

Child sexual exploitation by organised networks

Investigation Report
February 2022

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A report of the Inquiry Panel
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Executive Summary

In this investigation, the Inquiry considered the sexual exploitation of children by organised networks. Department for Education guidance recognises that child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It is said to occur “*where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator*”.¹

A ‘network’ was defined for the purposes of this investigation as “*two or more individuals (whether identified or not) who are known to (or associated with) one another*”. Offender networks are often loosely interconnected rather than formally organised and older children or teenagers may also be involved in grooming victims.

The sexual exploitation of children by networks is not a rare problem confined to a small number of areas with high-profile criminal cases. It is a crime which involves the sexual abuse of children in the most degrading and destructive ways, by multiple perpetrators. The Inquiry therefore chose to base this investigation on areas which had not already been the subject of independent investigation (such as Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxford). The intention was to obtain an accurate picture of current practice at a strategic level and through examination of individual cases, as well as drawing on wider knowledge about child sexual exploitation in England and Wales.

Six case study areas were chosen: Durham, Swansea, Warwickshire, St Helens, Tower Hamlets and Bristol. Eight themes were examined in each area:

- problem profiling and disruption of child sexual exploitation;
- empathy and concern for child victims;
- risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children;
- missing children, return home interviews and children in care;
- male victims;
- children with disabilities;
- partnership working; and
- audit, review and performance improvement.

In addition, the Inquiry undertook a detailed analysis of material held by the relevant local authority and police force in relation to 33 children from the six case study areas, in order to better understand the experiences of children who were currently being (or very recently had been) sexually exploited by networks.

The experiences of victims and survivors

As set out in the report, the Inquiry heard many distressing accounts of children who had been sexually exploited and abused. For example:

¹ *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, July 2018, [HOM003350](#)

- CS-A371 was taken into foster care when she was 10 years old, supplied with drugs at age 11 and was self-harming by 12. Adult men took her to flats and sexually exploited her. Police became involved when she was 17 and several prosecutions followed. She describes being demeaned by defence barristers in court who accused her of being racist and “a slag”² and said repeatedly that she had wanted sex with the perpetrators and had lied about her age.
- At 12 years old, Greg was groomed by a 26-year-old man who initially told him he was 18. The first contact was online but soon afterwards Greg met the man in person. This man established a closeness with him, then introduced Greg to other adult males who subsequently ordered him to go to various places and have sex with other men. Greg said the abuse he experienced became more severe and sadistic, as he was put in increasingly dangerous situations.
- CS-A373 told us that she experienced domestic violence as a young child and felt rejected at home. She repeatedly went missing from home but was found by the police and returned to her mother. When she was 12, an adult in the group she was associating with gave her cannabis, forced her to perform oral sex and raped her. At the age of 13, she was hospitalised after being given drugs by a local man, then placed in care outside her local area. At the age of 15, she met another adult male who gave her alcohol and cannabis before raping her. She reported this to the police and he was given a caution for having sex with a child under 16. She received no support or counselling and took an overdose. She repeatedly went missing and was returned home without any enquiry about why she was running away. She felt neither police nor social services properly assessed the risks she faced.
- CS-A372 was first raped in 2007 at the age of 12 by a 16-year-old boy who was prosecuted and convicted of rape. By the time she was 13, her home life was increasingly violent and chaotic. She told us her father threatened to ‘prostitute’ her and she started running away from home. Her case was closed by children’s social care on several occasions, which her records showed was because staff thought she was “*putting herself at risk*”.³ CS-A372 described being forced to perform oral sex on more than 20 adult men at the age of 14. This was also filmed. A number of men were charged but the charges were later dropped. She told us how, a few months later, she was abducted by a group of men and held at gunpoint while being forced to perform oral sex on them. She was placed back in care and returned to a pattern of repeated self-harm.

The understanding of the scale of child sexual exploitation

Child sexual exploitation has been a designated strategic policing priority since 2015, giving it the same significance as terrorism and serious organised crime. Despite this, the Inquiry’s findings indicate that less is now known and understood about the prevalence of this appalling crime than was the case prior to 2015.

An accurate picture of the prevalence of child sexual exploitation could not be gleaned from either criminal justice or children’s social care data. This has arisen in part because of changes in the recording and tracking systems of police and local authorities, which are

² CS-A371 22 September 2020 84/12-15

³ CS-A372 (read) 21 September 2020 16/19

used to identify and count specific incidents of child sexual exploitation. Now many areas subsume the data within wider categories, such as child criminal exploitation or child abuse more generally.

The child criminal exploitation model covers all aspects of child exploitation, such as trafficking or county lines, including those which are particularly related to drug offending. The rationale for adoption of this model appears to be that it discourages a 'silo' mentality in relation to all aspects of child exploitation. This comes at the cost of making child sexual exploitation even more of a hidden problem and increasingly underestimated. More significantly, there appears to be a flawed assumption that this form of child sexual abuse is on the wane. There is also a suspicion that some do not wish to be labelled as 'another Rochdale or Rotherham'.

In keeping with the wider picture described above, the Inquiry did not receive a reliable picture of child sexual exploitation from the six case study areas that provided data. The data presented were confused and confusing. There were inconsistencies in each case study area, with unexplained trends and in some cases large, unexplained variations in the figures. The data indicated that cases of child sexual exploitation were falling in two case study areas. Reductions in exploitation may in part be related to changes in local recording practices.

It is hard to reconcile the idea that child sexual exploitation by networks is now less prevalent with the widely reported 'explosion' in online child sexual abuse, including exploitation. As the Inquiry has heard in other investigations, some of the worst examples include where children – including babies and infants – are live streamed for money, sometimes being sexually abused at the direction of the paying perpetrator. It is more important than ever that the relevant agencies in every area should have a specific focus on what is known about child sexual exploitation, distinct from child criminal exploitation, whether or not the agencies adopt the child criminal exploitation model.

There were significant difficulties in this investigation in identifying networks or groups of abusers. The case study material showed that there were cases of child sexual exploitation by networks in all six case study areas but the police forces in these areas were generally not able to provide any evidence about these networks, using either the Inquiry's definition or any other. The Inquiry was particularly struck by the reporting that there were no known or reported organised networks in two of the case study areas. In relation to Swansea, we were told that there were "*no data*" to suggest that there was sexual exploitation by networks or gang-related child sexual abuse in the area.⁴ However, there were examples of child sexual exploitation by groups in the evidence seen by the Inquiry which should have been identified by the police. South Wales Police acknowledged "*there is a likelihood that there are organised criminal networks that we haven't discovered*".⁵ The local authority in Tower Hamlets also informed the Inquiry it had not identified any cases of sexual exploitation by networks, applying the definition of an organised criminal group, but then acknowledged that "*just because we haven't seen it doesn't mean to say it's not there*".⁶

⁴ SWP000151_008 para 1.27; SWP000163_002-003 para 6; SWP000151_016 para 1.49; SWP000151_040 para 3.21

⁵ Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 115/17-116/11, 135/7-14

⁶ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 20/21-21/8

The Inquiry has proposed improvements to this unsatisfactory position. Any denial of the scale of child sexual exploitation – either at national level or locally in England and Wales – must be challenged.

Definitions, terminology and access to services

There has been much academic and professional debate about definitions of child sexual exploitation, including the concept of ‘exchange’ and whether it is necessary to be present in an individual case of sexual abuse in order for it to meet the criteria for child sexual exploitation. ‘Exchange’ involves the child receiving something that they need or want, which might suggest that children have a choice about their own exploitation. Others consider it helpful in recognising the manipulation of children into sexual exploitation by an abuser, but it may be inapplicable or inappropriate in the experience of some sexually exploited children. It should not be used as a key criterion to determine whether or not a child has been sexually exploited, with the potentially devastating consequences that might have for the type of support the child is given.

It is a unique feature of child sexual exploitation by networks that children are coerced, manipulated or deceived into sexual activity with multiple abusers. The Inquiry considers the idea of ‘exchange’ to be an unhelpful distraction and does not see it as a central issue. Instead, the overriding imperative ought to be to identify all children who are harmed by sexual exploitation or at heightened vulnerability to it, to act decisively to protect them and to bring offenders to justice.

A further concern is that a distinctive professional language around child sexual exploitation has developed over many years, which describes children being ‘at risk’ despite clear evidence of actual harm having occurred. Examples of this include children having contracted sexually transmitted diseases, children regularly going missing with adults who picked them up in cars late at night and children attending so-called ‘house parties’ organised by adults, where they were plied with alcohol and drugs before being sexually abused.

The Inquiry received evidence of children in all of these categories who were habitually described as being ‘at risk’ of child sexual exploitation and in some cases were not given the support they needed because they were not categorised as already having experienced sexual exploitation. These were significant deficiencies in the overall approach to identifying, assessing and managing risk in some case study areas.

Another aspect of the same problem was illustrated in Durham, concerning the thresholds applied for children to receive various forms of services and support. The Inquiry was told that a child would not be placed in the category of high risk requiring multi-agency intervention if the perpetrator was unknown.

Failure to recognise the nature of risk and harm has widespread consequences for sexually exploited children. Over time, it downgrades the importance and seriousness of these cases in the minds of those responsible for protecting children and minimises the opportunities to investigate, disrupt and prosecute offenders. Despite receiving a welcome higher profile in recent years, some of the processes in place to identify and deal with child sexual exploitation have created an institutional hesitancy to intervene and take the necessary action to protect children and catch perpetrators.

Heightened risk and vulnerability

Research has identified two clear indicators of heightened vulnerability to child sexual exploitation. These are being in residential care and the presence of a disability. There are likely to be many more.

There is a national shortage of suitable residential care placements for children who are at risk of or have experienced child sexual exploitation.

In the case study areas, we saw evidence of victims placed in unsuitable local or out-of-area placements or experiencing a delay in identifying an appropriate placement. Pre and post placement supports were poor in some cases, with a lack of communication between relevant agencies, especially in distant placements.

Poor selection of these placements can result in escalating harm, including to the existing children in a distant care home. It is also widely recognised that in these circumstances children may also be groomed by perpetrators who have followed them to a distant placement to continue to exploit them or to engage them in county lines crimes. Children in the new area may be exploited by perpetrators, as they are vulnerable and without support networks.

Children with disabilities may be socially isolated, have a lack of accessible information and may find it harder to disclose abuse. Perpetrators may deliberately target disabled children who in some instances would have no means of communication and might also lack the language to describe abuse. These children should be seen as potential 'captive victims' who need skilled and well-trained intervention.

Disability featured prominently in more than one-third of the children's cases examined by the Inquiry. The impact of disability in raising the risk of sexual exploitation was not well understood within the main agencies and children with learning disabilities or neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism were not appropriately protected in some of the case study areas. Some councils gave evidence that, as a result of the Inquiry's questions on this matter, the issue was receiving the attention it deserved.

Going missing from home and school is a recognised feature of child sexual exploitation. This was part of the lives of almost all 33 sexually exploited children in the case study areas that the Inquiry considered, including children looked after away from home. In every case, the police response needs to be timeous and thorough to locate the missing child as soon as possible. Sensitive return home interviews should establish where the child has been, who they were with and what they were doing. From the case study evidence, these inquiries were often inadequate.

Efforts have been made to improve the identification of male victims of sexual exploitation. Social media and dating apps were regularly used by perpetrators to groom boys and young men. In some areas more tailored services were available for children from ethnic minority groups and LGBTQ+ children who experienced sexual exploitation.

Policing and the criminal justice system

Police forces have created problem profiles in order to develop comprehensive responses to child sexual exploitation. Despite support for these profiles by the Children's Commissioner and the Home Affairs Committee as long ago as 2013, the quality of these profiles in the

case study areas was very mixed. Several profiles contained incomplete evidence about the prevalence of child sexual exploitation, there was often a lack of information about perpetrator groups and some were based on inadequate data.

None of the areas examined kept data on the ethnicity of victims and alleged perpetrators. The inclusion of ethnicity in problem profiles would enhance the effectiveness of prevention and detection by the police. Likewise, the local authorities and others would not automatically tailor their services to all victims in a culturally sensitive way. Many of the high-profile child sexual exploitation prosecutions have involved groups of men from minority ethnic communities. This has led to polarised debate about whether there is any link between ethnicity and child sexual exploitation networks. Poor or non-existent data collection makes it impossible to know whether any particular ethnic group is over-represented as perpetrators of child sexual exploitation by networks.

When child sexual exploitation has been identified, the police and local authorities may use a range of tactics to interrupt or disrupt the activities. Disruption techniques include child abduction warning notices (CAWNs), sexual risk orders (SROs) and sexual harm prevention orders (SHPOs). CAWNs were most often used in the case study areas; there is a risk that they could be deployed as an alternative to full-scale investigation. The application of other disruption techniques was less evident. The notable exception was Bristol, which had created a specific multi-disciplinary team to deal with disruption.

Inspection, audit and review

Themed inspections of the police, children's social care and health took place in 2015 and 2016, and in 2019 in the case of the police. These all identified areas for improvement but the focus in joint inspections has shifted to wider issues of criminal exploitation and child neglect. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) child protection inspections have maintained a focus on child sexual exploitation but recent Ofsted inspection reports from the case study areas are not specific about child sexual exploitation. HMICFRS has consistently reported the need for significant improvements.

A number of institutions indicated that being selected as a case study area had generated improvement activity in relation to child sexual exploitation and in some cases this had led to significant service developments. While welcome, this raises questions about the effectiveness of internal performance and quality systems, as well as scrutiny by the inspectorates.

Recommendations

We recommend the strengthening of the response of the criminal justice system by the government amending the Sentencing Act 2020 to provide a mandatory aggravating factor in sentencing those convicted of offences relating to the sexual exploitation of children.

The government should publish an enhanced version of its Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit as soon as possible. We recommend that the Department for Education and the Welsh Government should update guidance on child sexual exploitation. This should include the identification and response to child sexual exploitation perpetrated by networks or groups and improve the categorisation of risk and harm by local authorities and other

institutions. The toolkit and guidance should specify that the core element of the definition of child sexual exploitation is that a child was controlled, coerced, manipulated or deceived into sexual activity.

We recommend that the Department for Education should, without delay, ban the placement in semi-independent and independent settings of children aged 16 and 17 who have experienced, or are at heightened risk of experiencing, sexual exploitation.

We recommend that police forces and local authorities in England and Wales must collect specific data – disaggregated by sex, ethnicity and disability – on all cases of known or suspected child sexual exploitation, including by networks.

Pen portraits

CS-A12

CS-A12⁷ described her stepfather's regular violence towards her and her mother. At age 12, she started running away from her home. She self-harmed and was treated for depression.

Shortly afterwards, in the mid-2000s, CS-A12 was placed in residential care. She said that staff *"just left me basically to do what I wanted"*.⁸ She explained how she met adult men who gave her alcohol and drugs and sexually exploited her over the following three to four years:

"they pretended that I was part of their family. They gave me what I was lacking at the care home. They gave me somewhere where I felt like I belonged and somewhere where I felt like I was wanted".⁹

Police often stopped cars in which CS-A12 was with her abusers. She told us that while the police often asked her age and identified that she was missing from care, no action was taken against the men. She said she was regularly told that she was wasting police time:

"one police officer told me I was what was going wrong in our society and that I was the type of person that was bringing about a bad society ... Another one said that we were going to get these men in trouble because we wanted to act like child prostitutes".¹⁰

CS-A12 said that the care home staff knew that she and other girls were being given alcohol and drugs by adult men. Staff helped one girl to select an outfit for a 'date' with a 30-year-old male. They missed many opportunities to end the abuse, for example, when the men bought CS-A12 gifts or dropped her off at the care home when drunk. Instead, she said:

"I was told by the staff that I was attention seeking and stuff like that, which I probably was, to be honest, I probably was ... crying for help, trying to get someone to notice that something wasn't right, but no-one ever paid attention. I were just treated like I was disgusting for doing it, not that there was a reason behind me doing it."¹¹

CS-A12 received a number of criminal convictions. One related to possession of a bladed article. She told us that this resulted from her chasing a man with a bread knife after he had assaulted her, leaving her with *"bust lips and a bust nose, a black eye and ... fingerprint marks around my arms and my throat"*.¹² She felt that the police, prosecutors and judges failed to see that her behaviour was a result of her exploitation.

⁷ CS-A12 22 September 2020 1/12-54/22

⁸ CS-A12 22 September 2020 12/12-12/13

⁹ CS-A12 22 September 2020 18/14-18/17

¹⁰ CS-A12 22 September 2020 22/10-22/16

¹¹ CS-A12 22 September 2020 17/17-17/23

¹² CS-A12 22 September 2020 37/20-37/22

CS-A371

CS-A371¹³ explained that both her parents were heroin addicts. Drug users would often visit her childhood home. She was taken into foster care when she was 10 years old, in around 2003.

At the age of 11, CS-A371 was being supplied with drugs and by 12 she was self-harming. She told us she was given alcohol, cannabis and cigarettes by adult men who took her to flats and introduced her to their friends. She said that from the age of 13 she was regularly sexually exploited; when she was drunk the men would penetrate her with their fingers and have vaginal or oral sex with her. CS-A371 believed the men showed her the affection and love that was otherwise lacking in her life. She saw the men as her friends.

A police investigation into CS-A371's exploitation commenced in 2010 and a number of adult males were prosecuted in 2013 and 2014. CS-A371 gave evidence at the trial, which she said was *"very much like I was being bullied"*.¹⁴ She described being blamed and demeaned by defence barristers. They accused her of being racist and *"a slag"* and said repeatedly that she had wanted sex with the perpetrators and had lied about her age.

*"I believe the reason I suffered from sexual exploitation over such a long period was because social workers had no empathy with me and my experience ... They took the view that I was making my own choices when, in reality, I was trapped in a horrendous situation and needed help ... They repeatedly describe me as engaging in risky behaviour as if the situation was my fault and my choice."*¹⁵

CS-A317

For much of her childhood, CS-A317¹⁶ was in care in a number of council-run children's homes.

She described being sexually abused and exploited from 2003, when she was 14. Her abusers gave her alcohol and drugs and made her have sexual intercourse with adult men. CS-A317 told us that the staff within the children's homes were *"aware that she was having sex with an older male"* but were dismissive and took no action to protect her.¹⁷ In her view, the care home staff failed to protect her and colluded with her abusers by suggesting they collect her by car near to the children's home rather than directly outside it.

She said the abuse escalated and, when she was 18 years old, she was raped by the main perpetrator of her exploitation. No action was taken by the police, who considered that she had consented. She had a breakdown and tried to take her own life. CS-A317 felt that *"it was easier for the police to criminalise the children rather than go after the abusing adults"*.¹⁸

CS-A317 was contacted later by the National Crime Agency (NCA) regarding the exploitation she experienced as a teenager. As a result of that investigation, the perpetrator was convicted of sexual activity with a child and sentenced to nine years' imprisonment. CS-A317 found the overall experience with the NCA team *"very positive"*.¹⁹ However, several features

¹³ CS-A371 22 September 2020 55/3-88/6

¹⁴ CS-A371 22 September 2020 84/1-4

¹⁵ CS-A371 22 September 2020 84/13-15, 86/24-87/8

¹⁶ CS-A317 21 September 2020 13/15-15/13

¹⁷ CS-A317 21 September 2020 13/20-21

¹⁸ CS-A317 21 September 2020 14/21-23

¹⁹ CS-A317 21 September 2020 15/1

of the trial distressed CS-A317: a female officer involved during evidence-gathering was unable, for unavoidable reasons, to remain involved in the case until its conclusion. At the sentencing hearing, she was required to sit in the public gallery in direct sight of her abuser. Immediately after the offender was sentenced, she was confronted by the defendant's family and friends who verbally attacked and threatened her.²⁰

CS-A372

CS-A372²¹ told us she grew up in a family where there was neglect and domestic violence. She felt desperate for affection and was bullied at school. She was first raped in around 2007, when she was aged 12, by a 16-year-old boy. Her mother reported this to police and the boy was prosecuted and convicted of rape.

Subsequently, CS-A372 was introduced to a man aged around 30, who she believes was involved in drug dealing and prostitution. He gave her gifts and was kind to her. However, she told us that he expected her to have sex with him and later demanded that she have sex with other men. She self-harmed and took several overdoses.

By the time she was 13, CS-A372's home life was increasingly violent and chaotic. She told us she was assaulted by her father who also threatened to prostitute her. She ran away and was regularly picked up by the police, to whom she reported the sexual abuse she had experienced. When she was interviewed about a rape in 2009, she was too traumatised to explain what had happened to her. CS-A372 does not consider that the police took meaningful steps to protect her.

