



# Visible

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# Project

## The goal

To improve health and wellbeing outcomes for adult survivors of child sexual abuse

## The strategy

To act as a catalyst for health and social care services system change

# “I couldn’t begin to recover from sexual abuse. I had kept my secret for so long.”

*We’re excited that you’re taking the time to learn about Visible, and its tangible and potentially transformative role in the lives of adult survivors of child sexual abuse.*

## Introduction

This booklet covers some key basics about the project, taking as its example the pioneering Leeds Visible Project, launched in June 2019. We’ve also included a handful of useful findings from our detailed report into Leeds Visible’s creation, which you can download in full at [visibleproject.org.uk](https://visibleproject.org.uk).

There’s too much information to cover everything here, but hopefully we’ve provided enough to inspire you to set up a Visible Project in your local area. We won’t pretend it’s all easy, but there’s now a wealth of support and resources to help you do it, and our own example to guide you. Above all, we’re convinced that the need for Visible has never been bigger, but also that the timing has never been better.

Thank you, and good luck in your own work.

**Leeds Visible**

# Until I had disclosed child secret for decades.”

## What is Visible?

Visible is a pioneering new initiative with a single, simple goal: to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

Devised, managed and delivered by a powerful collaboration between practitioners and abuse survivors, we want to be a catalyst for system change in the health and social care services, and beyond. Our first scheme is now up, running and improving lives in Leeds, and we hope it will serve as a blueprint for other Visible projects nationwide.

# 7.5%

Experts estimate that 7.5% of UK adults have suffered some form of child sexual abuse. In Leeds alone that equates to 50,000 adults.

## Why do we need it?

Awareness of the extent of non-recent child sexual abuse has grown in recent years, with cases like the Jimmy Savile case shining a spotlight on this sensitive issue. It's clear that this kind of abuse has been more widespread than anyone realised, affecting much bigger numbers of people from a far wider cross section of the population.

The enormous harm done to survivors of this abuse is also understood much more widely now. As a society in general – and especially as professionals working with survivors of child sexual abuse – we are more aware than ever of the psychological damage abuse causes. We know that this harm isn't just inflicted at the time of the abuse too. It has long-term – often lifelong – repercussions, seriously impacting the mental and emotional health of those affected by it, and also reducing their quality of life and their life chances. At its most severe, the impact of being abused as a child leads to serious mental health problems and sometimes suicide.

## Who is Visible for?

Visible is a force for good for the whole of society, but its structure and strategy have been carefully developed with two specific groups of people in mind: service users, and the people who work with them.

### Service users

Adults of any age and gender and from every walk of life can be survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and Visible aims to help them all. Visible is delivered in a way that makes it accessible to as many potential survivors as possible, including those who might be connected through employers or organisations which, up until now, haven't been involved in this issue.

### Professionals and staff

The support and resources offered by Visible can potentially be useful for any professional, practitioner or member of staff who comes into contact with the public. That's why our aim is for Visible to be embraced by as many organisations and agencies as possible, including the NHS, police forces, social services, independent charities, fire services, private businesses and faith organisations.

It's important to remember that people who work with abuse survivors might not realise that they're working with them. One of Visible's key goals is to raise awareness of the possibility that any user of any service is potentially a survivor of child sexual abuse. That's why Visible works with such a wide range of public-facing organisations and agencies.

To protect the original focus of Leeds Women's Counselling and Therapy Service as a service primarily for women, it's been important to keep a clear separation between it and the Visible project, which aims to help men and women equally.

## Structure: the groups of people behind Visible

The structure of Visible is particularly important: that's because it's a multi-agency project bringing together a wide range of senior figures, frontline practitioners and actual users of the service. Here, we've outlined the core groups and individual roles associated with the project and vital to its success.

## Reference Group

The Reference Group of abuse survivors was created with invaluable help from Leeds Involving People (LIP), an independent organisation specialising in helping service users share their experiences and express their views. The Reference Group met monthly and involved a total of 29 survivors over the two years it took to launch Visible Leeds. Special effort was made to include a diverse mix of survivors, and the overall feeling among the group was that taking part had been a worthwhile experience, both in terms of their own recovery and development and also their contribution to something positive.

