



visible Strategy

Improving health and wellbeing
with adult survivors of child sexual abuse

Visible Project Leeds – Strategy 2026–2029

1. Executive Summary

The Visible Project is an award-winning, survivor-led initiative based in Leeds, working to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse (CSA). This strategy sets out how Visible will act as a catalyst for system-wide change across health, social care, and wider systems in Leeds from 2026 to 2029. Grounded in lived and living experience, the strategy focuses on improving physical and mental health outcomes, advancing **real** trauma-informed care, strengthening workforce capability, and amplifying the voices of survivors in policy, practice, and service design.

No one knows how many adults experience sexual abuse in their childhood because, despite the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (iiCSA, October 2022) data is not collected. The Leeds care record does not collect data on this cohort either but we can make some estimates based on previous research. The iiCSA report estimates that 1 in 6 girls and 1 in 20 boys experience sexual abuse before the age of 16. NICE (December 2025) suggests 1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men report having been sexually abused as a child. However, it is well known that most people, especially men, do not disclose having experienced childhood sexual abuse and, even if they do disclose, they are not likely to do so until later in life. Therefore, the prevalence is more likely to be 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men having experienced CSA.

The shocking truth is that there is likely to be anywhere between 50,000 and 100,000 adults in Leeds living with the impacts of CSA. The Visible Project therefore wishes to draw

attention to a major and persistent public health issue and work with organizations to improve services for everyone who is likely to be living with the consequences of being sexually abused as a child. Through collaboration across statutory, voluntary, community, and private sectors, Visible will drive real change that is compassionate, innovative, evidence-based, and sustainable.

2. Vision

Leeds will be a city where adults who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, and are still living with the consequences of CSA trauma, are safe and feel safe, believed, supported and able to achieve the best possible health and wellbeing throughout their lives.

3. Mission

The Visible Project will be a catalyst for systemic change in order to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse in Leeds by:

- Centering lived and living experience in all aspects of system change
- Bringing real trauma-informed, survivor-specific responses to healthcare issues.
- Supporting organizations and professionals to work more effectively and compassionately
- Providing an environment where adult survivors can come together as a community and develop their own ideas for supporting themselves and one another.
- Influencing policy, practice, and public understanding of Childhood Sexual Abuse as a critical, long-term public

4. Values

- **Survivor-led:** Decisions and priorities are determined by those with lived and living experience.
 - **Compassionate:** We promote understanding, safety, and respect in all interactions.
 - **Collaborative:** Change happens through partnership across sectors and communities.
 - **Evidence-informed:** Our work is grounded in research, practical knowledge, and lived experience.
 - **Inclusive:** We acknowledge and embed diversity of experience, identity, and need in all that we do.
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5. Strategic Context

Childhood sexual abuse is associated with long-term mental health difficulties, poorer physical health, increased health-harming behaviors, and adverse social and economic outcomes across the whole life of those people who have experienced it. Suicidality, self-injury, dissociation, depression and anxiety are all serious conditions which people who have experienced childhood sexual abuse may experience at any point throughout their life. These circumstances may make it harder for people with living experience of CSA to work or look after their physical needs from time-to-time during their lifetime.

Complex-PTSD (C-PTSD), which is different from PTSD, is common amongst survivors of childhood sexual abuse and, due

to the effects CSA can have on the developing mind of the child and young adult, it should be seen more as an acquired form of neuro-diversity than a mental illness as many sufferers experience enduring differences in sensory processing, attention, concentration, hyper-vigilance and nervous system regulation which can affect daily life in ways that resemble other forms of neurodivergence.

Many people with C-PTSD appear to function well on the surface while privately struggling with emotional regulation, self-worth, relationships or chronic stress and anxiety. In any case the symptoms and behavioral impact on individuals varies widely and is frequently misdiagnosed as a personality disorder – if it is diagnosed at all. Most CSA survivors report being treated in a completely inappropriate way when trying to access health services and then being blamed for their own response to this re-traumatization because most health professionals do not see the need to act in a **real** trauma-informed way to service users, whether sexual abuse has been disclosed or not. Accessing public services of any description is often stressful because the services concentrate on procedure and not compassion. Service users often feel they are not treated as individuals with human needs. There are some great examples of trauma-informed practices in the city but they are isolated cases rather than the norm.

As well as the catastrophic effect on the individual's health and wellbeing, the impacts of Childhood Sexual Abuse create significant and avoidable pressure on health services, social care, welfare systems, and the wider economy. Again, these impacts are not measured so they are invisible.

Therefore, responses to CSA in adulthood have historically been fragmented and under-resourced. People with living experience of childhood sexual abuse feel silenced and ignored. Leeds has an opportunity to lead nationally by embedding survivor-specific, trauma-informed approaches across systems. Visible is uniquely placed to coordinate and

accelerate this change because of it's unique structure, bringing together people with living experience and professionals working across all aspects of health and social care.

6. Strategic Objectives (2026-2029)

Objective 1: Be the leading facilitator of Voice of those living with the effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse in Leeds; learning from the experience of real people and promoting understanding and compassionate care.