CS-A372 told us that children's social care opened and closed her case on multiple occasions, despite their knowledge of her history of overdoses, chaotic domestic conditions and sexual exploitation. Her records show that one of the decisions to close her case and take no further action was on the basis that children's social care thought that she was "*putting herself at risk*".²²

CS-A372 described, in June 2009, aged 14, being forced by an associate of the 30-year-old who had previously exploited her to perform oral sex on more than 20 adult men. This was also filmed. A number of men were charged, although the charges were later dropped.

She also told us that, a few months later, she was abducted by a group of men and forced to perform oral sex on 23 men while a gun was held to her head. She was also raped.

Afterwards, CS-A372 was placed back in care, having earlier returned to live with her mother. She tried to cooperate with police investigations but felt very conflicted and she repeatedly self-harmed.

CS-A372 considered that she was failed by the police and children's social care and that there was a lack of coordination between agencies tasked with protecting her.

²⁰ CS-A317 21 September 2020 15/6-13

²¹ CS-A372 21 September 2020 15/14-17/18

²² CS-A372 21 September 2020 16/19

CS-A373

CS-A373²³ told us that she experienced domestic violence as a young child and felt rejected at home. She started to associate with older girls and men in the area where she lived. She repeatedly went missing from home but was found by the police and returned to her mother.

In around 2007, when CS-A373 was 12, an adult in the group she was associating with gave cannabis to her, forced her to perform oral sex and raped her. Six months later, she disclosed the rape to a relative. The police were informed but no charges were brought.

At the age of 13, CS-A373 required hospitalisation after she was given drugs by a local man. Children's social care intervened and she was placed in temporary care. She was moved to several different foster care placements. She was later placed in a care home out of the area.

In February 2011, when she was 15, CS-A373 met a 26-year-old man. Having told care home staff that he was 18, she was allowed to continue to meet him. She described meeting another adult male who gave her alcohol and cannabis before raping her. She reported this to the police. He was cautioned for having sex with a child under 16. She was not provided with support or counselling following the rape and took an overdose.

CS-A373 repeatedly went missing and was taken home by the police without any enquiry as to why she was running away. CS-A373 felt that the police and children's social care had very little or no empathy for her, made no real attempt to understand her experiences and did not properly assess the risks she faced.

CS-A435

CA-A435's²⁴ parents separated before he was 10 years old. He continued to live with his mother, who was an alcoholic. CA-A435 increasingly argued with his mother over what he perceived as her poor care of him and his sibling.

CS-A435 had been aware that he was attracted to men since the age of 10. Between the ages of 16 and 18 he gradually disclosed this to most of the people in his life.

At the age of 16, CS-A435 became homeless due to a breakdown in his relationship with his mother. He was accommodated in a youth homeless hostel. At around this time, CS-A435 accompanied two other boys to the home of a 41-year-old man, who had contacted one of the boys and invited him to stay with him. The man showed the boys pornography and gave them alcohol. He attempted to kiss one of the boys and they asked to leave. In 2009, as a consequence of this incident, CS-A435 was assessed by his local authority as being a child at risk of sexual exploitation.

Between the ages of 17 and 18, CS-A435 was seriously assaulted by a group of other boys. He became too scared to live in his flat and so became homeless. He began to frequent a local park to meet older men who could give him accommodation in exchange for sex. At the same time, a number of people in CS-A435's peer group began sexually touching him in his sleep. CS-A435 felt that he had no choice but to allow this because these people provided him with a sense of security.

²³ CS-A373 21 September 2020 17/19-19/7

²⁴ INQ006381

CS-A435 has described the care provided by his local authority children's social care as "*unequivocally low*".²⁵ He only met his social worker once in 18 months and felt that life-altering decisions were made about him without his involvement.

'Daisy'

In 2004, at age 12, Daisy²⁶ befriended a girl whose mother took drugs and was involved in prostitution. Daisy was supplied with alcohol and went missing. She was introduced to a group of adult men and would drink heavily with them in a flat. She told us that she first saw this as friendship but when she was 13 they started to sexually exploit her. Men who were 10 or 12 years older than her told her they were her boyfriends and that they were in love. Daisy became pregnant at 14 and had an abortion. She describes being "*passed around*" for sex by between 100 and 150 men.²⁷

Daisy was well-known to the police by the time she was 13 years old. She was arrested and charged on a number of occasions with offences such as being drunk and disorderly or assault. She described these as being committed in the context of the abuse she was experiencing. Daisy said she disclosed the abuse to the police. On one occasion, officers told her they could not take further action because Daisy did not know the perpetrators' names. When she appeared at the youth offenders court in Rochdale, aged 15, her solicitor tried to explain the abuse she was experiencing but no investigation was conducted. Instead, Daisy was sentenced to four months in a young offender institution. On her release, the cycle of abuse and arrests continued.

In 2008, Daisy was approached by police officers who were primarily interested in abuse experienced by another girl. Daisy gave evidence at the trial in 2012. Nine of the 11 men were convicted of child sexual offences. Daisy described feeling overwhelmed and alone. She struggled to cope. She told us that, weeks after the trial, she reported to the police that she had been threatened and harassed, and that her home had been broken into, but she was given no support.

'Child A'

Child A²⁸ was referred to Barnardo's at age 14, having experienced sexual and physical abuse within his family. At 15, he was made to leave his family home by his mother. He stayed with various members of his extended family until moving into shared youth housing at 16. He became a victim of child sexual exploitation through the drugs party scene but minimised this when he first met with Barnardo's, although later described his experiences. Child A has since been able to enter education and live independently. He reports that he has not been subjected to sexual exploitation since this time.

²⁵ INQ006381_008

²⁶ 'Daisy' is a pseudonym used to describe the experiences of a woman who was interviewed for 'Groomed, abused and put in prison: Rochdale's untold story', a BBC radio programme broadcast on 14 July 2020. CWJ000001; Daisy 21 September 2020. 19/10-21/15

²⁷ Daisy 21 September 2020 20/14-15

²⁸ Child A's experiences were described in a Barnardo's report: INQ006436_098 para 2

'Greg'

At 12 years old, Greg²⁹ was groomed by a 26-year-old male, who initially told him he was 18. The first contact was online and Greg met the man in person after two weeks. Greg said that the man made him feel like he was in an intimate relationship. He listened to Greg and agreed with him when Greg told him how unfair his life was. He introduced Greg to other adult males, who Greg believed were “*the only people he had*” and that they liked him for being himself. They began to order Greg to go to various places and have sex with other men, paying for train tickets and taxi rides. Greg said the abuse he experienced became more severe and sadistic, as he was put into increasingly dangerous situations.

CS-A1

CS-A1, the daughter of CS-A2, was subjected to child sexual exploitation. CS-A2 described seeking assistance from children’s social care in 2014 due to concerns about CS-A1’s “*challenging*” behaviour. CS-A2 was seeking advice on how to address it.³⁰ CS-A1 was taken into foster care in 2016 on a voluntary basis when she was 13 years old and was accommodated in 14 different placements, during which time she became a victim of child sexual exploitation, including engaging in sexual activity with older males and sexual communication with perpetrators.³¹ She was found in hotel rooms on a number of occasions in 2018 with an adult male. CS-A2 considered that digital evidence suggested that intercourse had taken place. However, no charges were brought.³²

CS-A2 considered that her daughter’s placements were “*wholly inappropriate*”. One of the girls with whom CS-A1 was placed introduced her to a network of older abusers.³³ CS-A2 expressed frustration at the time taken by the local authority to appreciate the nature of the risk to CS-A1:

*“it’s ironic that while the professionals had finally come to the conclusion that CS-A1 was at a sufficient threshold of risk of [child sexual exploitation], that sadly, in all likelihood, she had probably already been abused by this point”.*³⁴

CS-A2 also referred to the trauma that she and her husband had been through as they watched helplessly as their daughter was sexually exploited and abused. She felt there were times she and her husband were portrayed in a negative light for no apparent purpose.³⁵ Her experience was that parents like her simply do not know how to raise concerns when they arise because the route to raising concerns is not clearly set out to them, especially at a time of turmoil. Her counsel described the process as:

*“more like a tangled web that CS-A2 and her husband had to navigate and persevere with rather than a clear path to follow in order to be able to articulate their genuine concerns about what was happening to their daughter”.*³⁶

²⁹ ‘Greg’ is a pseudonym for a child whose experiences were described in a study funded by the Nuffield Foundation: INQ006463

³⁰ CS-A2 25 September 2020 5/14-22

³¹ CS-A2 25 September 2020 5/14-7/25

³² CS-A2 25 September 2020 50/19-25

³³ CS-A2 25 September 2020 8/5-21

³⁴ CS-A2 25 September 2020 15/7-16/11

³⁵ INQ006363_003

³⁶ INQ006363_001-003

Part A

Introduction

Introduction

A.1: Background to the investigation

1. Child sexual exploitation is a particular type of child sexual abuse. Generally, it takes place outside the family and involves children being coerced, controlled, groomed, manipulated or deceived into sexual activity. Many exploited children are sexually assaulted or raped repeatedly, over months or years. The perpetrators of child sexual exploitation are typically adult men, acting together.

2. In recent years several significant prosecutions have increased public consciousness of child sexual exploitation.

2.1. In November 2010, five men were convicted of sexual offences against girls aged between 12 and 16 in Rotherham and jailed for between 4 and 11 years.

2.2. In the same month, 11 men were convicted of offences connected with the sexual exploitation of children in Derbyshire. The two main perpetrators received prison sentences of 8 and 11 years respectively.

2.3. Between 2008 and 2010, after Operation Lakeland, three men were convicted of the sexual exploitation of children in Cornwall. It was thought that they sexually exploited around 30 young girls. The main perpetrator was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment.

2.4. In May 2012, at the conclusion of Operation Span, nine men from Rochdale and Oldham were convicted of offences relating to child sexual exploitation. The defendants were jailed for between 4 and 19 years.

2.5. In June 2013, Operation Bullfinch concluded with the conviction of seven men from Oxford for offences relating to child sexual exploitation which included rape of a child under 13, trafficking in persons for the purposes of prostitution or trafficking within the UK for sexual exploitation and inciting child prostitution. Two defendants were jailed for 7 years and five were given life sentences with minimum terms between 12 and 20 years.

2.6. In 2014, 13 men were convicted of the sexual exploitation of children in Bristol at the conclusion of Operation Brooke, leading to prison sentences of between 18 months and 13 years.

3. These prosecutions were followed by a 2014 report, *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997–2013* (by the Chair of this Inquiry), which identified that at least 1,400 children and young people in Rotherham had been sexually abused or exploited over more than a decade. It identified “*collective failures*” by the local authority and that the police regarded “*many child victims with contempt*” and failed “*to act on their abuse as a*

crime”.³⁷ A further report by Ms (now Dame) Louise Casey CB in 2015, *Reflections on child sexual exploitation*, showed that many in Rotherham had continued to deny the scale of the problem and not enough action had been taken to stop the abuse. She reiterated that:

*“efforts need to be directed towards perpetrators in order to detect, prevent and disrupt that abuse at the earliest stages as well as the prosecution of individual perpetrators to ensure that they face the full force of the criminal justice system for their vile crimes”.*³⁸

4. Since then, there have been further large police investigations, including:

- Operation Clover, a South Yorkshire Police investigation underway at the time of the Rotherham inquiry, gathered momentum following the report’s publication. It concluded in early 2017 with four trials in which 21 offenders were convicted of multiple offences, including rape, false imprisonment and sexual intercourse with children under 13. One of the main perpetrators was sentenced to 35 years’ imprisonment.
- South Yorkshire Police also invited the National Crime Agency (NCA) to carry out an independent investigation into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham. The NCA commenced Operation Stovewood, which is still operational. To date, 20 individuals have been convicted as a result of this operation and received prison sentences ranging from 2 years to more than 20 years.
- In 2017, 17 men and one woman were convicted of sexually exploiting girls in Newcastle as a result of Operation Sanctuary and sentenced to between 4 and 20 years’ imprisonment.
- In 2019, nine men were convicted of the sexual exploitation of girls in Bradford, seven of whom received prison sentences of between 17 and 20 years.

5. The government has sought to identify and address the issues behind child sexual exploitation.³⁹ The 2015 *Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation* report stated that *“this will not be allowed to happen again”* and recognised that:

*“While the full extent of this crime is still unknown, we do know that it is not confined to one area. Any local authority or police force that denies that it has a problem, or thinks that it is only happening elsewhere, is wrong.”*⁴⁰

6. With online predators increasingly using mobile phones and other devices as well as social media or dating apps to target children, the risks to children are constantly changing. This requires the understanding of the issue and the response of statutory agencies to be dynamic.

7. In January 2021, the government published its *Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy*, which set out certain specific measures aimed at targeting group-based child sexual exploitation. It made a commitment that:

*“Through investments in police intelligence and analysis of exploitation, we will improve government policy and inform local level responses.”*⁴¹

³⁷ *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997–2013*, Alexis Jay OBE, 21 August 2014, [NAP000053_035](#)

³⁸ [INQ006500_003](#)

³⁹ [HOM003378_051-052](#) paras 191–195

⁴⁰ [ADC000023_003](#) para 3

⁴¹ [INQ006448_007](#) para 7

8. It is clear from this investigation that such improvements are necessary. As set out in this report, the sexual exploitation of children by groups is much more widespread than currently identified by data. Local authorities and police forces have failed to keep pace with the changing nature of this harm.

9. This investigation considered areas which have not already been the subject of well-publicised investigations of child sexual exploitation by networks (such as Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxford). Those cases have been examined in detail through the criminal courts, as well as in serious case reviews and other inquiries and investigations. Building on previous analyses, this investigation focussed on a range of geographical areas as well as responses to the sexual exploitation of a number of individual children, examining recent and current practice in order to better understand this insidious form of abuse of children. It has demonstrated that child sexual exploitation by groups or networks is widespread. It is not a problem faced by a small number of towns in the Midlands and the north of England.

10. This view has been reinforced since the conclusion of the public hearings in this investigation. In May 2021, an investigative report by *The Times* newspaper revealed failings in the approach of several police forces and social services departments to children who had been reported missing while at risk of sexual exploitation.⁴² In July 2021, the Bradford Safeguarding Partnership published a *Child Sexual Exploitation Thematic Child Safeguarding Practice Review*. This found that, while there had been substantial improvements in practice since the response to the non-recent cases of child sexual exploitation, not all learning had been fully embedded into practice. For example, risk was not always recognised when it should have been; inappropriate language was occasionally used; and there were examples of children being put into placements which could not meet their needs.⁴³

A.2: Methodology

11. In preparation for this investigation, the Inquiry reviewed several large-scale prosecutions in England and Wales, and a significant number of previously published reviews, inquiries and reports relating to child sexual exploitation by networks. More than 400 previous recommendations were considered, as summarised by the National Working Group (NWG) Network (a national network offering advice and support to those working with sexually exploited children), as well as those arising from other recent reports and inquiries.⁴⁴ A large amount of further information was obtained from a sample of local authority areas and institutions on a wide range of issues, including the range of services provided to victims and those at risk of child sexual exploitation, training, staff awareness and supervision, leadership, governance and accountability.

12. At the conclusion of that scoping exercise, the Inquiry identified eight themes on which to focus during this investigation:

- problem profiling (ie the collation of data and intelligence to provide a picture of the nature and extent of child sexual exploitation in a given area) and the disruption of suspects and perpetrators of child sexual exploitation;
- empathy and concern for child victims;

⁴² 'Police "failing to protect" thousands of girls at risk of sexual abuse', *The Times* 27 May 2021, [INQ006484](#); 'Police "covered up" failings on child sex cases', *The Times* 27 May 2021, [INQ006495](#)

⁴³ *Child Sexual Exploitation Thematic Child Safeguarding Practice Review*, Claire Hyde, July 2021, [INQ006555](#)

⁴⁴ [INQ006286](#) – the NWG Network has 14,500 members from a wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies. See [List of publicly available reports relevant to the investigation](#)

- risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children;
- missing children, return home interviews and children in care;
- male victims;
- children with disabilities;
- partnership working between agencies responsible for tackling child sexual exploitation; and
- audit, review and performance improvement.

13. In order to facilitate the detailed investigation and assessment of the eight themes listed above, as well as drawing on wider knowledge about child sexual exploitation in England and Wales, the Inquiry selected six local authority areas as case study areas:

- Durham County Council (Durham) covers 862 square miles in North East England, including the city of Durham, Chester-le-Street, Newton Aycliffe, Consett and Peterlee. It is the 50th (of 151) most deprived local authority in England.
- The City and County of Swansea Council (Swansea) incorporates approximately 150 square miles from the Lliw Uplands, to the rural Gower Peninsula in the west, to the city of Swansea and the related suburban areas. It has a slightly higher proportion of deprived areas than Wales as a whole.⁴⁵
- Warwickshire County Council (Warwickshire) in the West Midlands, is made up of the five districts and boroughs of North Warwickshire, Nuneaton and Bedworth, Rugby, Stratford and Warwick. It is the 119th most deprived local authority in England.
- St Helens Council (St Helens) is a metropolitan borough within Merseyside. It is the 32nd most deprived local authority in England and the eighth most deprived in terms of health deprivation and disability.
- The London Borough of Tower Hamlets (Tower Hamlets) in East London covers much of the traditional East End. It is the 23rd most deprived local authority in England, with 57 percent of children living in poverty.
- Bristol City Council (Bristol) covers the largest city in South West England. It is the 59th most deprived local authority in England.⁴⁶

14. These six case study areas were selected in order to enable the Inquiry to consider a range of features, including size, demography, geography and social characteristics, and to illustrate different policies, practices and performance on the selected themes.

⁴⁵ INQ005240_006

⁴⁶ INQ006458



Map of the six case study areas

Table 1: Overview of the six case study areas

	Durham	Swansea	Warwickshire	St Helens	Tower Hamlets	Bristol
Child population^a	530,094	246,993	577,933	180,585	324,745	463,377
Number of children in care^b	914	565	754	496	307	623
Rate of children in care per 10,000 children^c	90 per 10,000	117 per 10,000	64 per 10,000	135 per 10,000	42 per 10,000	66 per 10,000

^a As at mid-2019: INQ006462; ^b As at March 2020: English local authority figures, INQ006572; Welsh local authority figures, INQ006439; Total for England: 80,080 children, INQ006485; Total for Wales: 7,170 children, INQ006439; ^c As at March 2020: English local authority rates, INQ006572; Welsh local authority rates calculated using 2019 mid-year population estimates, INQ006439; Rate for England: 67 per 10,000 children, INQ006485; Rate for Wales: 114 per 10,000 children, INQ006571

15. In order to better understand the experiences of children who are currently being (or very recently have been) sexually exploited by networks, the Inquiry also reviewed a sample of individual children’s experiences across the six areas, selecting a total of 33 cases (including at least one boy or young man from each area) for closer analysis. The case study children were chosen by the Inquiry on the basis that:

- there was evidence that the child involved had been sexually exploited by a network within the Inquiry’s definition;
- the exploitation was known to the local statutory agencies recently, which the Inquiry defined as on or after April 2018; and
- the child’s circumstances and institutional responses appeared to illustrate one or more of the eight themes selected for this investigation.⁴⁷

The Inquiry obtained the material held by the relevant local authority and police force on each of these children. Witnesses from the local authorities and police forces answered questions about the children at the public hearing. This evidence provided an insight into the threats and dangers that some of these children faced and how the relevant agencies responded to them, in the context of the selected themes.

16. Most of the case study areas had initiated improvements after being notified of their selection and the themes to be examined. This is to be welcomed but inevitably begs the question how much improvement work in child sexual exploitation would have taken place without the Inquiry’s investigation.

17. The Inquiry’s public hearing was held over 11 days between 21 September 2020 and 29 October 2020. This was a virtual hearing, given the restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Inquiry heard from complainants, academics, local authorities, police officers, voluntary sector representatives, government officials, and representatives from victim support and campaigning groups. A further detailed description of the methodology for this investigation can be found in Annex 1.

