

# EVIDENCE BRIEF

## CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE RESPONSE PATHWAYS

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### KEY MESSAGES

- There are multiple contexts in which child sexual abuse occurs, is identified or disclosed, and response pathways.
- Therapeutic support should always be offered to every victim-survivor in all response pathways.
- Child Safety is not always best placed to lead a response to child sexual abuse. The focus of child safety is children at continuing risk.
- A child with a protective parent, an adult survivor, or an unidentified child in child sexual abuse exploitation material, are best responded to by agencies other than child safety.
- The Arch centres provide a multidisciplinary response to child and adult child sexual abuse including specialist police and therapeutic services and are the best placed to determine the right response pathways in each case in a victim-centred and trauma-informed way.
- Child Safety Services should be included in the Arch; this would enable all child sexual abuse matters to be rapidly screened from child safety intake to a specialist sexual abuse response, inclusive of child safety.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this evidence brief is to inform Tasmania's ARL renewal project to identify optimal responses to reports and information about child sexual abuse received by the child safety and wellbeing intake helpline 'the Advice and Referral Line'. This brief maps out the different contexts in which child sexual abuse occurs, is identified or disclosed and the different response pathways available in Tasmania. The aim of this policy briefing is to support clarity and consistency in responding to child sexual abuse by outlining what falls within the remit of statutory child protection services and when concerns should be referred to other systems or authorities for action. This evidence brief provides a recommendation that Child Safety Services be included in the Arch; this would enable all child sexual abuse matters to be rapidly screened from child safety intake to a specialist sexual abuse response, inclusive of child safety.

## BACKGROUND

Child sexual abuse is a serious but preventable issue with far-reaching and lasting impacts on children, families, and the broader community. As defined in the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2023 (National Office of Child Safety, 2021), child sexual abuse refers to any act that exposes a child or young person to, or involves a child or young person in, sexual activities that:

- they do not understand
- they do not or cannot consent to
- are not accepted by the community
- are unlawful.

Child sexual abuse differs in important ways from other forms of child abuse, such as physical abuse or neglect, which are mostly perpetrated by parents or other caregivers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021-22). In these cases, the role of statutory child protection is typically well-defined. In contrast, child sexual abuse can occur in broad range of contexts, including homes, schools, recreational settings, online spaces, or within peer or extended family relationships. Sexual abuse may be committed by adults or other children and young people, whether known to the child or not (Mathews et al., 2024). Sexual abuse may be disclosed by the victim-survivor during childhood or later in life as an adult. Sexual abuse may also be identified without a disclosure, for example, through identification of children in child sexual exploitation material. These varied circumstances require a more nuanced understanding of associated safety concerns, and varied response pathways.

### Contexts within which child sexual abuse can occur

The many contexts in which CSA occurs can notably influence the presenting characteristics and appropriate response. CSA encompasses the following:

- **Intrafamilial child sexual abuse:** Occurs when a child is sexually abused by relatives or someone who feel like family from the child's point of view (e.g. a parent, foster carer, or parent's partner) (Quadara et al., 2015). This may occur in person or online.
- **Extra-familial child sexual abuse:** Sexual abuse by someone outside of the child's family system (Quadara et al., 2015). This includes adults known or unknown to the child, including neighbours, family friends, or online contacts. It occurs in contexts where there is no parental or familial relationship. It may be linked to an institution; in which case it is described as 'institutional child sexual abuse' (described below). Extra-familial child sexual abuse may occur in person or online.
- **Institutional child sexual abuse:** Sexual abuse that occurs within, or is facilitated by, someone within any public or private body, agency, organisation, club or other entity that provides (or has provided) activities, care, program, facilities, or other services to children (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). The abuse may occur in person or online.

- **Harmful sexual behaviours:** Sexual behaviours displayed by children or young people that fall outside what may be considered developmentally appropriate or socially acceptable. These behaviours can cause harm both to the child displaying the behaviour and to any other child or young person involved. They may occur in person or online. When other children are involved, the behaviours may include a lack of consent, mutuality, or reciprocity, and can involve coercion, shame, force, or a misuse of power (National Office of Child Safety, 2021).

Harmful sexual behaviours can happen in a range of settings, including within the home (such as between siblings) or in any place where children and young people interact, such as schools, community spaces, or online environments.