Key actions:

- Sustain and develop living experience advisory and co-production structures
- Ensure survivor voices directly influence commissioning policy, service design and delivery
- Promote the safe and ethical participation of people with living experience in system change activity

Intended outcomes:

- Visible will be the trusted and influential voice of adults living with the effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse in Leeds.
 - Service providers will know to ask Visible to contribute to service delivery improvement initiatives and feedback opportunities.
 - Increased trust and engagement between survivors and services
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Objective 2: Involve adults with lived and living experience of Childhood Sexual Abuse in all the relevant work taking place in the City, including in the Visible Project itself.

Key actions:

- Expand the participation of the Leadership Reference Group, ensuring inclusivity and diversity of living experience.
- Provide significant opportunities for the Leadership Reference Group to share their living experience with professionals who provide the relevant services that survivors are likely to be accessing.
- Develop new initiatives that widen engagement and diversify representation especially from under-represented survivors groups (including but not limited to male survivors, deaf survivors, LGBTQI+ survivors and survivors from diverse ethnic and cultural communities)

Intended outcomes:

- Living experience perspectives are embedded in service delivery and decision-making across health and care systems
 - People with living experience of CSA feel safe and listened to when accessing any health, care, social or statutory service.
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Objective 3: Improve the physical and mental health outcomes of adults living with the effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse.

Key actions:

- work with health and care organizations to promote the facts associated with the long-term effects of living with CSA trauma, both in terms of physical and mental and physical health issues.
- Provide evidence, based on the latest research, of the disparities in health outcomes and life-expectancy between the general population and people living with the effects of childhood sexual abuse.
- Advocate for integrated responses addressing chronic pain, long-term conditions and mental health
- Campaign for longer term mental health provision for complex cases so people don't fall down the cracks in provision and so that survivors can choose to go in and out of therapy as they need to.
- Support services to address barriers to healthcare access for survivors including what feels safe for people living with CSA trauma.

Intended outcomes:

- Improved self-reported health and wellbeing among survivors
- Reduced crisis-driven service use over time

Objective 4: Build Workforce Knowledge, Confidence, and Capacity

Visible will support workers, services, organizations and institutions to work more effectively with both

service-users and employees who have experienced Childhood Sexual Abuse.

Key actions:

- Deliver and support high-quality training, reflection, and learning opportunities
- Develop practical resources grounded in lived experience
- Help professionals to understand the retraumatizing effect of negative service-user experience.
- Support organisations to embed real trauma-informed principles in their practices, policies, procedures and organizational culture

Intended outcomes:

- Increased confidence and competence among staff when providing services to people with CSA trauma.
 - People with living experience of CSA feel safe, listened to and supported when they access public services, not just healthcare services.
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Objective 5: Increase Public Understanding and Awareness

Visible will promote wider public understanding of the prevalence of Childhood Sexual Abuse and its often life-long impact on individuals and communities, specifically around ensuring that the distinct nature of CSA trauma is recognised and addressed.

Key actions:

- Lead public-facing awareness and engagement activity
- Challenge myths, stigma, and minimisation of the life-long effects of CSA trauma
- Hold public authorities to account with regard to the obligations in improving the health outcomes of people who have experienced CSA.
- Position Childhood Sexual Abuse as a public health and social justice issue

Intended outcomes:

- Data will be collected around the prevalence of CSA in line with the recommendations of the iiCSA.
- Reduced stigma and increased validation for survivors
- Greater public and political support for sustained investment in services that will improve the health and wellbeing of adult survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse.

7. Partnerships and Reach

Visible works across statutory and third sectors in Leeds and intends to extend influence into, not just health and social care settings but also, education, faith, community, sport and commercial settings. Partnerships are central to achieving system change.

Priority partners include:

- NHS and primary care services
 - Local authority and commissioning bodies
 - Voluntary and community sector organisations
 - Specialist CSA and trauma services
 - Employers, education providers, and community institutions
 - Other public sector organisations
 - Large commercial organisations in Leeds
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8. Measuring Impact

Visible will demonstrate impact through a combination of:

- Survivor-defined outcomes and feedback
 - System-level indicators (policy change, service redesign, workforce development)
 - Health and wellbeing outcome measures where appropriate
 - Qualitative evidence of culture and practice change
 - Evaluation approaches will be proportionate, ethical, and trauma-informed.
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9. Sustainability and Future Development

Over the period of this strategy, Visible will:

- Strengthen its strategic leadership role within Leeds

- Increase representation from a diverse range of people with living experience of Childhood Sexual Abuse
- Develop and manage an appropriate social media presence
- Diversify funding and partnerships to ensure independence and financial sustainability.
- Review the structure of the Visible Project to ensure it is independent, sustainable and relevant.
- Share learning locally and nationally to influence wider change

“What was done to us when we were children was a crime and our lives were forever altered. The people and systems who were meant to protect us failed us. Since then we have been ignored, fobbed-off, belittled and not believed. Society is more comfortable if we remain invisible. But if you are prepared to see us, to listen to us, and work together with us to invest in survivor-led, trauma-informed and person-centred approaches, Leeds can improve the quality of life for survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse, reduce long-term health inequalities, and deliver more effective use of public resources. That can be the reparation we deserve and we

can finally be VISIBLE as we were meant to be. ”

Michelle van Toop

**CSA Survivor and Chair of the Visible
Project, Leeds**

The cover page of this strategy document shows a photograph taken during the filming of “Imagine if Bones Could Talk...” by Debbie Riley and is reproduced with her permission. You can watch our film by visiting our website at www.visibleproject.org.uk where you will find lots of other resources which are available free-of-charge for use in your practice