⁴⁷ Preliminary hearing 15 January 2020 17/13-18/8

A.3: Terminology and references

- 18.** The term ‘CSE’ is often used by practitioners as an abbreviation for child sexual exploitation. In this report, we do not use this acronym, except when repeating words used in evidence or in a record.
- 19.** Those who have alleged abuse are referred to as ‘complainants’ and where abusers have been convicted (or where the fact of the abuse has been established formally in some other way) they are referred to as ‘victims and survivors’.
- 20.** In recognition of the varying degrees of organisation that may characterise the sexual exploitation of children where there are associations between offenders, the terms ‘groups’ or ‘networks’ are used in this report. The scope of the investigation remains unchanged but the term ‘organised network’ is avoided.
- 21.** Local authorities, through directors of children’s services, have statutory responsibility for the leadership, strategy and effectiveness of children’s services, including securing the provision of services to address the needs of children and young people.⁴⁸ Throughout this report, staff within local authorities with statutory responsibility for children are referred to as ‘children’s social care’. Until 2006, this work was carried out by social services departments and then by new children’s services departments. The term ‘children’s social care’ is used throughout for consistency.
- 22.** As social care is a devolved function, England and Wales each has different legislative frameworks, policies, procedures and oversight structures at a governmental and local authority level. In contrast, criminal justice matters are largely non-devolved.⁴⁹
- 23.** Since 2018/19, local safeguarding children partnerships have, across England, been responsible at a local level for coordinating safeguarding and welfare services, identifying and responding to the needs of children.⁵⁰ These replaced local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs).⁵¹
- 24.** In Wales, LSCBs remain responsible for agreeing how the different services and professional groups should cooperate to safeguard children and for making sure that arrangements work effectively in bringing about better outcomes for children and young people.⁵² There is also a National Independent Safeguarding Board in Wales, which has a duty to provide support and advice to LSCBs, report on the adequacy of safeguarding arrangements and make recommendations for improvement.⁵³
- 25.** Where reference is made to ‘professionals’ working in child sexual exploitation, this means those working in children’s social care, police forces or healthcare services. These are the three primary agencies working in this field.
- 26.** Children and young people’s mental health services (CYPMHS) is now used as a term for all services that work with children and young people who have difficulties with their mental health or well-being. The older term for children and adolescent mental health services

⁴⁸ See section 18(1) of the Children Act 2004

⁴⁹ WGT000464_001 para 4

⁵⁰ See, for example, INQ005012_001-002 paras 1-2

⁵¹ Children and Social Work Act 2017, Children Act 2004 (as amended) and *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018*, NAP000035

⁵² INQ005240_001 paras 1-2

⁵³ INQ006490

(CAMHS) is generally used in this report, referring to the main specialist NHS mental health community services that are now provided within the wider CYPMHS. CAMHS was the acronym used most frequently in the case study material.

27. References in this report such as ASP000434 and ASP000434_007 are to documents or specific pages of documents which have been adduced in evidence and that can be found on the Inquiry website. A reference such as 'CS-A12 22 September 2020 3-4' is to the hearing transcript which is also available on the website – that particular reference is to the evidence of CS-A12 on 22 September 2020 at pages 3–4 of that day's transcript.

Part B

The nature and scale of child sexual exploitation by networks

The nature and scale of child sexual exploitation by networks

B.1: Introduction

1. The sexual exploitation of children by networks caused public revulsion when it was exposed some years ago. The government of the day prioritised the institutional response to the revelations. Despite this, it is clear that the sexual exploitation of children by groups of associated abusers continues to be widespread, to a greater extent than official statistics indicate.
2. The crimes perpetrated against children in this context include vaginal, oral and anal rape, assault by penetration and other sexual assaults. Perpetrators are finding new ways, including through technology, to groom and degrade ever younger children. This form of exploitation has profoundly damaging impacts on children and their families.

B.2: Children's experiences of sexual exploitation

3. We heard and read harrowing evidence of child sexual exploitation by networks, including direct evidence from several complainants, victims and survivors, who described their experiences between around 2003 and 2011. While the Inquiry did not hear directly from the 33 case study children, the local authority and police evidence relating to them provided an insight into their experiences, which were more recent, dating from around April 2018.
4. Many of the children had experienced parental neglect, substance misuse, domestic violence and family breakdown.
 - 4.1. These themes were reflected in the evidence from CS-A12, CS-A371, CS-A372, CS-A373 and CS-A435, whose experiences are set out in the Pen portraits. They were also apparent in the experiences of the case study children.
 - 4.2. CS-A24 had a reported family history of alcohol and domestic abuse, including her mother hitting her. In 2018, when aged 14, she was considered to be at high risk of sexual exploitation, having disclosed five or six "*sexual partners*" over the previous three years who were aged 11 to 16. She was also going missing frequently and was associating with a number of males who might place her at risk.⁵⁴
 - 4.3. CS-A25's childhood involved family violence, alcohol abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. She was living between relatives' homes while deemed to be at high risk of sexual exploitation. She was considered to be at risk of sexual exploitation between July and November 2018, having been reported missing on repeated occasions, associating

⁵⁴ CS-A24 24 September 2020 28/15-31/7

with other girls at risk of sexual exploitation, and attending parties with older adults where drugs were supplied and taken. During this period, she reported harmful sexual behaviour by three boys which led to a police investigation. She was subsequently taken into care in 2019 but in October 2019 was still listed as being at risk of sexual exploitation.⁵⁵

4.4. CS-A221 had previously been on the Child Protection Register because of domestic violence and parental alcohol misuse. In 2019, he was sexually exploited by a registered sex offender who befriended and groomed both the child and his family.⁵⁶

4.5. CS-A26 was considered at high risk of exploitation in the home of one of her parents, who were separated, due to drug misuse and parties frequented by many adults, some of whom were misusing drugs.⁵⁷ She was placed in a residential home where she continued to go missing and there were ongoing concerns that she was being exploited.⁵⁸

4.6. CS-A22 was reported to have a difficult background, with a history of violence in the family. She had multiple episodes of going missing and was taken into care in 2017 at the age of 13. The evidence demonstrates that she was the victim of sexual assaults from 2018 to 2019.⁵⁹

5. CS-A12, CS-A317 and around half of the case study children had been in care.

5.1. Some were taken into care for reasons unconnected with child sexual exploitation and then became victims of sexual exploitation. CS-A77 was taken into care in 2015, when aged 14 or 15. When she was 17, covert policing tactics were used to identify people who were suspected to be exploiting her, as a result of which multiple people were arrested and issued with Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs). In late 2018, an assessment considered CS-A77's life was potentially at risk due to a range of factors, including sexual exploitation, unmanaged mental health problems and a risk of sexually transmitted disease.⁶⁰

5.2. Others were taken into care or placed in out-of-area or specialist care leaver placements in an attempt to protect them from perpetrators and break the cycle of sexual exploitation. CS-A302 disclosed sexual exploitation by multiple males, involving several rapes and sexual assaults, including while in out-of-area placements. When she was 13, she was placed in a specialist residential placement out of area, which was intended to reduce her vulnerability to sexual exploitation and which appeared to result in positive outcomes.⁶¹ CS-A56 was reportedly sexually exploited by organised criminal gangs in different parts of the country in 2018, aged 17, and was then placed in a specialist leaving care placement outside of Wales, where continuity of support could be provided. However, following her return to Swansea when aged 18, despite being given enhanced support, she was trafficked and sexually exploited.⁶²

⁵⁵ CS-A25 24 September 2020 31/11-35/6

⁵⁶ CS-A221 24 September 2020 38/15-39/23

⁵⁷ CS-A26 30 September 2020 1/19-5/16

⁵⁸ CS-A26 30 September 2020 5/3-15

⁵⁹ CS-A22 29 September 2020 1/21-4/9

⁶⁰ CS-A77 29 September 2020 5/10-6/12

⁶¹ CS-A302 30 September 2020 21/2-23; BSC000124_003-004

⁶² CS-A56 24 September 2020 37/6-38/12

6. More than one-third of the case study children had complex disabilities or neurodevelopmental disorders.

6.1. CS-A27 was a child in care in St Helens. He was first sexually exploited in 2013 when he was 13 years old and this continued until he was 18 years old.⁶³ He was diagnosed as having moderate learning difficulties and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He was accommodated in a special education residential placement from the age of 13.⁶⁴

6.2. CS-A216, who was diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder, was reportedly moved around towns in her local area for the purpose of sexual exploitation and was supplied with alcohol, making her particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse in the period 2016 to 2018. She was permanently excluded from school before being referred to mental health services after a serious self-harming incident.⁶⁵

6.3. CS-A300, who was diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder, was groomed and sexually exploited by adult males. A male had taken him to a flat where he had been sexually assaulted by two adult males. One of the alleged perpetrators was arrested but released pending investigation.⁶⁶

7. Alcohol and/or drugs were used as a means to groom and coerce many of the children whose experiences are detailed in the Pen portraits. This theme was reflected in the evidence about the case study children. Parties attended by children and adults were a common way of supplying children with alcohol and drugs. Disclosures by children that they had been assaulted and raped at these events were not uncommon. These events were also a means of introducing them to a wider network of perpetrators. For example, CS-A19 attended parties between 2017 and 2018 where adults supplied children with drugs and alcohol and said that she had been raped at an associated address. One person was charged before the case was discontinued and then reinstated by the Crown Prosecution Service as part of a wider investigation.⁶⁷ When CS-A29 went missing from the children's home in which she had been placed, she was supplied with drugs and alcohol. She was sexually exploited between the ages of 13 and 15 by a number of different older males.⁶⁸ On two occasions, at the age of 11 in 2015 and age 12 in 2016, CS-A26 was found intoxicated late at night in the company of adult males. She was also frequently missing from home.⁶⁹ CS-A21 had a large number of social media followers and there were concerns that she was being supplied with drugs and alcohol from a young age.⁷⁰ There were concerns that CS-A77 had been coerced into carrying large amounts of drugs inside her body.⁷¹

8. Mobile and other electronic devices were used in a number of ways.

8.1. CS-A372 described being forced to perform oral sex on more than 20 men and this being filmed.⁷²

⁶³ CS-A27 30 September 2020 5/18-8/14

⁶⁴ CS-A27 30 September 2020 5/18-8/14; STH000649_001; STH000631_007_014-015

⁶⁵ CS-A216 25 September 2020 77/1-77/16; 2 October 2020 84/6-86/1

⁶⁶ CS-A300 2 October 2020 91/2-92/13

⁶⁷ CS-A19 2 October 2020 86/3-89/11

⁶⁸ CS-A29 29 October 2020 7/9-13/18

⁶⁹ CS-A26 30 September 2020 1/19-5/16

⁷⁰ CS-A21 29 September 2020 4/11-20, 154/1-155/7

⁷¹ CS-A77 29 September 2020 5/10-6/12

⁷² CS-A372 21 September 2020 17/2-7

8.2. Several of the case study children were coerced into taking or sharing indecent images with mobile devices and photographed in intimate situations with adult abusers. Indecent images might then be used to blackmail or shame the child into further exploitation or criminal activity. When aged between 14 and 15, CS-A51 was coerced by another pupil to send indecent photos which had been circulated, and was groomed via social media.⁷³ The evidence suggests that she was groomed and sexually exploited between 2018 and 2019. When aged 15, CS-A220 was encouraged to send indecent images of herself to a 20-year-old male. The evidence suggests that she was sexually exploited at least from the age of 15 until after her 18th birthday, including a number of reported rapes.⁷⁴

8.3. There were many examples of perpetrators making contact with children through online dating apps. CS-A71 was identified as having been groomed online in 2017. She was then sexually exploited by multiple perpetrators in different parts of the country, with a younger child in care, from 2018 to 2019.⁷⁵ Several male victims saw online dating apps as a way to explore their sexual orientation and were reluctant for the police to take further action. Online abuse which progressed to contact abuse was experienced by six of the eight male case study children. When aged 15, CS-A43 was sexually abused at the home of a male in his late 20s, who made contact with him via an online dating app, Grindr. Other adult males contacted him online and offered him payment in return for certain types of photographs, as well as offering him money for sex. The evidence suggests that he was sexually exploited over the course of four months in 2018 to 2019.⁷⁶ CS-A27 also met men on Grindr who sexually exploited him and went on to rape him at the age of 17.⁷⁷

9. Violence and brutality were widespread. CS-A371 said her abusers would threaten her, saying that they would get friends to gang rape her, smash her windows and plant drugs in her house. She said that, on a number of occasions, she was raped, slapped, punched and kicked. She also described being verbally abused by the men, who would call her a “*bitch*” and a “*fat slag*”.⁷⁸ Among the case study children, CS-A22 was found in 2017 with injuries suggestive of serious sexual assault after a two-day episode of going missing. The local authority raised concerns with the police that she had been raped.⁷⁹ CS-A216 was reportedly trafficked to a neighbouring town for the purpose of sexual exploitation and threatened with a weapon in 2018.⁸⁰ The Inquiry also heard evidence of the threat of violence being directed at parents, with children being told that if they reported their abuse or failed to comply with the wishes of their abusers, they or their families would be harmed:

“the threat of violence is always there, because often what parents hear back from their child and why the child can be so frightened is that they are told by their abuser, you know, ‘I will come and get – I will get your sister or go and get your mum’. So even if it may not actually happen, the threat that it may happen is terrifying in itself. I don’t think

⁷³ CS-A51 29 October 2020 18/11-19/23

⁷⁴ CS-A220 24 September 2020 35/9-37/3

⁷⁵ CS-A71 30 September 2020 8/16-11/10

⁷⁶ CS-A43 29 October 2020 19/25-21/15

⁷⁷ CS-A27 30 September 2020 6/23-8/3; Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 101/12-21

⁷⁸ CS-A371 22 September 2020 79/6-81/10

⁷⁹ CS-A22 29 September 2020 1/20-4/9

⁸⁰ CS-A216 2 October 2020 84/6-85/2

we actually see that much of abuse to the families in terms of setting fire to their house – we have had one example of that – I think it is more the threat rather than actually it occurring.”⁸¹

Ms Vikki McKenna, senior service coordinator at Catch22 (which provides support services in St Helens), also told us that “we’ve seen an increase in violence towards parents of children who are being exploited”.⁸²

10. Dissatisfaction with the police response to reports of exploitation featured in many of the complainant accounts and in some of the experiences of the case study children. It was reported in a child exploitation meeting that CS-A27 had lost all faith in the system because he felt there had been a failure to obtain convictions of two men who had raped him after they met on a dating app. CS-A27 had disclosed to his social worker, police and placement staff that he had been using an online app to meet men for sex.⁸³

11. Several children were themselves charged with or convicted of criminal offences which were closely linked with their sexual exploitation. CS-A12 and ‘Daisy’ described this. Among the case study children, CS-A71 was arrested for arson, criminal damage and threatening behaviour to staff in her placement in 2019, although she had a diagnosis of ADHD and was being sexually exploited in different towns by multiple perpetrators.⁸⁴

12. Dissatisfaction with the actions of staff in care homes and children’s social care departments was a further theme. CS-A12 said that care home staff knew that she and other children (aged 13 or 14) were going out with adult males and were being sexually exploited and given alcohol, drugs and other items but did not intervene.⁸⁵ CS-A372 described her case being closed by children’s social care more than once, despite their knowledge of risks she faced, for which she was partly blamed.⁸⁶

B.3: The impacts on children and parents

13. Sexual exploitation often leads to children suffering one or more of the following:

- mental health consequences, including low self-esteem, conduct disorder, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), self-harm and suicide attempts;
- adverse effects on future behaviour and development, including age-inappropriate sexual activity, alcohol and drug misuse, a lack of ability to trust others and build relationships, and involvement in the sexual victimisation of others; and
- physical health implications such as sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancy and possible termination, physical injury and genital injury.⁸⁷

Some of the effects may take time to manifest themselves after exposure to the abuse has ended.⁸⁸

⁸¹ Gill Gibbons 2 October 2020 115/15-116/18

⁸² Vikki McKenna 28 September 2020 35/8-25

⁸³ CS-A27 30 September 2020 7/2-6

⁸⁴ CS-A71 30 September 2020 8/16-11/10

⁸⁵ CS-A12 22 September 2020 11/2-12/24

⁸⁶ CS-A372 21 September 2020 15/15-16/20

⁸⁷ INQ006283_009

⁸⁸ INQ006283_009

14. The complainants' accounts and the evidence relating to the case study children demonstrated harmful impacts on children:

- CS-A12 was given cocaine and alcohol in such quantities over a short period that her *"liver could not function properly and still doesn't"*.⁸⁹ She described being given so much cocaine that *"I couldn't function, I couldn't speak"*.⁹⁰
- CS-A317 had a breakdown and tried to take her own life following sexual exploitation;⁹¹
- CS-A372 repeatedly self-harmed after being raped by a group of men and being placed back into care;⁹²
- CS-A371 was *"physically assaulted by being slapped, punched and kicked by the men"*.⁹³ For many years she suffered from nightmares, insomnia and eating problems.⁹⁴
- CS-A56 was recorded as *"living a life of fear"* after being trafficked and sexually exploited;⁹⁵ and
- CS-A114 became pregnant when aged 12 as a result of sexual exploitation by a 17-year-old male. The pregnancy was terminated, which she later disclosed was not her choice but a decision taken by her parents.⁹⁶

15. In November 2019, Parents Against Child Exploitation (Pace), a registered charity that supports parents in relation to child exploitation and campaigns to change policy and practice to support child victims, published a study of parents' experiences of the children's social care system when a child is sexually exploited.⁹⁷ It found that parents' encounters with children's social care led them to believe that these services were *"ill-equipped"* to deal with child sexual exploitation. Pace identified significant delays between parents reporting concerns and services responding (in one case up to two years). It reported that professionals often lacked understanding of child sexual exploitation, often minimising or dismissing the risks and harms faced by children. Interventions also tended to focus on either the exploited child or the parents, rather than the perpetrators. Parents frequently felt alone in managing the threats to their child.⁹⁸ Pace also noted that the child protection system is *"largely based on younger children rather than teenaged children"* and the assumption that *"the neglect and abuse is within the family and not outside"*. This may lead to opportunities for support being missed.⁹⁹

B.4: Prevalence

16. Assessing the scale or prevalence of child sexual exploitation requires consideration of different sources of data, primarily from:

- the criminal justice system, which relates to criminal offences arising from child sexual exploitation; and

⁸⁹ CS-A12 22 September 2020 44/3-5

⁹⁰ CS-A12 22 September 2020 42/16-19

⁹¹ CS-A317 21 September 2020 13/16-15/13

⁹² CS-A372 21 September 2020 15/15-17/17

⁹³ CS-A371 22 September 2020 81/5-9

⁹⁴ CS-A371 22 September 2020 81/25-82/3

⁹⁵ CS-A56 24 September 2020 37/6-38/12

⁹⁶ CS-A114 29 October 2020 13/20-16/2

⁹⁷ INQ005169

⁹⁸ INQ005169_008-009

⁹⁹ Gill Gibbons 2 October 2020 102/20-103/2

- children’s social care, which relates to children who have been identified as being harmed by child sexual exploitation, or at heightened risk.

Criminal justice data

17. Offence codes: Police data collection and reporting is generally driven by type of offence but there is no specific offence of child sexual exploitation. Instead, four criminal offences are listed under the heading ‘child sexual exploitation’ in the Sexual Offences Act 2003.¹⁰⁰ In 2018/19, offenders were charged with 1,012 offences within this group.¹⁰¹ In 2019/20, the latest full year for which figures are available at the time of writing, this rose to 1,363.¹⁰² However, these categories do not include more serious crimes such as rape, which may also involve child sexual exploitation.¹⁰³ For that reason, crime statistics for offences listed as child sexual exploitation fail to capture the most serious child sexual exploitation crimes.

18. ‘Flagging’: One of the ways in which child sexual exploitation offences are identified and collated is by ‘crime flagging’. This is a manual operation, which requires police officers or staff to apply a ‘flag’ to offences which fit the definition of child sexual exploitation. This can be very subjective and thus variable. Some use software to search reports for particular words. Such flags were not always used properly or appropriately applied.¹⁰⁴ They also do not enable specific identification of network-based offending.¹⁰⁵ Flagging was made a formal requirement by the Home Office in April 2016 so that child sexual exploitation offences which do not have their own offence codes, and which would not necessarily be obvious from the nature of the offence, can be highlighted.¹⁰⁶ In 2018/19, police forces in England and Wales identified or ‘flagged’ 11,554 criminal offences as related to child sexual exploitation.¹⁰⁷ In 2019/20, the figure was 12,569.¹⁰⁸ However, due to the significant variations in flagging practices, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) recognised that the data on offences flagged as child sexual exploitation are not yet robust enough to provide an accurate comparison of prevalence between years.¹⁰⁹

19. Victim and perpetrator data: Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) has found that police forces do not capture data about victim and perpetrator characteristics accurately because they struggle to gather relevant data and to input it on to their IT systems and because they do not make the best use of information from other statutory agencies.¹¹⁰ (Ethnicity data are considered further below and in Part H.)

20. Prosecution data: The Crown Prosecution Service does not collect separate data for prosecutions or convictions where child sexual exploitation was a factor but reports only on child sexual abuse cases.¹¹¹ This is an important gap in criminal justice information. It fails

¹⁰⁰ See sections 47–50 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003. The offences are: paying for sexual services of a child, causing or inciting sexual exploitation of a child, controlling a child in relation to child sexual exploitation, and paying for the sexual services of a prostitute subject to force etc. These offences were initially classified as ‘child prostitution’ in the legislation.