- **Child sexual exploitation:** A form of child sexual abuse characterised by some form of exchange or perceived 'trade', whereby the child or young person is coerced, manipulated, or deceived into a sexual interaction for tangible and/or intangible benefits (Alderson & Ireland, 2020). Children and young people who are experiencing child sexual exploitation should not be misunderstood as a child displaying harmful sexual behaviour. Child sexual exploitation may occur in person or online.
- **Child sexual exploitation material:** Material that depicts or describes:
  - a person who is, appears to be or is implied to be, a child
  - as a victim of sexual abuse, or
  - a person who is, appears to be or is implied to be, a child
  - engaged in or apparently engaged in a sexual pose or
  - sexual activity (whether or not in the presence of other persons), or
  - a person who is, appears to be or is implied to be, a child
  - in the presence of another person who is engaged or
  - apparently engaged in a sexual pose or sexual activity, or
  - the private parts of a person who is, appears to be or is implied to be, a child.

## RESPONSE PATHWAYS

The following is intended to map different contexts of child sexual abuse and response pathways in Tasmania to assist in determining when a matter requires a response from Child Safety Services or other authorities.

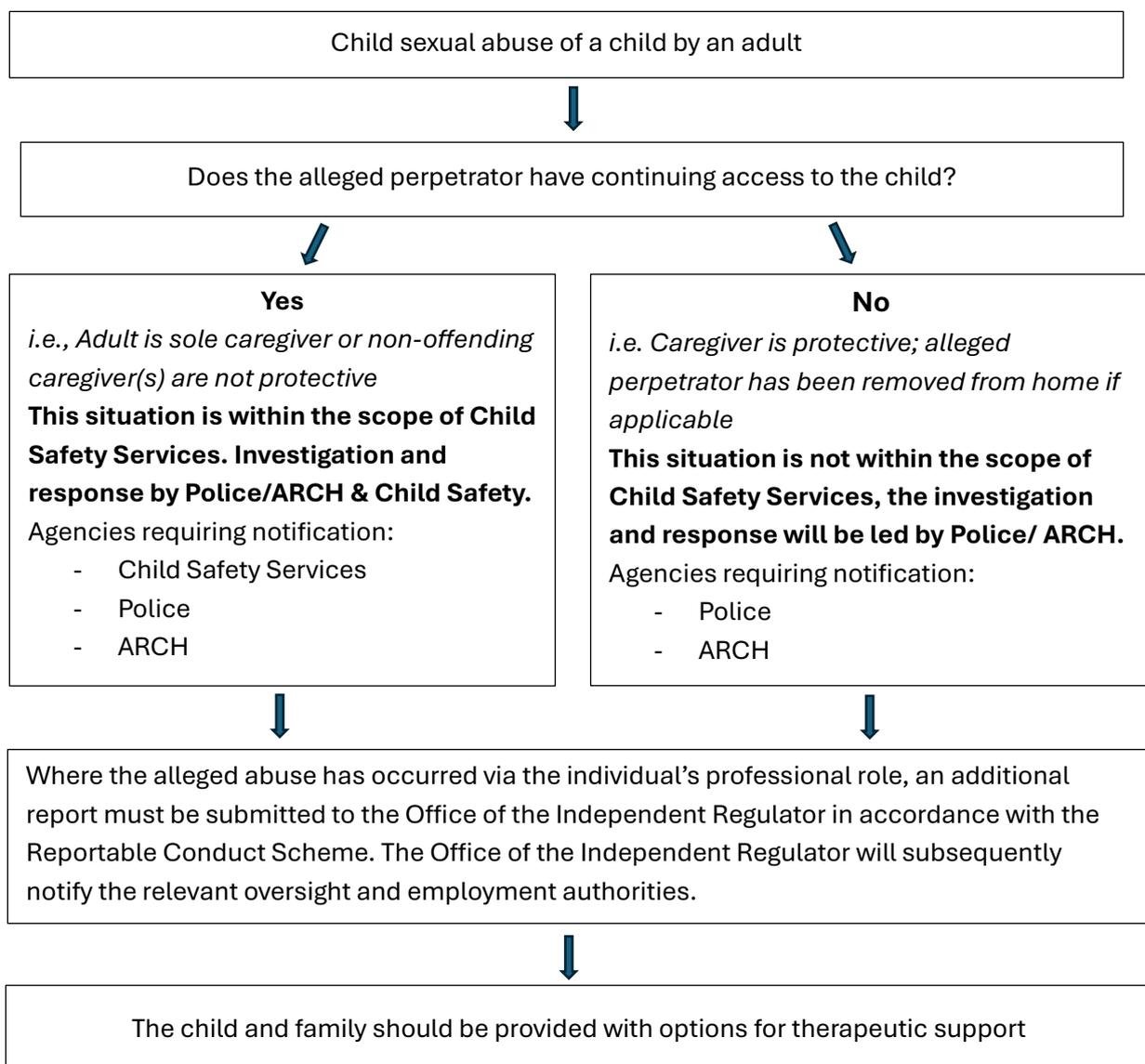
### Reports of child sexual abuse by an adult where the child in question is currently under the age of 18