## Service user involvement

One of the keys to Visible's integrity and success is the close involvement of service users. Survivors of childhood sexual abuse have played an integral part at every stage of the project's creation, delivery and evaluation. This hasn't just helped Visible identify, provide and fine-tune exactly the kind of help and support that survivors actually need, it has also added considerably to the project's authenticity; an extremely important quality for the vulnerable people it serves.

## Strategic Steering Group

This group was formed right at the project's outset and comprised representatives from various statutory and voluntary sectors across Leeds, like Leeds City Council, the Police and IAPT. The group met every two months and was the main influential body for pursuing Visible's primary goal: system change in approaches to adult survivors of child sexual abuse. The individuals within the Strategic Steering Group were carefully chosen for qualities like their strategic decision-making, expertise in safeguarding and commitment to change.

## Project Coordinator

A skilled and sympathetic project coordinator was appointed to coordinate the development, launch and evaluation of the Visible Project. This busy role involved a challenging mix of research, logistics, organisational, administrative and promotional work, and it was performed by a dedicated part-time worker on a fixed-term contract. The project coordinator liaised between the many different agencies and individuals involved in the project.

## Frontline practitioners

A large part of Visible's work has involved educating, training and collaborating with frontline practitioners: people from statutory and voluntary sectors who come into direct contact with adult survivors of child sexual abuse. So far in Leeds, we've provided training and resources to around 140 practitioners working with the following groups of service users:

- Women and men
- Sex workers
- Victims/survivors of crime/sexual violence
- Offenders, ex-offenders and those at risk of offending
- Homeless people
- People in crisis or with mental health issues
- Deaf people
- Torture survivors
- People with drug and alcohol problems

Frontline practitioners identified particular priorities in terms of what they and their colleagues needed for working with adult survivors of child sexual abuse. These included:

- Raising awareness of the prevalence of abuse
- Learning appropriate responses to disclosures of abuse
- Training in communicating with survivors and survivor-perpetrators
- Information on available services, good practice and prevention
- Partnership building with relevant organisations

## Support Worker

In some ways the most challenging role of all, the project's Support Worker met one-to-one with members of the Reference Group and oversaw their group sessions. This role was crucial to the project's success because it enabled Visible to involve survivors themselves. By its nature this is a particularly demanding role, as working with survivors and group dynamics is a complex challenge requiring enormous skill, sensitivity and resilience. This work also exposes support workers to the very real risk of vicarious trauma, which is another important consideration. For this reason, it's vital that any Visible project selects its support worker extremely carefully, and that expectations are managed to avoid the risk of survivors feeling let down by a lack of available resources. In Leeds it took several appointments to recruit the right person for this role, but it was definitely worth persevering.

**“I was treated for an eating disorder. I was very depressed. I was withdrawn. I had Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, PTSD and borderline personality disorder, and still no one asked me what had happened to me.”**

## **What we've achieved in Leeds**

In Leeds, we launched the UK's very first Visible scheme in 2019, hosted by Women's Counselling and Therapy Service and funded by Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales and NHS Leeds Clinical Commissioning Group. The scheme took two years of hard work and interagency collaboration to plan and create, but it's already providing resources and benefits to service users and practitioners alike.

### **Policy Statement**

A Policy Statement was agreed within just 10 months. It helps organisations to formally express their commitment to tackling the challenges faced by adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

### **Website**

A clear and comprehensive Visible website is now 'live' and provides a valuable source of information, signposting and downloadable resources. Self-help resources have also been made available to key online Leeds mental health initiatives like MindWell and MindMate.

### **Networks**

As a direct result of the process of creating Visible, new inter-agency networks and collaborations have been established throughout Leeds and beyond.

### **Staff empowerment**

We've already helped around 20 organisations equip their staff with the awareness, skills and confidence to recognise where abuse may have taken place, and also to advise and support survivors in more appropriate ways.

### **Visibility value**

The launch of Visible has provided a useful opportunity for pushing the subject of adult survivors of child sexual abuse higher up the public and public health agendas, both regionally and nationally.



## Starting your own Visible: some key tips

Like all the best initiatives, it takes time and resources to set up a Visible Project. The good news is that there's now plenty of support available. On top of that, the Leeds Project serves as an excellent blueprint, and we can provide detailed information and 'lessons learned' to help you. Here, we've outlined a few essentials to help you get started, with real-world examples of what we did in Leeds.