¹⁰¹ INQ006457_010

¹⁰² INQ006437_002

¹⁰³ INQ006437_003

¹⁰⁴ HOM003378_015 para 53; Christian Papaleontiou 1 October 2020 12/21-23

¹⁰⁵ HOM003339_023

¹⁰⁶ HOM003378_015 para 52

¹⁰⁷ INQ006456_010

¹⁰⁸ INQ006459_001

¹⁰⁹ INQ005170_032 para 84; HOM003378_018 para 64; INQ006456_010 Table 35b, footnote 2

¹¹⁰ Katherine Riley 1 October 2020 145/4-146/4

¹¹¹ Gregor McGill 2 October 2020 5/5-8/6

to recognise cases or defendants involving the sexual exploitation of children. According to the Home Office, as at February 2020 there were more than 90 police investigations in operation across England and Wales into group-based child sexual exploitation.¹¹²

21. These various deficiencies with criminal justice data on child sexual exploitation have been recognised for some time. Research published in 2017 highlighted the lack of consistent data across police forces, resulting in data being unreliable. Disruption and prosecution data at individual police force level were not readily available. Qualitative interviews with police in child sexual exploitation teams revealed that they were unaware of the scale of successful child sexual exploitation prosecutions because of the problematic nature of the data. The report concluded:

*“It is recognised across the field that the problems faced by practitioners in recording data have an adverse impact on the capacity of police and researchers to portray an accurate picture of what is happening on the ground. Information of the kind sought in this research will be largely unachievable until substantial strides are made in data recording practices across the criminal justice system”.*¹¹³

Children’s social care data

22. The Department for Education’s annual children in need statistics give figures for the number of assessments which identified child sexual exploitation as a factor. Over the five years to March 2020, assessments which included a risk factor of child sexual exploitation rose by over 50 percent (from 12,200 to 18,700).¹¹⁴ There is, however, a need for caution in considering these data, as the number of assessments are recognised to be below best prevalence estimates.¹¹⁵

23. In 2016, the Association of Directors of Children’s Services collected data on child sexual exploitation, finding a variation ranging from 1.1 to 137.5 children at risk per 10,000. The highest rates were reported in areas where there had been recent high-profile cases and in coastal towns. The majority of local authorities attributed higher levels of referrals for child sexual exploitation to heightened awareness among professionals and the wider public. The Centre for Expertise in Child Sexual Abuse (the CSA Centre), however, concluded in a 2018 report that this was “*unlikely to account for variations where there are few, if any, cases identified*”.¹¹⁶

24. The same report by the CSA Centre commented on wide variations across England in child sexual exploitation assessment data, concluding that these were likely to be related to recording issues rather than an accurate reflection of prevalence. Rates in local authorities ranged from zero to over 30 children at risk per 10,000.¹¹⁷

25. A 2019 report by Public Health England commented on reporting bias and the unreliability of counts of child sexual exploitation cases. It noted that:

¹¹² [HOM003378_050](#) para 189

¹¹³ *Evidence-based models of policing to protect children from sexual exploitation*, IASR, University of Bedfordshire, December 2017, [INQ005295_007](#) para 2.5

¹¹⁴ [INQ006448_022](#) para 56

¹¹⁵ [INQ006448_022](#) para 56

¹¹⁶ *Measuring the scale and changing nature of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation – Scoping report*, Professor Liz Kelly and Kairika Karsna, July 2017, updated August 2018, [INQ005118_027](#)

¹¹⁷ [INQ005118_027-030](#)

*“counts of known [child sexual exploitation] cases are always likely to be an under-estimation of the problem given widely documented under-reporting and under-identification of the issue”.*¹¹⁸

Data reliability and recent trends in data capture

26. Overall, there are fundamental flaws with both the criminal justice and children’s social care data sets. There are also significant difficulties in using the available data to assess prevalence because the various agencies use different definitions of child sexual exploitation and collate data for different purposes. These difficulties were illustrated by the data obtained by the Inquiry from each of the case study areas. As a consequence, it is simply not possible to know the scale of child sexual exploitation by networks.

27. There have been two significant changes in approach to child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse since the regional child sexual exploitation profiles were produced. The first is the now widespread practice in many parts of the country of recording child sexual exploitation within the broader category of child criminal exploitation. In many areas, this has been done without retaining good quality and specific information about child sexual exploitation. This practice was evident in many of the case study areas. The second is the trend away from recording specific child sexual exploitation data separately from the category of wider child sexual abuse, with the police highlighting the difficulties of distinguishing one form of abuse from another with any certainty.

28. The failure to identify and record instances of the sexual exploitation of children as a sub-group within criminal exploitation and wider child sexual abuse data inevitably results in child sexual exploitation becoming even more of a hidden problem and underestimated. It is also possible that fewer assessments are being undertaken.

29. In addition to inaccurate data and poor reporting systems, a number of other factors impact on how well the prevalence of child sexual exploitation is understood and reported. In 2015, the Cabinet Office’s *Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation* plan highlighted the culture of denial that had been found in Rotherham and said that people who abuse children must be stopped, regardless of their race, age or gender. It identified the need for a fundamental change of attitude within professions and the public about the nature of this crime.¹¹⁹ Six years on, not nearly enough has been done to change this culture.

30. The possible reasons for denial and downplaying of child sexual exploitation are complex. One factor may be differing priorities between institutions in the same area. There may also be competing priorities within institutions, especially for resources. As set out in Part E, victim-blaming attitudes towards child victims persist. A different factor may be the notoriety and adverse publicity attracted by high-profile sexual exploitation cases. This may see some institutional leaders more keen to assure themselves that their area is ‘not another Rochdale or Rotherham’, rather than being determined to find and root out child sexual exploitation in their area and expose its scale.

Data from the case study areas

31. The institutions in the six case study areas were asked to provide local data on the extent of child sexual exploitation.

¹¹⁸ HOM003325_028-029 para 3.2

¹¹⁹ ADC000023_006 paras 17-19

- 32.** Criminal justice ‘flagging’ data were available for only two of the case study areas where police and local authority boundaries were the same. In 2019/20, Durham Constabulary flagged 403 cases and Warwickshire Police flagged 250.¹²⁰
- 33.** Four of the case study areas were within wider police force areas and the police sometimes provided data for the whole police force area. Police forces should ensure that disaggregated data are available to local authorities and safeguarding partnerships about child sexual exploitation in their area.
- 34.** Over the past three years, there have been large increases in the number of assessments in which child sexual exploitation was identified as a factor in Durham and Warwickshire, and a steady decline in Bristol, while there have been marked fluctuations in cases recorded in Tower Hamlets and St Helens. The City and County of Swansea Council said there was a “*sharp reduction in Child Sexual Exploitation cases between 2018–2019*”.¹²¹
- 35.** The rates of assessments in which child sexual exploitation was identified as a factor in two of the case study areas were below the England average of 15.6 per 10,000 children: the rates were 11.0 per 10,000 in Bristol and 13.1 per 10,000 in Tower Hamlets. Rates were higher in St Helens (26.3), Durham (25.9) and Warwickshire (20).¹²²
- 36.** The factors underlying these variations are not known. However, the broader findings of the CSA Centre’s 2018 report suggest that the differences between the case study areas and annual variations in each area are likely to be linked to changes in data collection and reporting problems, rather than changes in prevalence.¹²³
- 37.** The Inquiry obtained data from the case study areas.
- 37.1.** Durham provided data for the five months to March 2019.¹²⁴ This showed that the police recorded 39 child sexual exploitation incidents. The police received safeguarding referrals for 238 children because of sexual exploitation concerns. In the same period, ERASE sexual exploitation forms were completed for 124 children. A Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership report gave a figure of 115 child sexual exploitation referrals in 2019/20.¹²⁵ For the same year, Durham County Council reported a very marked increase in child sexual exploitation as a factor in assessments of children in need (263 assessments).¹²⁶ In March 2020, 17 children at risk of sexual exploitation were being monitored by the child exploitation vulnerability tracker.¹²⁷
- 37.2.** Swansea reported 57 children identified as being at risk of child sexual exploitation and being monitored on its child sexual exploitation protocol in 2017/18, reducing to 39 the following year.¹²⁸ In the two years to March 2019, 106 children were referred because of sexual exploitation concerns and 92 children were discussed at

¹²⁰ INQ006459_001

¹²¹ SCC000550_014 para 78; SCC000569

¹²² See INQ006430 for the number of assessments in which child sexual exploitation was identified as a factor in 2018–20 for the five case study areas in England. The rates provided in the text are calculated using 2019 mid-year population estimates.

¹²³ INQ005118_027-030

¹²⁴ DUC000769_002

¹²⁵ INQ006252_006

¹²⁶ INQ006430

¹²⁷ DUC000815_005-006

¹²⁸ SCC000569_001

multi-agency strategy meetings.¹²⁹ In the two years to March 2019, South Wales Police stated that they had recorded 74 Swansea incidents with a child sexual exploitation flag; in the 2019 calendar year only four 'direct contact' offences were investigated.¹³⁰

37.3. In 2018/19, Warwickshire recorded 115 child sexual exploitation referrals and 291 incidents and investigations.¹³¹ Strategy meetings or multi-agency sexual exploitation meetings were convened for 33 children.¹³² In 2018/19, 173 assessments were conducted where child sexual exploitation was a factor, increasing to 242 assessments in 2019/20.¹³³ This represents a marked increase in a single year. The other data for Warwickshire are more mixed. For example, the number of child sexual exploitation-related incidents and investigations in Warwickshire suggests a decrease – from 303 in 2017/18, to 291 in 2018/19, to 245 in 2019/20.¹³⁴

37.4. In respect of St Helens, between April 2017 and March 2019, Merseyside Police recorded seven crimes in St Helens which were flagged for child sexual exploitation and involved direct contact.¹³⁵ In 2018/19, there were 76 children open to multi-agency meetings because of child sexual exploitation.¹³⁶

37.5. Tower Hamlets reported 374 episodes of concerns of child sexual exploitation that resulted in a child protection strategy meeting in 2018/19.¹³⁷ In the same period the Metropolitan Police Service recorded 102 reports of child sexual exploitation in Tower Hamlets.¹³⁸

37.6. In Bristol, in the two years to March 2019, children's social care worked with 205 children at risk of sexual exploitation.¹³⁹ In 2017/18, it identified 144 children as being at risk of sexual exploitation. The figure decreased to 100 in 2018/19. For the first five months of 2019/20 it was 72.¹⁴⁰ Bristol also provided data for the number of children newly identified as at risk of child sexual exploitation in each calendar year. This showed 80 children identified in 2018 (of whom 50 were identified for the first time), 77 in 2019 (39 for the first time) and 46 in the first six months of 2020 (16 for the first time).¹⁴¹

38. Overall the Inquiry did not receive data which it considered to give a reliable picture of child sexual exploitation across the six case study areas. This is likely linked to the absence of systematic and regular profiling of the problem of child sexual exploitation.

39. The data that were presented to the Inquiry were confused and confusing. There were inconsistencies in the data for each case study area, with unexplained trends and, in some cases, large and unexplained variations in the figures. Where the data suggest a reduction in child sexual exploitation, this is highly unlikely to be an accurate portrayal of the experience of children, not least due to the substantial recent increase in internet-based sexual harms.

¹²⁹ SCC000425_002; SCC000550_014 para 79

¹³⁰ SWP000151_004_013-014 paras 1.10 and 1.40–1.41

¹³¹ WCC000163_010-011

¹³² WCC000225_001

¹³³ INQ006430_002

¹³⁴ WCC000163_010; WSP000232_001 para 2

¹³⁵ MSP000220_006

¹³⁶ STH000836_005

¹³⁷ LBT004214_024-025 para 84

¹³⁸ MPS004300_002

¹³⁹ BSC000186_008 para 29

¹⁴⁰ BSC000082_004

¹⁴¹ BSC000317_003 para 2

B.5: Ethnicity data collection

40. As set out in Part H, this investigation demonstrated a widespread failure in the case study areas to record the ethnicity of perpetrators and victims of child sexual exploitation.

41. Analysis cannot be undertaken effectively unless there is an improvement in the accuracy and frequency of data collection generally. Under-recording will inhibit the opportunity to understand the context in which child sexual exploitation occurs, losing opportunities to deal most effectively with perpetrators and engage with victims and their communities. It is unclear whether a misplaced sense of political correctness or the sheer complexity of the problem have inhibited good-quality data collection generally and on ethnicity more specifically.

42. The failure to collect data on the ethnicity of the perpetrators and victims of child sexual exploitation, and the failure to make a public statement of the reasons why it is important to collect such data, have also led to a one-sided and often uninformed public debate where links have been made between ethnicity and a number of high-profile cases involving South Asian men. Allowing this debate to continue without providing a proper context allows an accusatory style of debate in the public domain which is both unhelpful and divisive.

43. Accurate data on the ethnicity of perpetrators and victims play an important part in enhancing understanding of crimes and the contexts in which they occur. They assist the relevant statutory agencies to target resources appropriately – enabling the police, for example, to engage with communities where these crimes occur to take preventative action. That engagement will be enhanced by an improved understanding of that community, such as whether there is resistance to intervention because authorities are distrusted, whether there are barriers to reporting based on cultural factors and whether members of that community fear the consequences of speaking out against wrongdoing. Victims may also require culturally sensitive services based on their needs to assist them and may need protection from being forced back into a life that has resulted in such damaging consequences.

44. The Secretary of State for the Home Department has been publishing data on perpetrator and victim ethnicity for 20 years, since the introduction of section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. This confirms the principle that statistical data on ethnicity are a valuable asset in ensuring statutory agencies are held to account for their performance in avoiding discrimination on the grounds of race or sex.

45. While the most up-to-date section 95 report contains data on the ethnicity of perpetrators of sexual offences, it does not break down the offence categories to include offences against children who have been sexually exploited.¹⁴² It is also silent on the ethnic profile of victims of sexual offending.¹⁴³ While section 95 is an important feature of data collection in the criminal justice system, it does not – and indeed is not designed to – accommodate the detail necessary to better understand the nature and prevalence of child sexual exploitation by networks.

¹⁴² INQ006491

¹⁴³ Section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 requires the Secretary of State to publish such information as he/she considers expedient for the purpose of facilitating the performance of those engaged in the administration of justice to avoid discriminating against any persons on the "ground of race or sex or any other improper ground".

46. Despite attempts to ascertain data on ethnicity at a national level, little progress has been made. The Home Office's paper *Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation – Characteristics of Offending* (published in December 2020) found that there were "significant limitations" to what can be said about links between ethnicity and child sexual exploitation. As this paper recognised, there is limited research and that which has been done tends to rely on poor quality data. There are significant challenges in obtaining accurate data.

47. Finally, the result of this lack of accurate and reliable data from police forces and local authorities, compounded by the lack of consistency about the definitions of 'child sexual exploitation' and 'networks' (discussed in Part C), is that the government and other organisations cannot know the current scale of child sexual exploitation by networks, or who is involved in these groups.

B.6: Improving data collection and analysis

48. The absence of accurate information about the nature and scale of child sexual exploitation is a fundamental obstacle to addressing the problem.

49. At a minimum, a standard set of indicators should be developed and reported on at local authority as well as police force level. Child sexual exploitation should be a distinct category within child sexual abuse and criminal exploitation statistics across all agencies at both local and national level. Otherwise, the scale of child sexual exploitation will remain seriously underestimated.

50. Accurate data on the ethnicity of victims and perpetrators should also be collated and analysed.

51. In the 2021 cross-governmental *Strategy for Tackling Child Sexual Abuse*, the Home Office has committed to engaging with criminal justice partners, academics, think tanks, charities and frontline professionals on improving the range and quality of data currently collected, and to drawing out insights from the data to help protect children by preventing and detecting offending.¹⁴⁴

52. Given the current unsatisfactory state of data on and analysis of child sexual exploitation, governments must ensure that obtaining specific data on child sexual exploitation is one of the most important priorities of strategy implementation. This is necessary to improve the institutional responses and outcomes for children.

53. Alongside these improvements, any denial of the true scale of child sexual exploitation must be challenged, at national level as well as locally.

¹⁴⁴ INQ006448_040 para 118

Part C

Defining child sexual exploitation by networks

Defining child sexual exploitation by networks

C.1: Introduction

1. Definitions of child sexual exploitation are used by statutory agencies to identify children at risk of exploitation or those who have been harmed by it, and to determine the services and support given to those children. Definitions are also used to ensure appropriate crime prevention strategies and policing responses, to ascertain the scale of this form of abuse at a local and national level. It is therefore crucial that child sexual exploitation is clearly defined and that professionals from different agencies understand the definition and apply it consistently.
2. The evidence shows this is not happening. There is considerable and unnecessary disagreement about what the definition of child sexual exploitation should be, with definitions not fully understood or uniformly applied in practice. There is also no clear definition or understanding of the 'networks' or groups of perpetrators who sexually exploit children.

C.2: Defining child sexual exploitation

3. The unique feature of child sexual exploitation is that children are coerced, controlled, groomed, manipulated or deceived into sexual activity.
4. Abusers often use alcohol, drugs, actual or threatened violence, kindness and affection to develop a connection with a child they intend to exploit. The manipulation at the core of exploitation is often a result of an imbalance of power. While any child may be at risk of sexual exploitation, exploited children are often already vulnerable, with childhoods characterised by neglect, substance abuse and domestic violence. Many are in care or have a disability. Teenagers are particularly vulnerable to child sexual exploitation but younger children are increasingly exposed to such harm.
5. That some exploited children seem to cooperate with sexual activity should not be misinterpreted as consent. A child under the age of 13 can never legally give consent to sexual activity and such activity is a criminal offence. Too often, even today, children who are victims of these crimes are treated as if they were consenting when the reality is that they have been coerced or manipulated into sexual activity.
6. Child sexual exploitation is currently defined in English statutory guidance as a form of child sexual abuse which:

“occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may

have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology".¹⁴⁵

- 7.** There is no longer a definition of child sexual exploitation in Wales. However, the guidance given to practitioners indicates that exchange is considered to be the central feature which distinguishes sexual exploitation from other forms of sexual abuse.¹⁴⁶
- 8.** There was debate during this investigation as to whether the 'exchange' element of these definitions is appropriate. Some argue that the exchange concept reinforces the suggestion that children have a choice about their own exploitation, which does not reflect the experiences of children who are sexually exploited, and may lead to 'victim-blaming' (even if this is unintended).¹⁴⁷ Others support the concept because it reflects the fact that perpetrators manipulate children into sexual behaviour in return for something tangible or the meeting of victims' emotional needs and it allows holistic, needs-focussed support to be given to exploited children.¹⁴⁸
- 9.** This debate is unnecessary and is not helping children who are being abused in this way. Exchange may be present in some cases of child sexual exploitation but not others. For example, there might have been exchange many months before the exploitation but not at the time of the sexual activity. Barnardo's agreed that there were children using its services who were clearly being sexually exploited but for whom the concept of 'exchange' was inapplicable or inappropriate.¹⁴⁹
- 10.** The English statutory definition, with its use of "and/or", therefore rightly makes clear that exchange is a possible but not an essential component of child sexual exploitation. However, it provides that, if exchange is absent, an element of financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator is necessary. This is too restrictive and child sexual exploitation can occur without either element. If one of these elements was genuinely required in order to show exploitation, the most egregious cases – where children are brutalised into sexual activity by serious violence – would fall outside the definition of exploitation.
- 11.** A child-centred approach is required. This may involve, but is not limited to, circumstances involving elements (a) and (b) of the current definition.
- 12.** The definition of child sexual exploitation must also be regularly reviewed to ensure it addresses the changing nature of the harm, including the substantial increasing use of online grooming.
- 13.** Additional confusion was caused by how the definitions were applied in practice.

