (Children's Commissioner, 2019)ⁱⁱ.

Due to the nature of grooming, it is difficult to know how many children in the UK have been subject to grooming behaviours. In the National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation (2025) Baroness Casey concluded that “there is no recent study of the prevalence of child sexual abuse and exploitation in the population”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Figures from the NSPCC highlight that 41,021 online grooming crimes have been recorded by police forces across the UK since 2017 and that 7,062 sexual communications with a child were recorded in 2023/2024 and that this has increased by 89% since 2017/18 when the offense first came into force.^{iv} With limited information and statistics on the prevalence of grooming offences, it is likely that this is affecting more children across the UK than the figures suggest.

Although there is legislation in the UK to attempt to tackle grooming, further work is required to strengthen the provisions to further keep children safe from harm, abuse and exploitation.

What is currently in place across the UK?

- **Sexual Offences Act 2003: England and Wales**
- **Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005**
- **The Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008**

► **Sexual Offences Act 2003: England and Wales**

It is an offence under **section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003** for a person aged 18 or over to have met or communicated with a child under the age of 16-years-old and subsequently,

intentionally meet them, for either party to travel with the intention of meeting or the person having the intention of exploiting the child during or after the meeting through sexual offences. This applies to meeting the child anywhere in the world.

► **Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005**

It is an offence under **section 1 of the Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005**, for a person aged 18 or over to meet or intend to meet with a child under the age of 16 years old having previously met or communicated with them, having the intention to engage in unlawful sexual activity either during or after the meeting. This applies to meeting the child anywhere in the world.

► The Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008

Under **section 21 of The Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008**, a person aged 18 or over commits an offence if they intentionally meet a child under 16 years old (having met with or communicated with them prior), or either party travel with the intention of meeting each other, or the person aged over 18 having the intention of exploiting the child through sexual offences. This applies to meeting the child anywhere in the world.

What is required to strengthen the law?

- **Legal definition** - A clear and recognised legal definition of grooming and statutory guidance for all UK nations.
- **Online focus** - Provisions for the online element of grooming which is increasing across the UK. This must be specifically referenced in legislation and measures to prevent against this added.
- **Extend age category** - The age of the provisions across the UK applies to anyone under 16. Provisions should be extended for young people between 16-18 who may still be at risk of grooming despite being of legal age to engage in sexual activity.
- **Offence for intent** - Create an offence of grooming which focuses on the preceding grooming behaviour as opposed to the focus in current legislation on the intention to meet and abuse children post the grooming behaviour having occurred.

References:

- ⁱ gov.uk/DfE/Safeguarding_and_Radicalisation.pdf
- ⁱⁱ childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/Keeping_Kids_Safe.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ gov.uk/National_Audit_on_Group-based_Child_Sexual_Exploitation_and_Abuse.pdf
- ^{iv} nspcc.org.uk/2024/online-grooming-crimes-increase

Conclusion

Although there are provisions in the legislation across the UK to address grooming, the law is not strong enough and does not go far enough in keeping children and young people safe.

The lack of a clear legal definition of grooming needs to be added to legislation to ensure clarity and consistency due to the complex and insidious nature of grooming. This should be accompanied with statutory guidance which addresses grooming across a range of settings in the UK (including faith communities).

Online grooming should be referenced and clear in legislation to ensure that there are provisions in place for those who are groomed online.

All provisions in the legislation should be extended to those who are under 18 years old to ensure that support is available for 16–18-year-olds who may be groomed.

An offence of grooming should be created to focus on the preceding grooming behaviour as opposed to the focus in current legislation on the intention to meet and abuse children post the grooming behaviour has occurred.

Any queries or for further information about this briefing email Katy Jackson on policy@thirtyoneeight.org or go to [@Thirtyoneeight](https://thirtyoneeight.org/manifesto)

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