All reports of sexual abuse involving a child or young person who is currently under 18 require a response. However, the appropriate response pathway depends on whether there are ongoing child safety concerns and the presence or absence of a protective caregiver.

The flow chart representing this response is shown in **Figure 1**.

**Figure 1**

*Visual Response Pathway for Child Sexual Abuse by an Adult*



## Harmful Sexual Behaviours

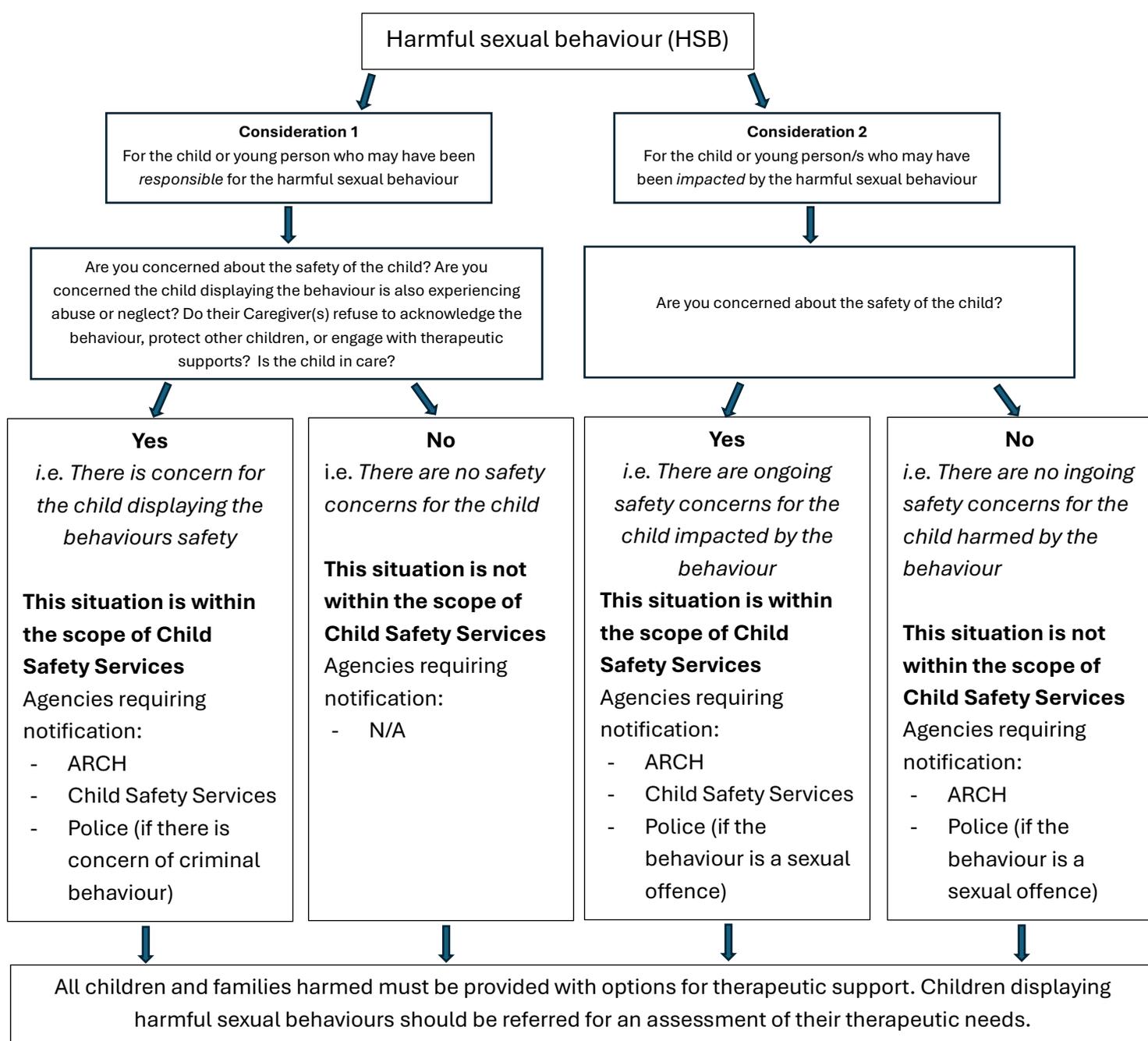
Child Safety Services have a role in responding to harmful sexual behaviours in certain contexts. Where child sexual abuse has occurred, or safety concerns exist for any child involved, a response is required by Child Safety Services. However, not all sexual behaviours exhibited by children are harmful. Further, not all occurrences of harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children and young constitute child sexual abuse (e.g., behaviours that are solitary and do not involve other children). These cases often do not require the response of Child Safety Services. This response should also be guided by the forthcoming Harmful Sexual Behaviours Policy established by the Tasmanian Government.