¹⁴⁵ [HOM003340_005](#)

¹⁴⁶ [Albert Heaney 1 October 2020 54/18-25; INQ006087_004-005 para 11](#). The 2016 'Luxembourg Guidelines' also alighted on the concept of exchange as the defining feature of child sexual exploitation: *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, paragraph C.3, [INQ006564](#)

¹⁴⁷ [BRD000275_005 para 19; Amanda Naylor 30 September 2020 170/22-173/10; Rosie Lewis 2 October 2020 131/25-132/2; Helen Beckett 22 September 2020 92/4-25](#)

¹⁴⁸ [Sophie Hallett 22 September 2020 97/6-101/24; INQ006087_002-005; Sophie Langdale 1 October 2020 52/13-53/3; INQ006331_001-003 paras 2-11](#)

¹⁴⁹ [Amanda Naylor 30 September 159/5-161/18](#)

- 14.** We saw repeated examples across the case study areas of confused professional judgements. Many children were described as being at high, medium or low risk of sexual exploitation, when in fact they had already experienced or were likely to be experiencing actual harm.
- 15.** The evidence also showed children being ‘missed’ from classification as victims or at risk of child sexual exploitation for flawed reasons. In County Durham, for example, there were some examples of cases not being recorded as child sexual exploitation because of a failure to understand the concept of consent.¹⁵⁰ In Bristol, it was accepted by Avon and Somerset Police that there were incidents of clear exploitation which were not flagged as such (as well as cases where a flag was used without any evidence of exploitation), for reasons which were not entirely clear.¹⁵¹
- 16.** In the South Wales Police area, if the ‘exchange’ between the victim and perpetrator was not “*abundantly clear from the outset*”, cases were logged as child sexual abuse rather than exploitation.¹⁵² This is at odds with the intention of the Welsh guidance that exchange denotes the exploitation of a need.¹⁵³
- 17.** These inconsistent approaches hinder the ability to understand the true nature and scale of child sexual exploitation properly. As a result, crime prevention strategies are also not being adequately developed, perpetrators are not being identified and apprehended, and children who have experienced sexual exploitation are not being provided with the support they need.
- 18.** There is also some debate about whether child sexual exploitation should be understood as a distinct type of harm, as a type of child sexual abuse within a framework of ‘child sexual abuse and exploitation’, or as a type of exploitation to be considered within a framework of ‘child exploitation’, including child criminal exploitation such as so-called ‘county lines’ drug trafficking activities.¹⁵⁴ All the case study areas in this investigation have moved towards the third approach of considering child sexual exploitation by networks within a framework of child exploitation, including the very real and emerging threat of child criminal exploitation.¹⁵⁵
- 19.** Child sexual exploitation may of course overlap with other forms of child sexual abuse and child exploitation. However, the nature of the harm experienced by sexually exploited children and the service response needed can be significantly different from that needed by victims of other forms of child sexual abuse or child criminal exploitation: it is essential “*to recognise the separate and distinct care and support needs arising for children and young people who have been sexually assaulted and raped as part of their exploitation*”.¹⁵⁶ For this reason, if

¹⁵⁰ DHP000379_010

¹⁵¹ ASP000438_021

¹⁵² SWP000151_004 para 1.9

¹⁵³ Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 108/16-109/22

¹⁵⁴ Sophie Hallett 22 September 2020 105/12-106/21; INQ005373_017; INQ005170_013 para 29; INQ006087_005 para 13; INQ005150_003-004 paras 2.8–2.10. A ‘county lines’ scenario is defined by the National Crime Agency as “*where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by gangs. The ‘County Line’ is the mobile phone line used to take the orders of drugs.*” INQ006563

¹⁵⁵ DUC000685_005, 013 paras 24 and 63; DUC000793_002, 009 paras 7 and 41; SCC000552_003; WCC000363_001 para 3; STH000818_003 para 1.9; LBT004214_002 paras 4–5; ASP000321_009 paras 34–35; ASP000507_002-005, 009-011

¹⁵⁶ INQ006087_005 para 13; INQ005150_003-004 paras 2.8–2.10

agencies are to include child sexual exploitation within a broader child exploitation model, they must have a distinctive and separate focus on child sexual exploitation. Otherwise, the risk of dilution of focus is too great.

C.3: Defining networks

20. The networks or groups of adults who sexually exploit children vary. They might be a number of adults actively working together and ‘passing’ children between them, or people with only loose associations (for example being from the same communities or through links they establish such as on social media). They might also be criminals who do not sexually abuse children themselves but who use the children as a commodity for their own gain, financial or otherwise.

21. During its work to set the scope of this investigation, the Inquiry identified that there was no specific definition of ‘organised networks’ in the law, guidance or practice relating to child sexual exploitation. The Inquiry considered that such a definition was necessary for conducting the investigation and therefore adopted its own working definition in 2019:

“An organised network is characterised by two or more individuals (whether identified or not) who are known to (or associated with) one another and are known to be involved in or to facilitate the sexual exploitation of children. Being involved in the sexual exploitation of children includes introducing them to other individuals for the purpose of exploitation, trafficking a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation, taking payment for sexual activities with a child or allowing their property to be used for sexual activities with a child.”¹⁵⁷

22. The breadth of this definition enabled the Inquiry to consider as many different permutations of this form of abuse as possible and to see any problems with identification of child sexual exploitation by networks by police forces and local authorities. In practice, this investigation focussed on cases of child sexual exploitation by two or more individuals who were known to or associated with one another, regardless of the extent to which they were ‘organised’.

23. The Inquiry’s definition is very similar to that used in the Home Office’s December 2020 paper, which defined group-based child sexual offending in the community as “*a form of child sexual abuse characterised by multiple offenders with connections to one another grooming and sexually exploiting children*”.¹⁵⁸ That report also found that there was no common structure to offender networks. It noted that:

- offender networks are often loosely interconnected and based around existing social connections (which means they are often broadly homogenous in age, ethnic background and socio-economic status); and
- networks of offenders vary considerably in size, from two to tens of offenders, which pose significant investigative challenges for the police.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Update Note CSEN 6 March 2019; The Inquiry’s definition of an ‘organised network’ was repeated during the Inquiry’s first preliminary hearing in May 2019 and its second preliminary hearing in January 2020 (Preliminary hearing 2 May 2019; Second preliminary hearing 15 January 2020). The definition was also set out in full in the correspondence from the Inquiry to police and local authority witnesses, asking them to provide information on the prevalence of sexual exploitation by organised networks using the Inquiry’s definition.

¹⁵⁸ HOM003399_013 para 25

¹⁵⁹ *Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation: Characteristics of Offending* (December 2020), HOM003399_035

24. The Inquiry's review of individual cases supported the varied nature of group-based offending. Examples of networks in this investigation included:

- adults supplying children with alcohol and drugs as part of the grooming process;¹⁶⁰
- adults arranging events to supply children with alcohol or drugs in return for sexual activity;¹⁶¹
- groups of men taking children to hotels and leisure venues;¹⁶²
- men from the same place of business exploiting a child;¹⁶³
- registered sex offenders associating with others in sexually exploiting children;¹⁶⁴ and
- the grooming or involvement of family members as the means by which offenders outside the family gain access to sexually abuse a child.¹⁶⁵

This illustrative range of different types highlights that the key focus must be on whether and how the group facilitates access to, and carries out, child sexual exploitation, not how they have come together.

25. It is clear from the case study material that there were cases of child sexual exploitation by networks in all six case study areas. Despite this, the police forces in these areas were generally not able to provide evidence about the extent of sexual exploitation by networks using the Inquiry's definition or indeed any other. There was also some confusion from the police with the definition of organised crime groups (OCGs), as set out in Part H. This impedes the identification of the extent of child sexual exploitation by networks. As an example outside of the six case study areas, Humberside Police is recently reported by Sky News to have stated that there is no "organised criminality within Humberside Police ... for CSE".¹⁶⁶ The article referred to school welfare reports from the area flagging warnings of child exploitation and accounts from women who allege abuse by a group of men operating in Hull. Other recent reporting suggests that 35 children in Hull have been "officially identified as being at high risk of child exploitation over the last five months" with 371 children reported as missing between July and November 2021.¹⁶⁷

26. There were similar difficulties at a national level. The Home Office stated that:

"Much of the official data does not allow us to distinguish [child sexual exploitation] offending by organised networks and flags that identify co-offending are not used consistently to allow sound analysis of multiple offender child sex offences".¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁰ CS-A29 29 October 2020 10/14-23; CS-A24 24 September 2020 29/4-22; CS-A19 & CS-A216 2 October 2020 87/3-7, 84/20-85/10; CS-A21 29 September 2020 5/6-8; CS-A26 & CS-A32 30 September 2020 2/3-10, 17/15-17

¹⁶¹ CS-A25 24 September 2020 33/6-10; CS-A216 & CS-A19 2 October 2020 85/3-10, 87/3-7; CS-A21 29 September 2020 5/6-8; CS-A26 30 September 2020 2/3-13

¹⁶² CS-A22, CS-A81 & CS-A90 29 September 2020 4/1-5, 8/12-15, 9/17-21

¹⁶³ CS-A32 30 September 2020 16/7-14

¹⁶⁴ CS-A22 29 October 2020 3/10-16; CS-A220 & CS-A221 24 September 2020 36/17-24, 38/15-39/23; CS-A22 29 September 2020 2/24-3/4; CS-A71 30 September 2020 10/7-12

¹⁶⁵ CS-A118 29 October 2020 16/25-17/3; CS-A56 & CS-A221 24 September 2020 37/6-15, 38/15-39/6; CS-A26 30 September 2020 1/23-2/2

¹⁶⁶ 'Hull grooming gang targeted primary school girls – as police told to declare war on abusers', Sky News, 24 November 2021.

¹⁶⁷ 'More than 370 Hull children reported missing in just five months with dozens at risk of sexual exploitation', Hull Live, 16 December 2021.

¹⁶⁸ HOM003378_018 para 64

When asked about whether any consideration was being given to a single definition of 'networks', Mr Christian Papaleontiou, Head of the Home Office's Tackling Exploitation and Abuse Unit, accepted that the definitional issues were "very *challenging*" and indicated that the Home Office was trying to embed within local, regional and national structures an ability to discern between networks and looser group-based offending. It was working to understand what interventions were needed for different forms of offending.¹⁶⁹

27. Barnardo's case management recording systems also did not capture different offender models, so it was unable to identify how many children who had experienced sexual exploitation had been abused through networks.¹⁷⁰

28. A focus on the sexual exploitation of children by networks requires a broad understanding of what networks are, such as the one used by the Inquiry. Professionals need to understand that this abuse may be undertaken by 'organised' groups – but also loose associations – in order to respond appropriately to all cases in which children are being sexually exploited by multiple perpetrators.¹⁷¹ This should involve consideration of the importance of networking and other group processes and dynamics (which may overlap) in facilitating, spreading and sustaining sexual exploitation.

¹⁶⁹ Christian Papaleontiou 1 October 2020 21/3-22/4; Christian Papaleontiou 1 October 2020 130/7-131/24

¹⁷⁰ BRD000275_003

¹⁷¹ INQ006279_003-004 para 9

Part D

Meeting the needs of particular groups of sexually exploited children

Meeting the needs of particular groups of sexually exploited children

D.1: Introduction

1. Child sexual exploitation can occur in any community and it is crucial that practitioners do not make assumptions about who might be a victim or a perpetrator. However, research indicates that children in residential care and those with disabilities are at increased risk of sexual exploitation.¹⁷² In addition, while girls are most frequently the victims of child sexual exploitation, there is less recognition of the extent to which boys and young men are also targeted by perpetrators.

D.2: Children in care

2. In England, as at 31 March 2020, there were 80,010 children in care.¹⁷³ Of those children, 39 percent were aged 10 to 15 and 24 percent were 16 or over; 13 percent lived in children's homes, secure units or semi-independent placements.¹⁷⁴ In Wales, on the same date, there were 7,170 children in care. Of those children, 37 percent were aged 10 to 15 and 15 percent were 16 or over; 7 percent lived in residential settings.¹⁷⁵

3. Children in care are some of the most vulnerable children in society, due to both the experiences and situations that lead to them being placed in care and certain factors associated with being in care, such as going missing from care and being placed a long way from home.¹⁷⁶ In England in the year to March 2018, child sexual exploitation was identified in 3,160 assessments for children in care.¹⁷⁷ This equates to 16 percent of all the assessments which identified child sexual exploitation.¹⁷⁸

4. Teenagers in care are more likely to require specialist or intensive support. They are 50 percent more likely (compared to children in care aged under 13) to have a statement of special educational needs (SEN) or an education, health and care plan (EHCP) and are 10 times more likely to have been attending a pupil referral unit (PRU).¹⁷⁹ Compared

¹⁷² *Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Understanding Risk and Vulnerability*, Coventry University, August 2016, [INQ005182_006_014-015](#)

¹⁷³ [INQ006485_003](#). Children in care are formally referred to as 'looked after' children, which is defined by section 22 of the Children Act 1989 as a child who is in the care of a local authority, or who has received accommodation from a local authority, for more than 24 hours.

¹⁷⁴ [INQ006485_013_015](#)

¹⁷⁵ *Children looked after at 31 March by local authority and placement type*, Welsh Government, February 2021, [INQ006582](#); *Children looked after at 31 March by local authority, gender and age*, Welsh Government, February 2021, [INQ006439](#)

¹⁷⁶ [INQ006285](#)

¹⁷⁷ *Stability Index 2019: Technical report*, Children's Commissioner for England, August 2019, table 21, [INQ006184_047](#) An equivalent figure is not available for Wales.

¹⁷⁸ In 2017/18, 20,000 children in need assessments identified child sexual exploitation, [INQ006567](#)

¹⁷⁹ *Stability Index 2019: Overview report*, Children's Commissioner for England, August 2019, [INQ006566_006](#)

to younger children, teenagers in care are six times more likely to be victims of sexual exploitation.¹⁸⁰ Twelve percent of children in care aged 13 and over had sexual exploitation identified in their assessments.

5. A carefully chosen placement that meets the child's particular needs can reduce the risk of sexual exploitation. However, some perpetrators of sexual exploitation deliberately target children in residential care. Staff cannot protect children in their care from every risk. Agencies must be realistic about what staff can do, while acknowledging and addressing failures. It is crucial that staff and other carers receive appropriate training, including in adopting trauma-informed approaches.¹⁸¹

6. The Inquiry sought information from the local authorities in the case study areas about the extent to which sexual exploitation harm and risks were recorded for children in their care. We were told that:

- in 2018/19, 11 children in care in Durham were identified as at risk of sexual exploitation¹⁸² (as an indication, there were 840 children in care in its area in March 2019);
- between 2017 and 2019, 23 children in care in Swansea were referred to the child sexual exploitation team (in March 2019, there were 555 children in care);¹⁸³
- in March 2019, 111 children in care in Warwickshire were identified as being either at risk of or being sexually exploited (in March 2019, there were 722 children in care);¹⁸⁴
- in March 2019, four children in care in St Helens were identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation (in March 2019, there were 466 children in care);¹⁸⁵
- in 2018/19, there were 69 episodes in which children in care in Tower Hamlets were considered to be at risk of sexual exploitation, resulting in a child protection strategy meeting being convened (in March 2019, there were 329 children in care);¹⁸⁶ and
- in March 2019, 37 children in care in Bristol were identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation (in March 2019, there were 617 children in care).¹⁸⁷

7. The information about the numbers of children in care identified as sexually exploited or at heightened risk varies from area to area. It is not clear why that should be and the case study areas should consider this. The Inquiry cannot make comparisons or draw reliable conclusions about the data as a result of such marked disparities.

The experiences of the case study children who were in care

8. CS-A29 was initially taken into care in Durham on a temporary basis due to family circumstances. It appears that she continued to be sexually exploited after she became a looked after child.¹⁸⁸ On two occasions, CS-A29 was taken into police protection because Durham Constabulary did not consider her to be safe in the local authority children's home in which she was living. She was said to be very unsettled there, repeatedly going missing,

¹⁸⁰ *Stability Index 2019: Overview report*, Children's Commissioner for England, August 2019, INQ006566_003_006

¹⁸¹ See, for example, *Child sexual exploitation: support in children's residential homes*, Ivana La Valle and Berni Graham with Di Hart, December 2016, DFE003192

¹⁸² DUC000793_005-006 paras 22-24

¹⁸³ SCC000425_001

¹⁸⁴ WCC000236_005 para 20

¹⁸⁵ STH000818_008 para 1.31

¹⁸⁶ LBT004214_025-026 para 86

¹⁸⁷ BSC000284_023 para 94

¹⁸⁸ CS-A29 29 October 2020 9/20-12/6

and boys in the children's home were said to have engaged in harmful sexual behaviour with her.¹⁸⁹ The police expressed concern about the increased risk to CS-A29 and suggested that a foster placement was critical but none was said to be available.¹⁹⁰

9. CS-A50 was sexually exploited for almost a year when aged 13. During that time, she moved between the homes of her parents and extended family and there was no responsible adult taking care of her.¹⁹¹ However, when she became a child in the care of Durham County Council a choice of placements was available for her and she was involved in the selection of her permanent foster carer. Within two months, the assessed risk of sexual exploitation to CS-A50 was reduced to low. Within a year, CS-A50 had no further episodes of going missing. It was considered that the foster placement had a significant positive impact on her life.¹⁹²

10. Three children in the case studies from Swansea were in care. CS-A25 was prematurely removed from the monitoring of the child sexual exploitation protocol towards the end of 2018, before she went into care.¹⁹³ CS-A220 was retraumatised by the behaviour of other children in her residential placement and a long delay in finding a suitable supported accommodation place for her adversely affected her mental health.¹⁹⁴ CS-A56 continued to be sexually exploited by her perpetrators while she was in care.¹⁹⁵ However, there was evidence of good practice in the provision of accommodation and support to CS-A220 and CS-A56 when they were in transition to leave care.¹⁹⁶

11. From May 2016 to August 2019, CS-A1 was in care in Warwickshire for several reasons, including episodes of going missing.¹⁹⁷ A review in June 2016 noted that it was unfortunate that CS-A1 had not been found a stable placement – as a result, her education and access to support services were not settled.¹⁹⁸ Warwickshire Police considered that she should be placed out of area to protect her but Warwickshire County Council disagreed.¹⁹⁹ She was then accommodated in 14 different foster placements – four were with independent providers and 10 were local authority placements (none of which were child sexual exploitation specialist placements). In two placements, CS-A1 was located with other children who regularly went missing. In one, she was placed with an older child who introduced her to a network of older people and another placement was in the geographic location where CS-A1 was being sexually exploited – she went missing 48 times while in this placement.²⁰⁰ In May 2018, CS-A1 was placed in a children's home, which her mother considered to be her daughter's most positive placement, with a more structured environment and staff who would follow her if she went missing.²⁰¹ During the two years taken by Warwickshire County Council to identify and provide a suitable protective placement for CS-A1, she continued to be sexually exploited. Warwickshire County Council explained that they found it difficult to identify suitable placements owing to CS-A1's complex needs and the absence of suitable placements. It considered that this is a national issue that requires government action to ensure that there are sufficient suitable placement

¹⁸⁹ CS-A29 29 October 2020 10/21-11/14

¹⁹⁰ DHP000579_003 para 6; DHP000581; DHP000454_017-018 paras 57–62

¹⁹¹ DUC000728

¹⁹² CS-A50 29 October 2020 6/4-7/7

¹⁹³ CS-A25 24 September 2020 34/10-15

¹⁹⁴ CS-A220 24 September 2020 35/8-37/3

¹⁹⁵ CS-A56 24 September 2020 37/6-38/12

¹⁹⁶ Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 99/17-100/8

¹⁹⁷ WCC000244_010-011

¹⁹⁸ WCC000253_001-004

¹⁹⁹ CS-A2 25 September 2020 39/13-40/1

²⁰⁰ CS-A2 25 September 2020 7/8-8/20, 40/7-20, 17/13-19/16

²⁰¹ CS-A2 25 September 2020 17/13-19/16

options.²⁰² In any event, this demonstrates an important weakness in the Warwickshire placement regime.

12. CS-A26 was in the care of St Helens Council. She had multiple episodes of going missing and was assessed as being at very high risk of child sexual exploitation. The potential harm to her increased when CS-A26 was placed in residential care due to the unsuitability of her initial placement.²⁰³ There was no clear evidence of a strategy to address the high number of episodes of going missing that contributed to the risk to CS-A26. Merseyside Police accepted that, when looking at the records relating to CS-A26, it was difficult to identify what disruption activity was carried out around the missing episodes in the 2015–16 period.²⁰⁴ They also accepted that there were times when CS-A26 was found in the company of adults and that there were “*potentially opportunities where we should have taken more positive action*”.²⁰⁵

13. CS-A71 was also in the care of St Helens Council. She was groomed online and sexually exploited by adults she travelled to meet in other areas. She took a younger, 13-year-old child in care with her and that child was also exploited. CS-A71 was exploited across three police force boundaries. When she was placed out of area, there was no evidence that she was monitored by multi-agency meetings in those areas.²⁰⁶ The placements and assessment of CS-A71 failed to keep her safe.

