

# Policy Brief: Enhancing Mental Health Services for People with a Sexual Interest in Children



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# 2PS Project Overview

2PS, which stands for Prevent & Protect Through Support is a highly innovative project offering a paradigm shift in the approach to tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) across Europe. The highly qualified and diverse consortium – together with leading global actors – are committed to laying the foundations for new coherent modus operandi that complement the reactive approaches currently favored. This is achieved by addressing the support needs of people with a sexual interest in children and people who feel they might offend. 2PS will share the best practices for guidance, therapy and treatment methods – combined with new training and awareness for frontline support workers and LEAs. This project aims to move preventive actions to the forefront, offering alternative courses of action to existing offenders and people who fear they might offend – including people with a sexual interest in children.

## **The main goals of the project are:**

- Increasing prevention actions and provide support and services to individuals at risk of engaging in illegal or risky behavior to help prevent them from harming children or engaging with materials that are a source of concern and could lead to illegal content consumption.
- Establishing a central repository of services and support actions that can help to divert anyone who recognises they are having indecent thoughts towards children.
- Providing support to those who have not yet offended and who are willing to engage to prevent offending and victimisation and, where offending has occurred, provide support to prevent future offending and victimisation.

## **These will be achieved through:**

- Understanding the prevention ecosystem and widening activities for knowledge exchange.
- Testing and validating directly with offending and non-offending people with a sexual interest in children as well as understanding key differentiators between them.
- Creation of new platforms and improvement of existing tools that encourage people who fear they might offend, including people with a sexual interest in children and CSAM users to seek support.
- Development of trainings to provide target stakeholders (frontline-support, specialists and LEAs), with greater knowledge of people who fear they might offend against children.
- Creation of campaigns to stimulate a change of perception on the role of prevention for combating CSAE.



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# HIGH LIGHTS:

- Across community, clinical, and mixed samples, people with a sexual interest in children demonstrated moderate (35% - 70%) to high (>70%) interest and participation in treatment.
- The most common motives for entering treatment were improving mental health, distress due to their sexual interest, depression, anxiety, suicidality, and coping with their sexual interest. There were differences between community and forensic samples in their motives, with the latter more motivated by gaining a sense of mastery, abstaining from reoffending, recovering their freedom, or pressure from others.
- Positive treatment experiences of people with a sexual interest in children include lessened feelings of loneliness, abstaining from offending, improved wellbeing, and decreased suicidal ideation.
- Negative experiences included hostile therapists, having been reported to police, abandonment or rejection by a therapist, and services focused on prevention instead of improving mental health.
- Barriers preventing people with a sexual interest in children from accessing therapy include the fear of exposure and rejection, perceived lack of options, and being prescribed a prevention-oriented therapy.
- Facilitating factors include empathic and compassionate therapists who do not treat them as future offenders.



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# Current Gaps and Challenges

It is challenging for services to balance a focus on prevention with addressing the mental health needs of the client seeking help. Furthermore, few services are designed specifically for individuals seeking confidential, voluntary support before they engage in harmful behaviours. Many therapists report feeling ill-equipped to address the unique needs of this group, further reducing available support options.

## Recommendations for Policymakers

To improve mental health services for individuals with a sexual interest in children and support broader CSA prevention efforts, we recommend the following actions:

**Expand Accessible Services:** Develop confidential, community-based services that provide non-judgmental support and review mandatory reporting guidelines with regards to their effectiveness in stopping offending and potential undesirable effects on treatment seeking.

**Enhance Therapist Training:** Implement specialized training programs for mental health professionals to build competence in working with this population, reducing stigma associated with help-seeking and improving service quality.

**Promote Primary Prevention:** Establish public health campaigns emphasizing the importance of mental health support for individuals at risk of offending and encouraging help-seeking behavior.

**Strengthen Collaboration:** Engage multidisciplinary teams, including researchers, therapists, legal professionals, and advocacy groups, to develop comprehensive prevention strategies.

**Evaluate and Refine Services:** Introduce robust monitoring and evaluation processes to assess the effectiveness of mental health interventions and inform evidence-based improvements.



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# CONCLUSIONS

Implementing these recommendations can improve the mental health of individuals with a sexual interest in children, reduce stigma, and ultimately contribute to the prevention of child sexual abuse. Policymakers are urged to collaborate with researchers, mental health professionals, and community organizations to develop comprehensive solutions that address these issues.

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