All children and families should be offered therapeutic support and children responsible for HSB should be referred for an assessment of their behaviours and associated needs.

The response pathway is shown in **Figure 2**.

**Figure 2**

*Visual Response Path for Harmful Sexual Behaviours of Children*



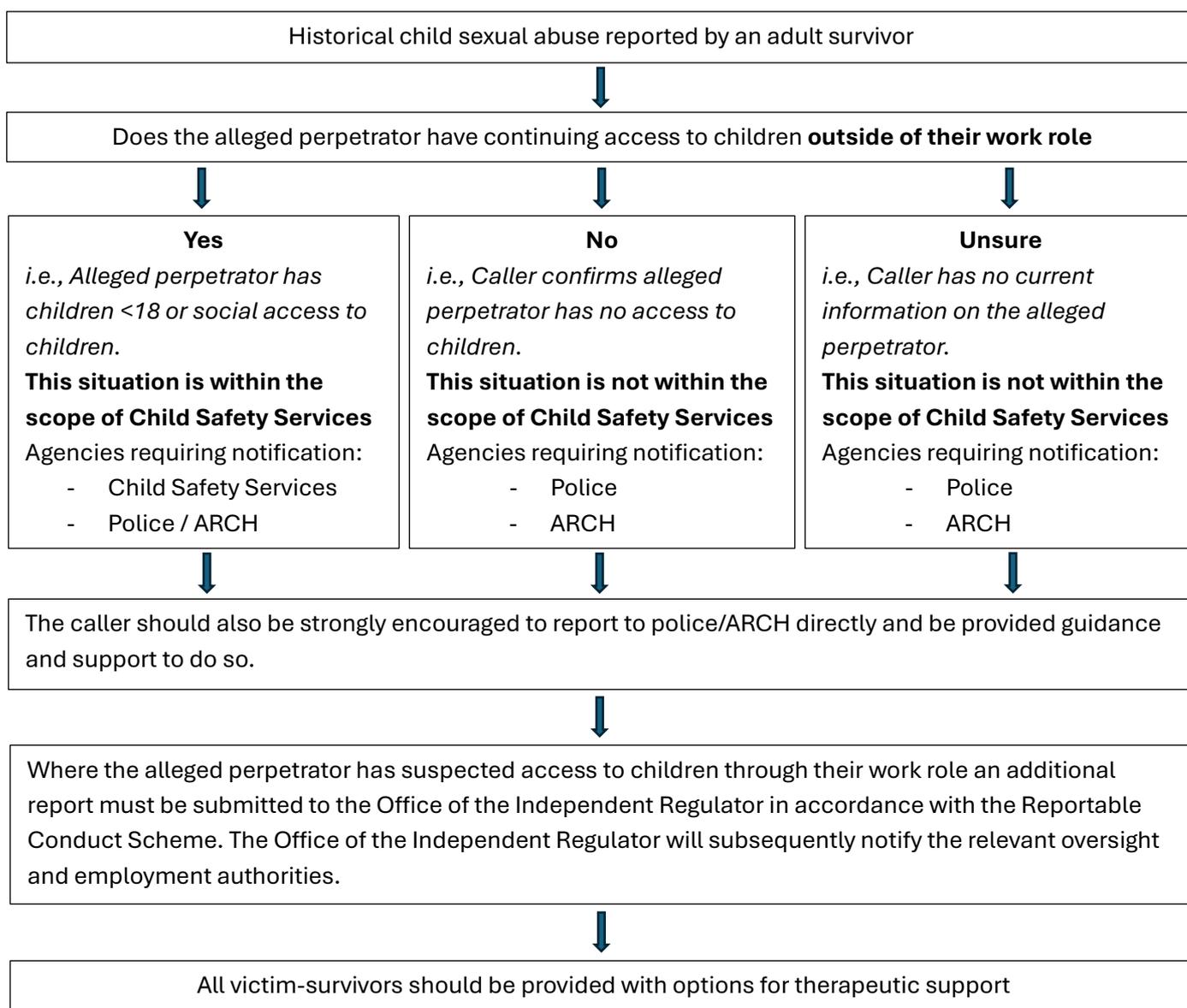
## Reports in relation to adult survivors of historical abuse