14. CS-A22 was placed out of the Tower Hamlets area for a year and was then brought back to the borough. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets accepted that not enough was done to prepare CS-A22 or her parent for her return and that the school which she was due to attend was not made aware of her vulnerability.²⁰⁷ It was reported that CS-A22 was sexually exploited upon her return home and she subsequently disclosed further sexual assaults.²⁰⁸ She was later placed out of area in another specialist placement.²⁰⁹

15. CS-A302 had several out-of-area placements while in the care of Bristol City Council and continued to be sexually exploited whilst in those placements.²¹⁰ Bristol City Council was able eventually to identify a specialist out-of-area placement at a distance, which was successful.²¹¹ CS-A302 considered that the specialist placement had “*saved my life*”.²¹²

Out-of-area placements

16. In recent years, local authorities in England have increasingly placed children in care outside of their geographical area.²¹³ From March 2018 to March 2019, the proportion of children placed out of area rose from 37 percent to 41 percent, with 20 percent of children living in distant placements. The proportion remained at 41 percent in March 2020.²¹⁴ In Wales, 36 percent of children were placed out of area in March 2019; as at March 2020, the figure had reduced to 30 percent.²¹⁵

²⁰² Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 98/13-99/8

²⁰³ Jim Lievers 28 September 2020 111/10-113/14

²⁰⁴ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 150/4-8

²⁰⁵ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 150/15-21

²⁰⁶ Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 109/19-110-3

²⁰⁷ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 92/12-95/13

²⁰⁸ CS-A22 29 September 2020 4/1-9

²⁰⁹ LBT004214_041 para 155

²¹⁰ CS-A302 30 September 2020 21/2-6

²¹¹ Ann James 30 September 2020 86/18-22; 30 September 2020 21/7-8

²¹² BSC000124_003-004 para 15

²¹³ INQ006285_008

²¹⁴ INQ006468

²¹⁵ INQ006469; INQ006568

17. Research has shown that out-of-area placements, including those in secure units, can be beneficial for some children, particularly if the child is well supported and consulted about the decision, and the placement addresses problems as the child sees them. There may be many valid reasons for placing a child out of area, including in an emergency or to access therapeutic support. Being entirely removed from an area may also be appropriate, for example, for some children who have already been sexually exploited or who are at risk of exploitation.

18. For approximately 50 percent of children, however, a placement outside their home area had a negative impact.²¹⁶ Ofsted recognised that some older children with complex needs were being placed away from home because of a lack of suitable local placements, which *“is not always in the best interests of the child”*.²¹⁷

19. There are many other circumstances where out-of-area placements are unsuitable for those identified as being at risk of or harmed by child sexual exploitation because:

- placing authorities do not always take account of local risks of exploitation, potentially exposing the child to further harm;
- children placed out of area face a heightened risk of going missing and yet robust plans to address this are not always in place;
- children are disadvantaged if agreement is not reached about how their education, health and any therapeutic needs will be met; and
- if perpetrators are not disrupted, they may harm the child during the out-of-area placement and when the child returns home. They will also pose a threat to other children in the local area.²¹⁸

20. Data were requested from the local authorities about the numbers of sexually exploited children placed outside their home area:

- Durham: Numbers were not provided, other than that seven children at risk of sexual exploitation were placed in unregulated placements outside Durham in the two years to March 2019;²¹⁹
- Swansea: It was not possible to determine the numbers from the data provided;²²⁰
- Warwickshire: 33 children in 2018/19 and 49 children in 2019/20;²²¹
- St Helens: Numbers were not provided for children placed in neighbouring areas but seven children were placed over 30 miles away (April 2017 to end December 2020);
- Tower Hamlets: 130 children were placed out of the borough at March 2020, 13 of whom were at a distance of more than 20 miles;²²² and
- Bristol: 14 children were placed outside Bristol in 2018/19, seven of whom were placed in adjoining local authority areas.²²³

²¹⁶ Sophie Hallett 22 September 2020 130/21-131/16

²¹⁷ OFS012595_029 para 89

²¹⁸ OFS012595_027-029 paras 84-90; OFS012738_004 para 10; BRD000275_010 para 34; INQ006285_003-004

²¹⁹ DUC000658_009 para 43

²²⁰ SCC000550_027 paras 143-147

²²¹ WCC000236_016 para 90; WCC000409_002 para 5; Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 106/4-9

²²² LBT004289_015 para 52

²²³ Ann James 30 September 2020 70/8-11; BSC000124_001 para 1

- 21.** On the basis of the information provided, it was not clear whether out-of-area placements met children's needs or further increased exposure to sexual exploitation risks and harm. There was evidence of sexual exploitation occurring or continuing when a child was placed out of area.²²⁴ There also appeared to be a "*national problem*" of authorities not being aware of children placed within their areas by others, including children identified as at high risk of sexual exploitation.²²⁵
- 22.** The Inquiry saw some non-compliance with procedures intended to reduce the risks of out-of-area placements. For example, when a Swansea child is placed out of area, the policy stated that there should be a cross-border meeting at which South Wales Police will brief the new force (and sometimes the relevant social worker) and provide an intelligence package including missing data and risk factors. However, such meetings do not always take place.²²⁶
- 23.** Warwickshire County Council appeared to have comprehensive procedures for out-of-area placements. Recently updated guidance made clear that, when selecting placements, the risk of sexual exploitation had to be considered; where possible, locations were risk assessed. It was recognised that consultation and information-sharing should include the police. Where children were placed more than 20 miles from home, out-of-county agreements indicating that the placement is suitable and safe for the child were to be routinely sought. Warwickshire County Council also described the steps it takes in managing sexual exploitation risks to children placed in its area by other councils, which included carrying out return home interviews and following up sexual exploitation concerns.²²⁷
- 24.** St Helens Council and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets also described policies aimed at ensuring the ongoing responsibility of the 'home' local authority or police force for children placed out of area who are identified as at risk of sexual exploitation.²²⁸
- 25.** Given concerns about the cross-border movement of children and perpetrators, Bristol City Council has taken steps to pool resources with neighbouring authorities so that Barnardo's can provide support services to children on a regional basis and make regular checks on children. Operation Topaz (Avon and Somerset Police's child exploitation disruption team) also covers the region.²²⁹
- 26.** In Ofsted's view, a coordinated strategy at a national level is required to manage the supply of children's home places, including consideration of how private and voluntary providers, local authorities and others can be guided and incentivised to open homes where they are most needed. Otherwise, placements that do not meet the needs of vulnerable children, including those at risk of sexual exploitation, will continue.²³⁰

²²⁴ See, for example, the Swansea evidence at SCC000550_028-029 paras 148-156 and the experience of CS-A302.

²²⁵ WCC000236_005 para 19. See, for example, the Swansea evidence at Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 92/2-23; SCC000550_024 para 125; SWP000151_042 para 4.6 and BRD000277_008

²²⁶ SWP000151_043-046 paras 4.9, 4.15-4.18. See also the lack of monitoring of CS-A71 (St Helens) and poor planning for the return of CS-A22 (Tower Hamlets) to her home area.

²²⁷ WCC000236_013-014 paras 78 and 81-82; WCC000420 paras 84-86; WCC000421_001-003; WCC000422_002-003 paras 8 and 12; Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 105/10-106/15

²²⁸ STH001203_008 paras 16.1-16.2; STH000818_022 para 5.2; Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 63/3-64/14; LBT004214_055 para 215

²²⁹ 30 September 2020 71/8-20

²³⁰ OFS012595_029 para 90

27. As there are particular risks when moving sexually exploited children across boundaries, there should be better collaboration between placing and host authorities, as well as police forces. There is a need for strengthened statutory guidance on out-of-area placements that deals specifically with sexually exploited children.

Unregulated placements

28. Under the Care Standards Act 2000, services that provide accommodation and care for young people under the age of 18 are required to register with Ofsted. If accommodation without care is provided, the placement is considered ‘unregulated’.

29. Some unregulated placements provide positive support to 16 and 17-year-olds in becoming independent. However, these placements can be in temporary or isolated settings such as mobile homes, barges, caravans, hostels or even tents.²³¹ There is often no or limited support provided and the level of supervision by staff varies.²³² These features of unregulated placements increase the vulnerability and exposure of often lonely children, who may become more susceptible to grooming behaviours and child sexual exploitation.

30. At the time of the public hearings, in all but one of the case study areas, use of unregulated placements for sexually exploited children was minimal, ranging from zero to four children.²³³ There was some evidence of children identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation being placed in unregulated placements between 2017 and 2019.²³⁴ There was also evidence of children becoming exposed to risk of sexual exploitation after a move to an unregulated placement.²³⁵

31. From September 2021, in accordance with new regulations, those under 16 years old cannot be placed in unregulated accommodation.²³⁶ The government has also consulted on new standards for the use of such accommodation for children in care aged 16 and 17, “*overseen by an Ofsted-led registration and inspection regime*”.²³⁷ The Children’s Commissioner has called for the use of unregulated accommodation to be banned for all those under 18.²³⁸

32. The use of unsupervised, unregulated accommodation for children in care aged 16 and 17 who are experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing, sexual exploitation remains a serious concern and must be stopped by the Department for Education. New standards for the use of such accommodation must include measures to reduce the risk of sexual exploitation faced by children in these placements.

²³¹ INQ006493

²³² INQ006274_006

²³³ DUC000685_009 para 44; DUC000793_007 paras 26–27; SCC000550_029 para 157; WCC000215_001-002; STH000818_029 paras 5.42–5.43; LBT004337_007 para 19; BSC000186_019 paras 88–89

²³⁴ BSC000186_019 para 89

²³⁵ See, for example, the evidence from St Helens (STH000818_029 paras 5.42–5.43) and Bristol (BSC000322_002 para 8).

²³⁶ Regulation 4 of The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, which adds a new Regulation 27A to The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010.

²³⁷ INQ006453; INQ006494

²³⁸ INQ006282

D.3: Boys and young men

33. Research suggests that:

- there are different routes into exploitative contact for boys and young men;
- gender is relevant to understanding risk and vulnerability, impacting on behaviour and ability to disclose;
- boys and young men may respond differently to experiences of exploitation;
- boys and young men are more likely to come to the attention of child sexual exploitation services via the criminal justice system; and
- the role of masculinity and sexual identity in supporting boys and young men who have been sexually exploited is relevant.²³⁹

34. In 2014, Barnardo's identified a need to raise professional awareness of boys and young men as potential victims of child sexual exploitation.²⁴⁰

35. In 2017, the Home Office funded a Barnardo's research project, 'Boys 2'. This was a two-year project to improve the identification and assessment of, and interventions for, boys and young men impacted by child sexual exploitation. It also aimed to develop standardised assessment documents and intervention resources for frontline professionals, with a subsequent development plan.²⁴¹

36. In 2018, joint guidance produced by the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Children's Society and Victim Support – *Boys and Young Men at Risk of Sexual Exploitation: A Toolkit for Professionals* – acknowledged that the sexual exploitation experiences of boys and young men are less understood and often overlooked.²⁴²

37. In 2019, the government outlined its commitment to strengthening the response to male victims and survivors of crime, including sexual violence, in its *Position statement on male victims of crimes considered in the cross-Government strategy on ending Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)*.²⁴³

38. The current *All Wales Practice Guide* recognises the often hidden nature of child sexual exploitation against boys and young men.²⁴⁴

The experiences of boys and young men in the case studies

39. CS-A221 was a 14-year-old boy in Swansea who, in 2019, was allowed by his parents to stay for lengthy periods at the home of a registered sex offender, who groomed him. The child's social worker was unaware of concerns about the offender and did not complete checks because the offender was thought to be a vulnerable adult. The child had not made any disclosures and refused a sexual health screening. The offender was imprisoned for breach of a Sexual Harm Prevention Order.²⁴⁵

²³⁹ BRD000279_006; INQ005176_102_145-147

²⁴⁰ BRD000279_003; INQ006325

²⁴¹ HOM003378_042-043 paras 164-165

²⁴² NAP000045_003

²⁴³ HOM003337

²⁴⁴ WGT000464_013

²⁴⁵ CS-A221 24 September 2020 38/15-39/23

40. CS-A90 moved to Tower Hamlets in 2018, when he was 13 years old. He went missing from home a number of times. There were also concerns about his sexual activity, county lines, gangs, and possible emotional and psychological harm. In early 2019, it was reported that CS-A90 intended to hold his birthday party in a hotel with people older than him. A child sexual exploitation assessment was completed and a strategy meeting held. The Metropolitan Police Service accepted that the focus had been criminal exploitation and drugs rather than child sexual exploitation, although CS-A90 had been put on a child protection plan.²⁴⁶

41. CS-A62 was a young man with complex disabilities in Bristol. The evidence suggests that he was sexually abused between the ages of 13 and 16.²⁴⁷ Agencies took account of and were sensitive to CS-A62's sexual orientation. Disruption activity took place in respect of adults suspected to be grooming him.²⁴⁸ When he reported, aged 13, that he had been meeting up with a male described as a "known paedophile", this was followed up and it was considered that there was little evidence to support concerns that he may be being abused.²⁴⁹

42. Several of the case study boys and young men (including CS-A43, CS-A59 and CS-A27) were sexually exploited after contact with them was initiated via an online dating app, Grindr. Risk assessment in relation to exploitation via online dating apps such as, but not limited to, Grindr is difficult. Significant multi-agency work is required to tackle it.²⁵⁰

Identifying male victims

43. The case study areas were asked to provide information about the numbers of sexually exploited males they identified between March 2017 and March 2019.

43.1. Durham Police stated that, of the total number of children discussed at the operational child exploitation group over the two years, 17 (12 percent of the total) were boys.²⁵¹ Its Child Exploitation Vulnerability Tracker, introduced in November 2019 in relation to children deemed to be at high risk, identified two boys and young men at risk of sexual exploitation in the third quarter of 2019/20 and one boy the following quarter.²⁵²

43.2. In Swansea in 2017/18, 14 strategy meetings (9 percent of the total) were held to discuss sexual exploitation concerns about male victims. The following year 13 boys and young men (14 percent) were discussed.²⁵³

43.3. In Warwickshire over the two-year period, of the children and young persons who were the subject of an initial child sexual exploitation assessment, 29 (13 percent) were male and, of those subject to a review assessment, 2 (20 percent) were male. Two boys and young men (15 percent) were discussed at multi-agency meetings because of sexual exploitation concerns and 24 (42 percent) were discussed at sexual exploitation strategy

²⁴⁶ Sue Williams 29 September 2020 164/3-165/6; CS-A90 29 September 2020 10/10-11/7; LBT004228

²⁴⁷ CS-A62 30 September 2020 19/18-21

²⁴⁸ BSC000186_028 para 139

²⁴⁹ CS-A62 30 September 2020 19/22-20/1

²⁵⁰ As part of the Internet investigation, the Inquiry examined the law enforcement response to online harms and, in particular, its response to the ways in which the internet is used to facilitate the sharing of child sexual abuse imagery, the grooming of children and the live streaming of child sexual abuse. Further examination of the institutional response to these harms can be found in *The Internet Investigation Report*

²⁵¹ DHP000440_040 para 141; DHP000456_039 paras 132-133

²⁵² DHP000456_039 para 132; DUC000815_005-006

²⁵³ SCC000550_032 para 170

meetings.²⁵⁴ Over an earlier two-year period (from 2016 to 2018) the percentage increased from 7 percent to 20 percent (although the numbers of boys and young men were not stated).²⁵⁵

43.4. In St Helens in 2017/18, 17 boys and young men were referred because of sexual exploitation concerns (14 percent of such referrals) and discussed at multi-agency meetings. The following year the figure was 13 boys and young men (11 percent).²⁵⁶

43.5. Tower Hamlets stated that 43 percent of child sexual exploitation risk assessments were completed on boys and young men from April 2018 to August 2019.²⁵⁷ Over the same period, 22 percent of sexual exploitation assessments for children in care were for boys and young men (out of 47 children in care assessments).²⁵⁸

43.6. In 2017/18 in Bristol, 23 males were flagged as at significant risk of child sexual exploitation (16 percent of the then flagged total); the following year, this figure was 22 (22 percent).²⁵⁹

44. In all six case study areas, there was evidence of awareness-raising and training on identifying the sexual exploitation of boys and young men. Examples included a Barnardo's project in Bristol and a multi-agency campaign in Warwickshire, 'Something's Not Right', which aimed to increase awareness of the sexual exploitation of boys and young men and to encourage them to speak out about their experiences and seek support.²⁶⁰

45. In at least three of the case study areas, data about sexually exploited boys and young men were subsumed within the broader category of criminal exploitation. As explained in Part C, it is important that the victims of child sexual exploitation, as opposed to other forms of exploitation, can be specifically identified.

Supporting male victims

46. St Helens Council and Durham County Council made no specific child sexual exploitation services available for boys and young men.²⁶¹ However, within the Durham case studies, CS-A43, a male victim who was sexually exploited by adults who made contact with him via Grindr, received timely support from local agencies, including a referral to a specialist LGBTQ+ service, in line with his and his parents' wishes.²⁶²

47. In Warwickshire, dedicated resources have been put in place for male victims. The Barnardo's team targets boys and young men with services to prevent and disrupt sexual exploitation.²⁶³ Children's social care also now has a specialist worker within the multi-agency team: Ofsted commented in 2020 that there was "*targeted direct work completed with boys and a number of male workers recruited specifically to complete this work*".²⁶⁴

²⁵⁴ WCC000236_018 paras 102–103

²⁵⁵ WCC000236_018-019 paras 102–105

²⁵⁶ STH000818_030 paras 6.1–6.2

²⁵⁷ LBT004318_016 para 45

²⁵⁸ LBT004298_001-002

²⁵⁹ BSC000186_020 para 92

²⁶⁰ WCC000236_018-019 paras 102–105

²⁶¹ STH000818_030 para 6.5; DHP000440_040 paras 140 and 143; DHP000456_039 para 135; DHP000379; DUC000685_011 para 53

²⁶² CS-A43 29 October 2020 19/25-21/15; DUC000739_005

²⁶³ WCC000236_018 para 104

²⁶⁴ OFS012688_001

48. One solution to the under-representation of male victims, which is being adopted in Bristol, has been for BASE (a specialist service that supports young adults aged 18 to 25 who are at risk of being sexually exploited or where there are known concerns around sexual exploitation) to lower the threshold for entry into sexual exploitation support services when boys and young men are referred. As a result, Barnardo's in Bristol has a higher proportion of boys and young men receiving its child sexual exploitation services than across its services in other areas.²⁶⁵

49. Overall, more needs to be done to identify and support boys and young men who are the victims of sexual exploitation. Once boys and young men do come forward, they also need more targeted and appropriate support than is typically provided. Targeted work to support boys must not be at the expense of other groups, including girls.

D.4: Children with disabilities

50. Research commissioned by Barnardo's in 2015 highlighted specific factors that increased the vulnerability of children with learning disabilities to sexual exploitation. These included overprotection, disempowerment and social isolation, and a lack of accessible sex and relationships education and information. There is also a reported lack of knowledge, understanding, awareness and training, specifically about the sexual exploitation of children with learning disabilities.²⁶⁶

51. Research funded by the Home Office in 2016 suggested that children with disabilities in all settings are at a high risk of sexual violence and that some factors, such as limited understanding of social cues and social interaction, can make young people more at risk of exploitation. Social isolation can also potentially make young people with disabilities more vulnerable to grooming and exploitation.²⁶⁷

52. Children who are deaf or have a physical disability are considered to be three times more likely in general to experience abuse than those without a disability.²⁶⁸

53. Perpetrators target children they identify as vulnerable, which can include vulnerability due to disabilities.²⁶⁹

54. In May 2021, *The Times* newspaper reported the experiences of 'Sarah', a teenager with learning disabilities. She was filmed being sexually exploited by a group of men, who could be heard laughing and taunting her. None of the abusers were charged with any criminal offences. One of her social workers said "*If you wanted to look at a worst-case scenario for failing to tackle the abuse of a child, this is it. Everything that could go wrong, did go wrong*".²⁷⁰ Sarah's experience is also reflected in the children's case studies examined in this investigation, which showed the impact of child sexual exploitation on children with disabilities.

²⁶⁵ Amanda Naylor 30 September 2020 181/2-183/1; BRD000278_006 paras 23–25

²⁶⁶ *Unprotected, overprotected: meeting the needs of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, sexual exploitation*, Barnardo's, 2015, INQ005420_033

²⁶⁷ *Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Understanding Risk and Vulnerability*, Coventry University, August 2016, INQ005182_006_014

²⁶⁸ WGT000464_013 para 62

²⁶⁹ OFS012595_048-049 para 160

²⁷⁰ INQ006493

Recognising disabilities

55. Disabilities are often identified through SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) assessments, EHCP (education, health and care plans) and the Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS) pathway. Carefully worded forms or screening documents, guidance and training can assist practitioners in identifying whether sexually exploited children have a disability. Practice across the six areas in this respect was mixed but none had fully effective systems in place.

56. In County Durham, the child sexual exploitation assessment form included any “*specific recognition around any disability or additional vulnerability*” but this had only been the case since November 2019. Cases involving children with a disability could not therefore be tracked before that time.²⁷¹ Durham County Council has recently stated that disability is now included as a risk factor in its Child Exploitation Vulnerability Tracker (CEVT), which provides a point score around identified vulnerabilities including disabilities and allows for recording and monitoring of children at high risk of exploitation.²⁷² It has worked closely with SEND professionals to improve the knowledge of its child protection staff. The SEND and Inclusion Service reviewed 57 child exploitation cases triaged in the CEVT between March and June 2020. Of these, 43 percent had identified special educational needs or disabilities.²⁷³ However, Durham County Council accepts that it is “*fairly early days*” in terms of its approach to children with disabilities and that there is still a “*significant amount of work to do*”.²⁷⁴ While this attempt to better understand the needs of disabled children is to be welcomed, a specific focus on child sexual exploitation was missing and should be included in the future, including disabled children considered to be at medium or low risk of sexual exploitation who are not captured in the exploitation tracker.