### Support and consult survivors

Adult survivors of child sexual abuse are crucial to Visible, offering unique insight and first-hand knowledge that maximise its impact. These survivors need to be well supported with dedicated resources.

- In Leeds, the members of a Reference Group shape our work and influence project delivery. The Group is supported by Leeds Involving People, which offers expertise and advice on involvement and multi-agency cooperation.

### Secure support and/or initial leadership from a local influencer

- In Leeds, this was the strategic mental health commissioner, then a council commissioner and mental health commissioner.

### Fundraise for start-up money

- In Leeds, the NHS Clinical Commissioning Group supported Visible with funds for an initial one-day workshop and the first year pilot.

### Establish a Strategic Steering Group

This should include large statutory bodies and any organisations or companies that have an interest, expertise or influence in the subject. Also invite small and specialised voluntary sector agencies.

- In Leeds, the backing of a single influential individual helped us win engagement from useful people and organisations.

### Be alert, bold and opportunistic

Look for chances to 'piggyback' relevant or sympathetic initiatives, strategies, projects, campaigns, organisations and needs assessments. Take every chance to add value to them by referencing adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

# “I wish someone had asked me

## Engage large service providers

Bigger organisations already have contact with – or can reach – larger numbers of people, including those in or near crisis.

## Engage organisations with large workforces

Research shows that a significant number their of employees will be adult survivors of child sexual abuse – people who Visible could help.

- In Leeds, we work with local authorities, NHS Trusts, Police and businesses.

## Share knowledge

Provide resources to equip all staff, in every organisation, with the information they need for making improvements. Remember that these organisations face high demand and have limited capacity, so their services are often very overstretched.

- We made short, highly impactful presentations (with facilitator notes) that can be delivered without much preparation at team meetings. We also promote an 8-minute film that tells a particularly powerful story. All the resources on our website are available to everyone, and you can contact us for Word or PowerPoint versions.

Alongside the various practical steps you’ll need to take, a few key insights will help you to get a Visible Project up and running with fewer problems and setbacks.

## Be flexible

Because policy and public services surrounding child sexual abuse are changing fast, flexibility proved a massive asset for the Leeds Visible Project and its creation. Being able to respond to changes in local needs and resources will increase the chance of the project’s success. By relying on a relatively small but committed group of individuals, Visible has had an advantage over bigger, slower organisations, and can use its relative agility to good effect.

## Consider diversity

An awareness of diversity needs to underpin every aspect of Visible, including an appreciation that child sexual abuse affects women and men from every class and community. It’s important to build trust and include BAME representatives and those from hard-to-reach communities like asylum-seekers and refugees.

# sooner what happened to me.”

Think too about using outreach work, and performing interventions at a cultural level, like at local mosques to encourage potentially reluctant survivors to engage with the project.

## **Manage expectations**

Working with survivors of child sexual abuse requires great skill and sensitivity. Any Support Worker who gains the trust of survivors will inevitably find themselves working closely with individuals, and potentially in a therapeutic capacity, albeit unofficially. This dynamic needs careful management with boundaries and time limits, and real honesty around the wider availability of professional help like counselling.

## **Allow time**

It takes time to develop networks, recruit individuals and establish a safe and ethically rigorous Visible Project. Set realistic goals and timescales, and don't be afraid to change them in order to do things properly.

## **Reflect, learn, educate and evaluate**

Understand that this work needs to be informed by current thinking and best practice at all times, and develop

suitable systems of accountability to help organisations meet their commitments to policy change. It's also important to nurture a culture where the education of existing services and the development of relevant new ones becomes second nature.

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## **Now is the perfect time**

Growing public awareness and ongoing media attention mean this is a very good time to launch a Visible project of your own. Current initiatives like the IICSA's Truth Project and the work of the Centre for Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse add to this timeliness, and so does the current interest in Adverse Childhood Experiences and trauma informed care. Don't forget to make yourself aware of parallel initiatives you can either collaborate or align yourself with.

## Resources and further reading

If you'd like to know about Leeds Visible or setting up a Visible project in your own local area, just visit [visibleproject.org.uk](https://visibleproject.org.uk)  
Alternatively, please contact:

Leeds Women's Counselling and Therapy Service **0113 245 5725** or email [visible@visibleproject.org.uk](mailto:visible@visibleproject.org.uk)