Adults disclosing historical child sexual abuse require support and clear guidance during what is a confronting and challenging process. Reports of historical child sexual abuse only require a response from Child Safety Services if there is current concern that the alleged perpetrator has current contact with children.

This response pathway is shown in **Figure 3**.

**Figure 3**

*Visual Response Path for Historical Child Sexual Abuse Reported by an Adult Survivor*



## Reports of reportable conduct/grooming by professionals working with children

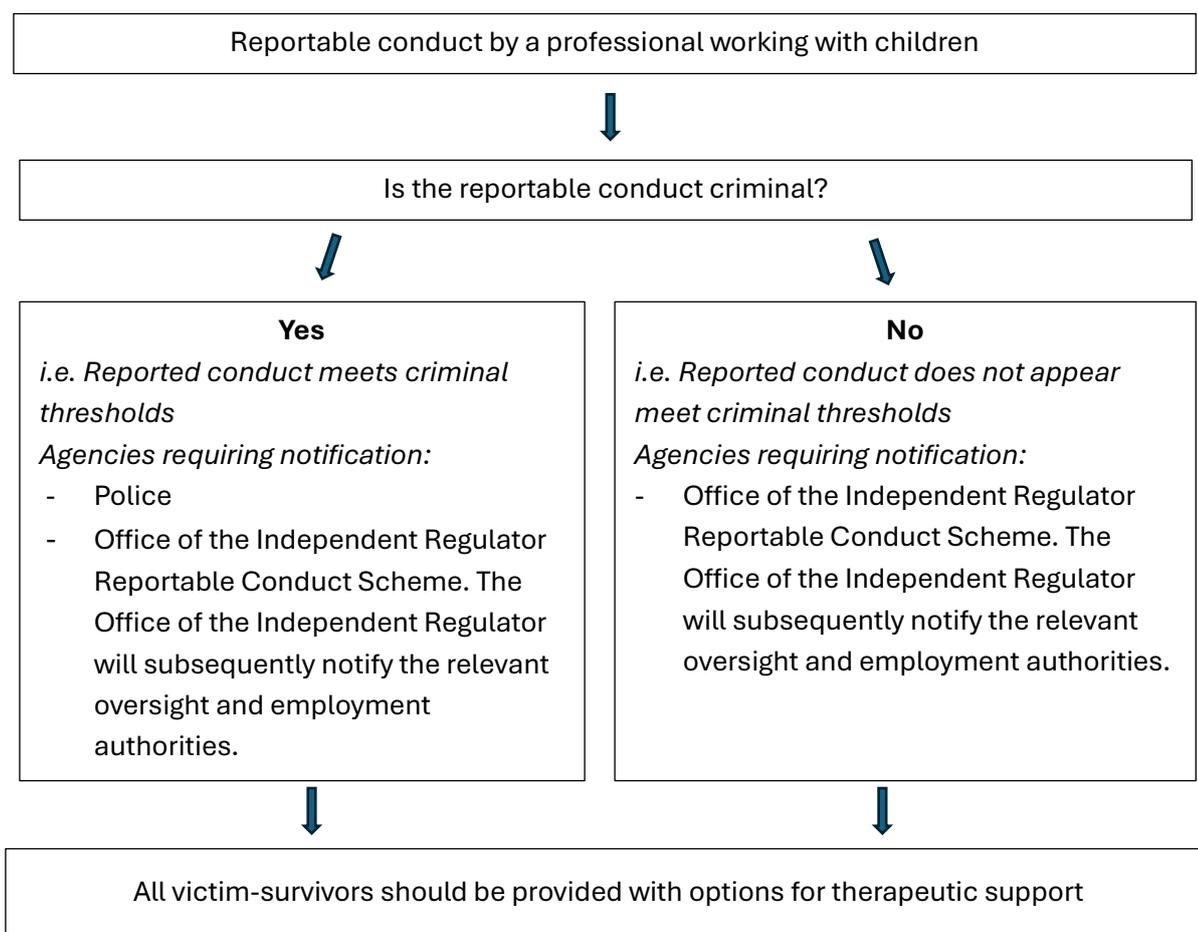
Reportable conduct is a term that includes both criminal and non-criminal behaviour, such as grooming, sexual abuse, physical violence, emotional harm, neglect, and failing to report child abuse. Reportable conduct may not constitute child sexual abuse in all situations, though these types of behaviour can lead to future child sexual abuse and must be acted upon.