57. While the City and County of Swansea Council’s (Swansea Council’s) Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (SERAF) identified whether a child at risk of sexual exploitation has a disability, it did not prompt the assessor to consider the impact of disability on the child and any vulnerability to sexual abuse. The expectation was that disability would be discussed in strategy meetings.²⁷⁵

58. Warwickshire County Council uses the National Working Group (NWG) Child Sexual Exploitation Assessment Tool, which records whether a child has a disability or any additional emotional or learning needs. The practitioner is prompted to consider the need for a capacity assessment or an EHCP. It also records whether it is suspected that the child has an undiagnosed learning disability that may impact upon their behaviour.²⁷⁶ The Council has developed its child sexual exploitation case record template so that it records and identifies any disability, including a learning disability.²⁷⁷ Despite this, the Warwickshire Safeguarding Partnership raised concerns about the identification and recording of the needs of children with disabilities, noting that the proportion of children described as disabled being referred is lower than expected (compared with the prevalence of children with disabilities).²⁷⁸ Warwickshire Police’s officers are able to obtain information on disability through children’s

²⁷¹ John Pearce 23 September 2020 20/15-17; DUC000685_011 para 57

²⁷² John Pearce 23 September 2020 21/14-22/21; DUC000813_005; DHP000528; DHP000456_004 paras 10–11

²⁷³ DUC000813_005

²⁷⁴ John Pearce 23 September 2020 25/9-18, 29/18-30/7, 30/18-31/4

²⁷⁵ SCC000550_033-034 paras 185–187

²⁷⁶ WCC000236_020 para 121

²⁷⁷ WCC000236_020 paras 115–117

²⁷⁸ INQ005279_006 para 36

social care but this is not done routinely.²⁷⁹ The force's 2019 sexual exploitation profile document also "*did not establish any clear links between CSE [child sexual exploitation] and people with disabilities*".²⁸⁰ The processes used in Warwickshire form a foundation for effective identification of disabilities but the low rate of identification and recording is a concern.

59. The referral form (CE1) used by St Helens Council, which was in standard form under the Pan-Merseyside Protocol, asked if the child being referred has a disability, with a 'yes' or 'no' answer, but did not specifically require recording of the nature or effect of the impairment on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.²⁸¹ Its risk assessment form (CE2) included a prompt for recording whether the child has a disability and a section in relation to physical health concerns (including mental health) to allow for further identification and detail of the disability. However, St Helens Council accepted that there was limited scope to identify learning disabilities or needs, or for practitioners to record the effect of disabilities on the child. In addition, there was no guidance for staff on how to assess and record disability.²⁸²

60. In Tower Hamlets, the exploitation screening document referenced the need to consider disability as a potential vulnerability factor for young people. However, specific guidance was not provided to staff on assessing or recording disability for children at risk of sexual exploitation.²⁸³ Training around exploitation, children who go missing and learning disabilities was said to be "*poorly attended*".²⁸⁴ Data on children with disabilities were not systematically captured prior to July 2019 and the introduction of a new screening tool.²⁸⁵ Mr Richard Baldwin, Divisional Director for Children's Social Care, noted that where children at risk of sexual exploitation have been identified as having a diagnosis of autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, special educational needs and mental health conditions, this information was recorded on the child's case file and partners were encouraged to share information. Any additional vulnerabilities were then discussed in strategy meetings, case conferences and strategic meetings, and additional support that may be required was discussed.²⁸⁶

61. In 2019, an audit was carried out by Bristol City Council of 12 case files involving children with disabilities who were at risk of sexual exploitation. It found some examples where the child's needs and vulnerability associated with their disability were clearly analysed and proactively linked to their vulnerability to child sexual exploitation. However, the audit also identified that, for some children in complex family situations, the focus on sexual exploitation seemed to have been lost amidst other issues such as neglect and physical abuse. There were also examples of situations where a child's disabilities had not been actively considered as a vulnerability factor. Risk management plans and safety plans had not been used consistently, the quality of assessments and sexual exploitation checklists varied and there were examples of cases where plans had not included goals and actions to address the sexual exploitation risk factors. As a result, Bristol City Council made a number

²⁷⁹ WCC000176_048 para 185

²⁸⁰ WSP000176_048 para 186

²⁸¹ STH000818_031 para 7.2

²⁸² Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 64/20-65/6; STH000818_031 paras 7.3-7.4

²⁸³ LBT004214_055 paras 210-211

²⁸⁴ INQ005080_007 para 40

²⁸⁵ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 71/5-14; LBT004289_045 para 145

²⁸⁶ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 72/2-9; LBT004289_045-046 para 146

of improvements.²⁸⁷ Prompts for disability featured in the Bristol child sexual exploitation checklist.²⁸⁸ The Council indicated that its policy was that children with disabilities who are victims of or at risk of sexual exploitation have a social worker from the Council's Disabled Children Service allocated to them to act as a case coordinator.²⁸⁹

62. Across the six areas, there needs to be improvement in systems to increase the identification of sexual exploitation risk for children with disabilities.

63. It is important for institutions and agencies to have adequate staff training and guidance in place to identify whether a child who is experiencing or is at risk of exploitation has a disability. To ensure that appropriate support is provided, professionals have to work together across agencies, with health professionals and schools having an important contribution to protect children with disabilities. There also needs to be close collaboration between staff who are trained to work with children with disabilities and those with child sexual exploitation expertise.

Taking account of the needs of children with disabilities

64. Twelve of the children selected from the six case study areas were identified as having a disability. As disability was not a criterion for selection, this amounts to a significant proportion – more than one third – of all those cases reviewed.

65. In Durham, CS-A51 was diagnosed with autism and had particular communication needs. She was groomed and sexually exploited from the age of 15. She was well supported by an ERASE worker who used appropriate language and visual exercises to enable CS-A51 to begin to understand the impact of her disability on how she formed relationships.²⁹⁰

66. However, in other Durham cases reviewed in this investigation, there was no or limited evidence that the agencies took into account the child's disability in assessing the risk of sexual exploitation that they faced or the harm they had already experienced. Although information was gathered about CS-A29's disability in 2018, the impact of her disability was not considered in the risk assessment.²⁹¹ In her case, and in respect of CS-A118, professionals did not appear to recognise the symptoms of ADHD and the potential impact on their vulnerability to sexual exploitation.²⁹²

67. This theme was reflected in several of the other case study areas.

68. CS-A24 was a young girl from Swansea who was identified as being at risk of sexual exploitation after going missing a number of times. After one episode of going missing at the age of 14, she returned home under the influence of drugs. In mid-2018, CS-A24 had a formal diagnosis of ADHD and a conduct disorder. A 2018 risk assessment noted concern that CS-A24 "*may continue to make unsafe decisions that place herself, her mum, her brother and sister and others at risk of harm*".²⁹³ Ms Julie Thomas, Head of Children's Services at Swansea Council, acknowledged that this language was inappropriate. She told us that children with ADHD demonstrate "*very impulsive behaviours*" and this was something they "*would have*

²⁸⁷ BSC000186_022 para 104; BSC000284_026 paras 112–114; BSC000132

²⁸⁸ BSC000186_021 paras 99–101

²⁸⁹ BSC000284_027 para 115

²⁹⁰ DUC000784_001

²⁹¹ John Pearce 23 September 2020 30/18-31/4; DUC000587_010

²⁹² DUC000795

²⁹³ SCC000534_009; SCC000568

considered” within the context of child sexual exploitation.²⁹⁴ However, we saw no evidence that CS-A24’s ADHD was taken into account when professionals assessed her vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

69. CS-A25 was known to Swansea Council from the age of 12, following an allegation of domestic violence. At the age of 14, a risk assessment found her to be at high risk of sexual exploitation. CAMHS raised concerns that CS-A25 might be displaying neurodevelopmental disorder traits and that she potentially had autism. A strategy meeting was told that a referral from her school was considered to be required before this was investigated. Despite having subsequently been taken into care, we saw no evidence of further investigation of whether CS-A25 had a disability.²⁹⁵

70. CS-A300, who had a neurodevelopmental disorder, was groomed and sexually exploited by adult males in Warwickshire.²⁹⁶ His disability was not recognised or recorded by the local authority, although a multi-agency meeting recorded his disability.²⁹⁷

71. CS-A27 was diagnosed as having moderate learning difficulties and ADHD. He was in the care of another local authority but was placed by that local authority in St Helens in a special education residential placement. At the age of 17, he was raped and sexually exploited by individuals and groups who established contact with him via Grindr.²⁹⁸ A risk assessment by placement staff noted that he had “*openly stated meeting unknown males for sex*” and that he “*has no concept about the danger he is placing himself in when meeting unknown males for sex*”.²⁹⁹ It is difficult to see how the sexual acts to which CS-A27 was subjected could be regarded as consensual. Mr Jim Leivers, Interim Director of Children’s Services for St Helens Council, accepted that CS-A27’s disability had not been taken into account in this regard and noted that he “*was a victim*”.³⁰⁰

72. CS-A71 also had ADHD.³⁰¹ St Helens Council again accepted that they had not taken account of this when undertaking assessment or planning for her.³⁰²

73. Overall, there appeared to be a lack of knowledge, understanding and awareness about the sexual exploitation of children with disabilities among some professionals in the case study areas. As identified in research, there has been a lack of training given to professionals (such as social workers and police officers) and failures by agencies to identify this kind of sexual exploitation, develop strategic preventative approaches to it, and gather and evaluate information about it.³⁰³

74. Local authorities, police and their relevant partners should take a proactive approach towards safeguarding children with disabilities. A multi-agency approach is required and should include input from health services and providers, who have an important role in assisting with the identification and support of children with disabilities. Whereas not every child with a disability who is at risk of or experiencing child sexual exploitation will require a specialist service, prompt referrals to specialist services should be made when required.

²⁹⁴ Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 69/23-70/15

²⁹⁵ CS-A25 24 September 2020 31/10-35/7

²⁹⁶ Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 100/25-102/9

²⁹⁷ Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 108/7-15; WSP000125_003

²⁹⁸ CS-A27 30 September 2020 5/18-8/14

²⁹⁹ STH000649_001; STH000631_007 014-015

³⁰⁰ Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 106/5-14

³⁰¹ CS-A71 30 September 2020 8/19-23

³⁰² Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 107/10-19

³⁰³ INQ005420; INQ006323

75. The inspectorates responsible for externally scrutinising the work of local authorities and health authorities have also indicated that children with special educational needs or disabilities who are at risk of child sexual exploitation do not routinely have their needs fully explored or assessed.³⁰⁴

76. Barnardo's has acknowledged that its efforts to improve the identification of sexual exploitation amongst children with disabilities had not to date been successful. In an attempt to address this, Barnardo's staff provided training to disability social work teams, special school staff and care home staff.³⁰⁵

D.5: Children from ethnic minority backgrounds

77. Several witnesses gave evidence to the Inquiry that children from ethnic minority backgrounds face additional barriers to disclosing sexual exploitation.

78. Ms Rosie Lewis is Director of the Angelou Centre in Newcastle, which provides support for black and ethnic minority women and children who have been the subject of domestic and sexual violence. She explained that for many ethnic minority families and victims of sexual exploitation there is not an innate trust that institutions would support them, due to a feeling of having been targeted and excluded in different ways. As a result, many do not come forward.³⁰⁶

79. Professionals sometimes failed to identify and respond in a culturally sensitive manner to child sexual exploitation in ethnic minority communities. The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse considered that there are several possible explanations for this, including:

*“professional resistance to recognising that CSA victims come from all ethnic and religious groups, fear of being viewed as culturally insensitive, and fear of intrusion into cultures that are different from the dominant”.*³⁰⁷

80. The theme of professional ‘nervousness’ was also highlighted by Ms Zlakha Ahmed MBE, founder and CEO of Apna Haq, a survivor-led organisation in Rotherham which supports black and ethnic minority women and girls who have experienced any form of violence. She expressed the view that institutions such as children’s social care departments did not feel confident working with girls from ethnic minority communities and would therefore “back off” and refer girls to Apna Haq. She gave an example of a girl who was referred to both children’s social care services and to Apna Haq but with whom children’s social care did not engage for three months because of a feeling that they did not understand the community or culture.³⁰⁸

81. Ms Lewis considered that statutory services generally had “a lack of cultural competence” – meaning a lack of understanding of systemic violence and institutional discrimination – and that this can be “really problematic”.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁴ See, for example, the views of the Care Quality Commission at [CQC000371_014](#) para 52

³⁰⁵ [BRD000275_011](#) paras 37–39; [INQ005420](#)

³⁰⁶ [Rosie Lewis 2 October 2020 140/16-141/9](#)

³⁰⁷ [INQ005170_028](#) para 71

³⁰⁸ [Zlakha Ahmed 2 October 2020 136/16-138/5](#)

³⁰⁹ [Rosie Lewis 2 October 2020 139/17-18, 140/4-5](#)

82. Dr Shehla Khan, Chairperson of the Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team (an organisation working to support ethnic minority people across Wales, including those vulnerable to exploitation) noted that it often found the behaviour of police officers in Swansea “*wanting in terms of their sensitivity to the needs of BME young people in particular*”.³¹⁰

83. There is some evidence that a lack of diversity among staff can lead to unconscious bias and a perception of intentional discrimination.³¹¹ In the North-East, fewer than five percent of staff in statutory services were from an ethnic minority, despite the fact that in some schools 41 percent of children were from ethnic minorities.³¹² Swansea Council’s evidence was that it had become clear that “*staff working within statutory organisations were insufficiently ethnically diverse, and so lacked cultural diversity understanding*”. Swansea Council has recently reviewed its workforce strategy, including how it can attract a wider range of ethnicities into its workforce.³¹³

84. Specific support services for ethnic minority communities can also assist in identifying and responding in a culturally appropriate way to child sexual exploitation.³¹⁴ The need for such services, and the extent to which such services are provided, varied across the case study areas.

84.1. Durham County Council disbanded its ethnic community outreach team several years ago.³¹⁵ It does, however, have ‘Team around the Family’ arrangements, including community workers who help child sexual exploitation workers to understand cultural backgrounds and sensitivities in their area.³¹⁶

84.2. Swansea Council was “*acutely aware*” of the low levels of reporting by ethnic minority victims and so introduced a ‘culturally harmful behaviour worker’ to sit alongside its practice lead for child exploitation.³¹⁷ It also works closely with partner agencies with direct links to ethnic minority communities, such as the EYST, including inviting them to strategy and planning meetings as appropriate.³¹⁸ In Swansea, Dr Khan argued for the creation of a child sexual exploitation advocacy team with ethnically and culturally diverse staff.³¹⁹

84.3. In Warwickshire, a Barnardo’s officer has worked with a community centre in the South Asian community, focussing on training and encouraging outreach work.³²⁰

84.4. St Helens Council has not, to date, completed specific work to improve the accessibility and sensitivity of child sexual exploitation services to children and young people from ethnic minority communities.³²¹

³¹⁰ INQ005914_002-003 paras 9–10

³¹¹ “*People don’t talk about it*”: *Child sexual abuse in ethnic minority communities*, Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse Research Team, June 2020, p19, para 2.4

³¹² Rosie Lewis 2 October 2020 139/17-18

³¹³ INQ005914_003 para 12; Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 49/6-49/15

³¹⁴ INQ005914_002 para 5

³¹⁵ Rosie Lewis 2 October 2020 134/16-25

³¹⁶ DUC000685_004 para 19

³¹⁷ Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 47/24-48/20

³¹⁸ SCC000550_012 paras 61–64

³¹⁹ INQ005914_002-003 para 10

³²⁰ WCC000236_007 para 41; Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 74/8-14

³²¹ STH000818_011 para 2.8; Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 53/3-21

84.5. In Tower Hamlets, at the time of our hearings, the Metropolitan Police Service had conducted no specific planning about the accessibility of child sexual exploitation services to ethnic minority communities.³²²

84.6. In Bristol, the number of ethnic minority young people identified as at risk of sexual exploitation and accessing specialist services via BASE appeared to be proportionate to their population. Barnardo's undertakes specific work with victims identifying as Muslim in recognition of the lower proportion of South Asian and Black African young people accessing services.³²³

D.6: LGBTQ+ children

85. Some areas made dedicated services available to LGBTQ+ victims of sexual exploitation.³²⁴ For example, Durham County Council commissioned a 'Humankind' service to provide information to young people and professionals around LGBTQ+ issues. Humankind has also been involved in care planning for LGBTQ+ children at risk of exploitation.³²⁵ Warwickshire County Council worked with local LGBTQ+ organisations, including Proud Youth. Young people who are at risk of child sexual exploitation are supported by Barnardo's to access local services.³²⁶ In Bristol, 25.5 percent of children accessing BASE support services identify as LGBTQ+.³²⁷

D.7: Inclusive approaches

86. Recognising that children from ethnic minority groups and LGBTQ+ children, among others, were under-represented in referrals to Barnardo's from other agencies, Barnardo's has since 2019 invested approximately £1 million in designing inclusive new approaches and processes with a range of marginalised children.³²⁸ Barnardo's aim is to improve its ability to identify and respond to exploitation and to support the wider sector to adopt these approaches. For example, it is developing resources on identifying and working with Pakistani Muslim children.³²⁹ Improved understanding and representation of ethnic minority communities within the agencies working to prevent and respond to child sexual exploitation may contribute towards their success in protecting children.

³²² MPS004318_017-018 paras 72-73

³²³ BSC000186_012-013 paras 55-56; BSC000082_007-008

³²⁴ LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and others.

³²⁵ DUC000685_004 para 20

³²⁶ WCC000236_008 paras 43-45

³²⁷ BSC000284_012 para 49. The themes discussed here are similar to those reflected in the Inquiry's report on *Engagement with support services for ethnic minority communities*, Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, April 2021.

³²⁸ BRD000275_006 para 23

³²⁹ BRD000275_006 para 23

Part E

Recognising the child as the victim

Recognising the child as the victim

E.1: Introduction

1. One theme that should run through the institutional response to child sexual exploitation is the recognition of the child as a victim. Too many victims of child exploitation are treated as offenders or somehow responsible for the harms done to them. It is critical that adults – particularly professionals – show empathy and concern to children who are at risk of, or who are already victims of, sexual exploitation. Aside from the inherent necessity of treating children well, an empathetic approach to children is likely to encourage them to feel able to make disclosures and to feel supported when they do.

E.2: Sanctioning child victims

2. There were several examples of child victims of sexual exploitation being charged with criminal offences and consequently incurring criminal records, despite the backgrounds to their offending being inextricably linked with their exploitation.

3. CS-A12 received a number of criminal convictions. One related to possession of a bladed article. She told us that this resulted from her chasing a man with a bread knife after he had assaulted her, leaving her with *“bust lips and a bust nose, a black eye and ... fingerprint marks around my arms and my throat”*. She felt that the police, prosecutors and judges failed to see that her behaviour was a result of her exploitation.³³⁰

4. ‘Daisy’ was well-known to the police by the time she was 13 years old.³³¹ She was arrested and charged on a number of occasions with offences such as being drunk and disorderly or assault. She described these as being committed in the context of the abuse she was experiencing. When she appeared at the youth offenders court in Rochdale, aged 15, her solicitor tried to explain the abuse she was suffering but no investigation was conducted. Instead, Daisy was sentenced to four months in a young offender institution. On her release, the cycle of abuse and arrests continued.³³²

5. In Bristol, CS-A32 was arrested for a property-related offence and told police that men from a certain place of business, about whom she later made allegations of sexual exploitation, made her do it.³³³

6. In Tower Hamlets, the Metropolitan Police Service has, in recent years, used Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs) against young victims to stop them associating with one another.³³⁴

³³⁰ CS-A12 22 September 2021 37/15-22

³³¹ ‘Daisy’ is a pseudonym for a woman who was interviewed for ‘Groomed, abused and put in prison: Rochdale’s untold story’, a BBC radio programme broadcast on 14 July 2020, [CWJ000001](#).

³³² [CWJ000001_006-010](#)

³³³ CS-A32 30 September 2020 15/21-16/25

³³⁴ [Sue Williams 29 September 2020 145/20-146/19](#)

7. The prospect of receiving a criminal conviction may deter children from disclosing child sexual exploitation and indeed may serve to increase the hold that perpetrators have over their victims. The treatment of sexually exploited children as criminals in such circumstances is all the more troubling given that, as explained in Part H, too often the perpetrators of child sexual exploitation are not investigated or prosecuted.