For reportable conduct that involves child sexual abuse, the above response pathway should be followed. For all other behaviours, professional regulators, such as the [Office of the Independent Regulator](#), are better placed to respond. Police should only be informed where the actions meet a criminal threshold, but therapeutic support should always be offered to the person making the report.

This pathway is shown in **Figure 4**.

**Figure 4**

*Visual Response Path for Reportable Conduct by a Professional Working with Children*



## **THERAPEUTIC SERVICES**

There are a range of specialist services available to support children, young people, and families affected by child sexual abuse. Families can be provided with options for therapeutic support via ARCH.

Key services include:

- Sexual Assault Support Service (SASS) (South)
- Laurel House (North-West)

## **ARCH CENTRES**

Tasmania's Arch centres provide multidisciplinary support for individuals affected by sexual harm. Arch is a safe place where you victim-survivors of sexual violence can get information and support. At Arch, services and organisations that support people affected by sexual harm work together under the one roof to provide coordinated and collaborative, trauma-informed and victim-centred support. The service providers at Arch are:

- Laurel House (at northern Arch) – counsellors
- Sexual Assault Support Service (at southern Arch) – counsellors
- Tasmania Police – specialist investigators (not in uniform)
- Family Violence Counselling and Support Service – Family Violence Workers
- Strong Families Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line – Child Safety and Wellbeing Workers
- Child Safety Service – Child Safety Officers

## **CHILD SAFETY AND WELLBEING INTAKE AND THE ARCH CENTRES - ROLE AND FUNCTION IN RESPONDING TO REPORTS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE**

The function of a child safety and wellbeing intake line is to rapidly refer all allegations of child sexual abuse for an appropriate response. Requiring an intake and triage service to gather sufficient information to determine what category of child sexual is being reported and to make the often multiple referrals required in a generalist rapid screening environment creates risk of predictable human error. Child sexual abuse is best responded to by child sexual abuse specialists in a trauma-informed and victim-centred response.

The Arch Centres are well placed to be the single point of referral for child safety and wellbeing intake line to rapidly refer all child sexual abuse contacts regardless of context.

ARCH Centres should include a [delegated Child Safety Officer](#) to jointly triage with Police and specialist sexual assault counselling services, ensuring the right agencies are engaged in each case.

Police and Child Safety Officers within ARCH Centres are also best positioned to assess 'intel' on alleged historical perpetrators' current access to children.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

1. It is recommended that the Arch centres be the single point of referral for all child sexual abuse contacts made to the child safety and wellbeing intake line
2. It is recommended that a delegated Child Safety Officer be situated within the Arch centres to jointly triage and respond to cases with Police and specialist counselling services.

## REFERENCES

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