8. Mr Gregor McGill, Director of Legal Services at the Crown Prosecution Service, explained that considering whether to prosecute someone who has also been a victim of exploitation involves “*some of the most finely-balanced decision-making that my prosecutors have to make*”. The more serious the offending, the more compelling the public interest in prosecution. Prosecutors have been given guidance and training to assist them in determining whether the public interest is met by prosecuting someone who has been a victim of exploitation.³³⁵

9. Prosecutors should carefully consider whether it is in the public interest to prosecute children in these situations. The focus should be on investigating the criminal conduct of sexual exploitation, not sanctioning children for what is frequently low-level anti-social behaviour. The importance of this issue is also reflected in the IOPC’s recent recommendation that “*the Law Commission reviews the legislative framework around offences committed while a child or young person is being groomed or exploited to identify whether any changes to legislation would be appropriate to reduce the impact on their future life prospects.*” The IOPC recommended that the review “*should include both the availability of substantive defences and the potential to filter convictions which occurred in such circumstances during criminal records disclosure*”.³³⁶

10. Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 provides a statutory defence, in some circumstances, for children who carry out certain criminal offences as a direct consequence of their exploitation.³³⁷ This defence is a potentially important safeguard for victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation by networks. Unfortunately, neither the Home Office nor the Crown Prosecution Service collect data on the use of this defence, which the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner recommended in October 2020 should change.³³⁸ Its effectiveness cannot be properly understood without sufficient data. These data should be collated and published.

11. Once a child receives a conviction, there is no mechanism for deleting it from their criminal record unless it is quashed by an appellate court, meaning that victims have to disclose these offences when applying for jobs. There are also only very limited circumstances where previous offences can be disregarded.³³⁹ A campaign has advocated a change in the law to expunge the criminal records of victims and survivors of sexual exploitation who committed crimes at the direction of their abusers.³⁴⁰

E.3: Blaming child victims

12. Victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation should be treated with empathy and concern. Victim-blaming attitudes and behaviours are incompatible with this. They obscure the seriousness of the crimes committed against them and may support a punitive approach

³³⁵ Gregor McGill 2 October 2020 37/6-38/29

³³⁶ *Operation Linden – Learning and Recommendations*, Independent Office for Police Conduct, November 2021, p. 9.

³³⁷ Christian Papaleontiou 1 October 62/17-63/24

³³⁸ HOM003397_002 paras 5–7; CPS005009_006 paras 31–32

³³⁹ HOM003397_003 paras 8–10

³⁴⁰ INQ005178; This is also known as ‘Sammy’s Law’.

which places responsibility for stopping sexual exploitation with the children. A victim-blaming culture and approach may result in inappropriate or ineffective interventions and support plans that lead children to feel that they are being punished for their own abuse.³⁴¹

13. Ms Sophie Langdale, Director of Children’s Social Care, Practice and Workforce at the Department for Education, stressed that “*the guidance is clear*” that child exploitation is never the victim’s fault.³⁴²

14. However, as explained in Part C, there are questions about the extent to which the current definition of child sexual exploitation in statutory guidance itself involves victim-blaming, with its reference to the element of ‘exchange’.

15. In Barnardo’s view, victim-blaming continues to be a feature of many child sexual exploitation operating models and assessments.³⁴³

16. Ms Maggie Oliver and Mr John Wedger, campaigners and former police officers, also argued that there remains a “*pervasive victim blaming culture*” across agencies, including the Crown Prosecution Service and police forces. They gave examples of institutions treating victims as complicit in their abuse and seeing victims as having made a lifestyle choice – concluding that the examples of victim-blaming in the case study areas reflected a cultural failure of management.³⁴⁴ They recommended mandatory training across all relevant institutions to address victim-blaming.³⁴⁵ However, most areas have adopted clear guidance on appropriate language for all staff.³⁴⁶ Most have also conducted multi-agency training on the importance of language, delivered to frontline practitioners by child sexual exploitation specialists.³⁴⁷

17. Victim-blaming can occur when children are described as consenting to sexual acts. County Durham’s 2019 problem profile identified cases recorded as “*consensual sexual acts between young people*”, even where a victim was not yet a teenager or an offender was in his or her 20s. The profile noted that this gave rise to:

“*concerns as to whether the concept of consent is properly understood, or if grooming has [led] them to believe that they consent. Although not flagged as such, these cases would probably be more accurately flagged as CSE [child sexual exploitation].*”³⁴⁸

Detective Chief Constable David Orford of Durham Constabulary explained that the term ‘consensual’ was used to distinguish acts of mutual touching from acts where force had been used.³⁴⁹ It is never appropriate to describe children under 13 years old as participating in consensual sexual acts and it is concerning that such cases were not flagged as child sexual exploitation, despite the profile noting that this would be more accurate.

³⁴¹ Amanda Naylor 30 September 2020 172/21-24

³⁴² Sophie Langdale 1 October 2020 47/19-49/7, referring to statutory guidance *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, July 2018, HOM003350

³⁴³ BRD000275_005 para 18

³⁴⁴ INQ006352_001_023-026 paras 2i and 83-93

³⁴⁵ INQ006352_002

³⁴⁶ See, for example, the language guide adopted in Swansea (Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 43/9-14, 52/3-8; SCC000550_011 paras 54-56; SCC000431) and Warwickshire County Council’s adoption of National Police Chiefs’ Council guidance (Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 72/6-24; WCC000174)

³⁴⁷ See, for example, the evidence of training in Durham (John Pearce 23 September 2020 4/12-6/5, 14/4-15/9, 17/13-15; DUC000809_002 para 7; DUC000812; DUC000785_001; DUC000817_001 para 3), Warwickshire (Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 72/11-16; WSP000176_023-024 para 91), Swansea (Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 43/9-14, 52/3-8; SCC000550_011 paras 54-56; SCC000431) and Tower Hamlets (LBT004289_023 para 80)

³⁴⁸ DHP000379_010

³⁴⁹ DHP000456_013 para 36

18. Durham County Council’s child sexual exploitation strategy also used the term “*inappropriate relationships*” to describe “*Late teens/early 20’s targeting 13–14 year old and older perpetrators targeting those in mid-teens*”.³⁵⁰ Durham Constabulary noted that this comes from College of Policing terminology.³⁵¹ The College of Policing has undertaken to immediately review its guidance. Other bodies which use this language should do the same.

19. Another aspect of victim-blaming is the use of language that “*places responsibility, shame or blame onto a child for their own exploitation*”.³⁵² Examples include describing a child as engaging in “*risky behaviour*” or making “*risky*” choices. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) reported that, while inappropriate language is generally less likely to be present where a case has been allocated to a specialist team, practice in this regard is mixed across England and Wales.³⁵³

20. There was some evidence of victim-blaming in relation to individual children in each of the six case study areas.

20.1. In Durham, CS-A29 had been sexually exploited between the ages of 13 and 15 and was described as “*placing herself in danger*”, “*placing herself at risk of CSE*”, “*continuing to display risk taking behaviours*” and “*taking risks by sexualised behaviour*”.³⁵⁴

20.2. In Tower Hamlets, CS-A22 had been assessed as at high risk of child sexual exploitation at the age of 13. There were concerns that she had been sexually abused and raped and she was taken into police protection.³⁵⁵ However, she was described as “*a frequent missing person [who] appears to willingly expose herself to danger*” and “*placing herself at risk*”.³⁵⁶ Similar language was also evidenced in documents relating to CS-A77, who was described as showing “*risk-taking behaviour*”.³⁵⁷ There was an example of an inappropriate use of the word ‘boyfriend’ with reference to adult perpetrators.³⁵⁸ The Children’s Society reported that, through their Return Home Interview Service monitoring reports in 2017, there were examples of victim-blaming language by both social workers and police officers. One example seriously undermined the severity of sexual abuse the child had experienced.³⁵⁹

20.3. In Warwickshire, a number of comments about a child being “*promiscuous*” were recorded during Operation Jive.³⁶⁰ After reviewing social care files of the girls involved in Operation Jive, which included CS-A146, Warwickshire Police considered that recording and language used by professionals could be “*quite harmful*”. An assessment of CS-A216 recorded that she was “*placing herself at risk*”, which was challenged by the Council.³⁶¹

³⁵⁰ DUC000691_006-007

³⁵¹ DHP000456_024 paras 71–72

³⁵² Amanda Naylor 30 September 2020 165/21-166/7

³⁵³ Katherine Riley 1 October 2020 155/16-156/6

³⁵⁴ John Pearce 23 September 2020 12/19-13/16, 17/3-9; DUC000584_008

³⁵⁵ CS-A22 29 September 2020 1/21-4/9

³⁵⁶ Sue Williams 29 September 2020 159/23-160/1; MPS004363_041

³⁵⁷ Sue Williams 29 September 2020 160/2-4

³⁵⁸ LBT004289_023 para 80

³⁵⁹ INQ005080_008-009 paras 49–50

³⁶⁰ WSP000176_023-024 para 91

³⁶¹ WCC000188_004

20.4. In St Helens, Catch22 (a charity providing commissioned missing and child sexual exploitation services in the area) noted that victim-blaming language continued to be used on referrals, which was an issue across Merseyside.³⁶² It had also identified examples of children being described as “*promiscuous*” and “*putting themselves at risk*”.³⁶³ In evidence to the Inquiry, Mr Jim Leivers (Interim Director of Children’s Services) described CS-A26 as exhibiting “*risk taking behaviours*” and “*placing [herself] in situations of vulnerability*”.³⁶⁴

20.5. In Swansea, CS-A24 was described as having had “*sexual partners from the age of 11*”. Ms Julie Thomas, Head of Children’s Services at the City and County of Swansea Council, accepted that its paperwork had been “*littered*” with inappropriate language.³⁶⁵ Although Detective Chief Superintendent Daniel Richards of South Wales Police told us that the language did not “*sit easily*” with him because it risked diminishing the victim status of children, he referred to “*risky behaviour meetings*” and “*children who have engaged in risky behaviour while missing*”.³⁶⁶

20.6. In Bristol, there were several references to CS-A32 “*putting herself at risk*” and an example of an officer describing a child as “*prostituting herself*” in a crime report.³⁶⁷

21. Professionals should be vigilant to avoid the use of such language. To varying degrees, the authorities in the case study areas have taken steps to respond to poor language or other behaviour when it has been identified.³⁶⁸ It is important that a culture in which victim-blaming is always challenged appropriately is created. Barnardo’s consistently challenges such language in Warwickshire, as does the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in Tower Hamlets.³⁶⁹ There is also evidence of Warwickshire County Council challenging victim-blaming language. However, the victim-blaming nature of the language used by some of the professionals in Durham had not been brought to their attention by Durham County Council prior to them leaving their roles and we did not see any specific evidence of other occasions in which victim-blaming language had been challenged.³⁷⁰

22. Regular audits of case files are important to ensure language about children is factually appropriate and non-judgemental. Audits carried out by St Helens Council in December 2019 enabled it to identify that 16 percent of the children’s files included some evidence of unacceptable language. Only one example of inappropriate language was found by the September 2020 audit.³⁷¹ The London Borough of Tower Hamlets’ risk assessments are also checked and quality assured, including for appropriate language, on a rolling basis.³⁷²

23. Senior leaders within local authorities and police forces must also take the lead on eradicating attitudes and behaviours which suggest that children who are victims of exploitation are in some way responsible for it.

³⁶² Vikki McKenna 28 September 2020 9/7-25; INQ004924_002 para 5(c)

³⁶³ STH000818_010 paras 2.1–2.3

³⁶⁴ STH001202_002 para 1.5; Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 112/7-10

³⁶⁵ Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 42/13-17, 51/21-52/8, 56/1-6

³⁶⁶ SWP000151_038 para 3.12; Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 138/21-22, 173/7-25

³⁶⁷ William White 30 September 2020 147/9-148/3; ASP000321_38-39 paras 161–165

³⁶⁸ See, for example, John Pearce 23 September 2020 14/4-15/9, 17/13-15; DUC000785_001; SWP000151_024-025 paras 2.7–2.8; Vikki McKenna 28 September 2020 9/7-25; INQ004924_002 para 5(c)

³⁶⁹ BRD000276_004 paras 13–14; NSP000169_014 para 71

³⁷⁰ John Pearce 23 September 2020 11/8-14, 12/2-13; DUC000685_004 para 17; DUC000817_001 para 3

³⁷¹ Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 47/5-24, 48/17-49/12; STH001203_003 para 5.1; INQ004944_002 para 2.3

³⁷² LBT004289_023 para 80

E.4: Ensuring children’s voices are heard

24. There was some evidence that institutions were not systematically gathering and taking account of the views of children.

25. A multi-agency audit of eight child sexual exploitation cases in St Helens, conducted in October 2019, identified that there was evidence that the views of the child had been taken into account in 87.5 percent of cases but that the views were not always reflective of, or focussing on, child sexual exploitation concerns.³⁷³

26. In October 2018, HMICFRS found that in the Metropolitan Police Service (which serves Tower Hamlets):

*“officers and staff do not always speak to children. As a result, children’s views and disclosures of abuse or neglect are not always appropriately pursued”.*³⁷⁴

Commander Sue Williams confirmed that addressing the inspectors’ findings was “*work in progress*”.³⁷⁵ She described some of the barriers to achieving this as being the volume of recruits coming through the force and the level of experience of some officers.³⁷⁶

27. More positively, the National Working Group (NWG) Child Sexual Exploitation Assessment Tool, used in Warwickshire, has a standard field to record the wishes of the child. This is completed with the child’s account during the course of the assessment.³⁷⁷

³⁷³ [STH001203_007](#), paras 13.1–13.9; Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 [55/24-56/7](#)

³⁷⁴ [INQ005334_023](#). This followed a 2016 inspection by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, which had similarly found that Metropolitan Police Service “*officers and staff often [did] not assess cases properly or speak to children who are clearly at significant risk of CSE*” and that there was “*very little information in the majority of case files on the views of the child*”: [INQ005333_046_084](#)

³⁷⁵ Sue Williams 29 September 2020 [148/20-149/16](#); MPS004318_016 para 65

³⁷⁶ Sue Williams 29 September 2020 [149/16-25](#)

³⁷⁷ Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 [87/14-20](#)

Part F

Risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children

Risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children

F.1: Introduction

1. This section examines the ways in which organisations identify children who are already being harmed by, or who are at heightened risk of, sexual exploitation, the action taken to protect those children and the outcomes for children.

F.2: Early identification of the signs of child sexual exploitation and information-sharing

2. Sexually exploited children are likely to be in contact with frontline services such as GPs, contraceptive and sexual health services, and hospitals. These healthcare professionals have an important role in detecting early warning signs and intervening in child sexual exploitation cases, by acting to refer and protect children.³⁷⁸ However, in 2016, five joint targeted area inspections noted that many frontline health professionals lacked the skills needed to identify child sexual exploitation and, when provided with the means to identify sexual exploitation, “*they do not always use them*”.³⁷⁹

3. Schools are also well placed to identify changes in the daily behaviour of exploited children, such as deterioration in school work, coming into school in an exhausted state or showing a lack of engagement. It is important that school staff have the confidence to identify the warning signs of sexual exploitation and take a proactive approach to safeguarding.³⁸⁰

4. An audit of nine cases in Bristol identified some good practice in respect of referrals but also examples of cases where different teams in children’s social care services (such as those dealing with initial referrals and the early help team) and the police had not correctly identified the risk of sexual exploitation and referred the children to children’s social care quickly enough.³⁸¹

5. Research by Parents Against Child Exploitation (Pace) in 2019 identified delays between parents raising their concerns and receiving a response from children’s social care, as well as parents frequently feeling left alone in managing threats to their child and putting safety measures in place. In seven locations (none in the Inquiry’s case study areas), Pace is commissioned to provide a parent liaison officer programme where officers are co-located

³⁷⁸ See, for example, the 2019 guidance on the issue from Public Health England: [HOM003325](#)

³⁷⁹ [HOM003364_004](#)

³⁸⁰ [Gill Gibbons 2 October 2020 111/1-112/7; Ann James 30 September 2020 34/3-13; Amanda Naylor 30 September 2020 176/9-16](#)

³⁸¹ [BSC000115](#)

with multi-agency teams and are able to gather and record relevant intelligence from parents.³⁸² Pace's evidence shows that, with this programme, safeguarding outcomes are much improved, with a reduction in episodes when children go missing, a reduction in children going into care and an increase in disruption and conviction of perpetrators.³⁸³

F.3: Screening and risk assessments

6. There are a wide variety of methods used in England to identify children who have already been harmed or who are at risk of harm, to raise initial concerns about sexual exploitation and to conduct thorough assessments of the risks of sexual exploitation the child faces.³⁸⁴ Initial identification is often referred to as 'screening' and more detailed assessment as 'risk assessments'.
7. Traditionally, these assessments have prompted the identification of vulnerabilities (such as prior abuse, neglect and family dysfunction) and factors that may indicate a risk of child sexual exploitation.³⁸⁵ Factors considered to evidence a significant, high or very high risk of exploitation include going missing overnight or longer; entering or leaving cars driven by unknown adults; and physical or emotional abuse by a controlling adult. Moderate or medium risk factors include staying out late; returning to home or care under the influence of alcohol or drugs; acquisition of money or items without explanation; and excessive receipt of texts or phone calls or use of the internet. Although these factors are often referred to as indicating risk, they can also be evidence that a child has already been sexually exploited and harmed. Practitioners should not lose sight of this.
8. Checklists may be "*a bit of a comfort blanket and give a false positive or a false negative*".³⁸⁶ They are particularly problematic if they do not allow or encourage the inclusion of narrative information to explain indicators, risk and protective factors.³⁸⁷ They should not be used in isolation or as a substitute for holistic professional judgement and professional curiosity.³⁸⁸
9. Rather than describing harm or classifying the level of risk, some assessments include a numeric score.³⁸⁹ Those that score risk solely on a numerical basis should not be used.
10. For these reasons, as has been made clear in the Department for Education guidance since February 2017, professionals must conduct more rounded assessments of a child's vulnerability, risk and protective factors. Assessments should emphasise the importance of understanding all the child's experiences and relationships, and the world they live in.³⁹⁰
11. Despite the 2017 guidance, there was continued use of a checklist approach in some areas, with limited space for professional judgement. For example, Durham County Council's revised child exploitation risk assessment only made minor amendments to the original

³⁸² Blackburn with Darwen, Rochdale, North Yorkshire, Calderdale, Kirklees, Wakefield and Central Liverpool: INQ006565

³⁸³ *Parents' experiences of the Children's Social Care system when a child is sexually exploited*, November 2019: INQ005169_002-008

³⁸⁴ HOM003358_039

³⁸⁵ INQ005182_005

³⁸⁶ Yvette Stanley 1 October 2020 175/11-15

³⁸⁷ HOM003358_006

³⁸⁸ Wendy Ghaffar 1 October 2020 175/17-177/16; DFE003406_003 para 7; INQ005150_007 para 4.7; INQ006087_004 para 8

³⁸⁹ SCC000439

³⁹⁰ Sophie Langdale 1 October 2020 66/16-67/2; INQ005150_007 para 4.7; DFE003186_005 para 16; HOM003340_007_014

document, which was outdated. There is a basic checklist and risk rating system. There is also a continuing overlap between the indicators for low, moderate and significant risk in the revised risk assessment.³⁹¹

12. Risk assessments often described children as being at high or medium risk of sexual exploitation.³⁹² Many of these children are in fact already experiencing abuse and require immediate intervention. High, medium or low risk is therefore an inappropriate way to describe their circumstances and to flag up the need for immediate intervention.

13. A merging of risk and harm was apparent in the evidence about the case study children. Warning signs of harm, such as being missing overnight, sexual health problems and being supplied with alcohol and drugs in parks or at parties, were described in terms of 'medium' or 'high' risk rather than being assessed as the child being sexually exploited. For example, if a child has a sexually transmitted disease, this is clear evidence that a child has already experienced harm; it is not merely an indicator of risk.³⁹³

14. The conflation of risk and harm was also apparent from the revised County Durham risk assessment which merged indicators of risk (such as "*very limited or no recognition of abusive or exploitative behaviour*") with actual harm (such as "*young person is being sexually abused by an adult or there is an inappropriate relationship age gap*").³⁹⁴

15. There was a more progressive approach to risk assessment in Warwickshire, which uses the National Working Group (NWG) Child Sexual Exploitation Assessment Tool. This was developed in consultation with a large number of councils and piloted before it was introduced in 2017. It moved away from a tick-box approach to clarify the difference between risk and harm, avoid screening out those deemed 'low risk' and avoid using risk indicators which were not supported by evidence.³⁹⁵ The NWG has identified further improvements that should be made to the assessment, namely to strengthen the voice of the child and family members, to include disruption and to incorporate a wider recognition of diverse groups.³⁹⁶ The use of this assessment in Warwickshire was evaluated in 2019 and was shown to have improved professional judgement, informed by chronologies of the child's life. It also promoted greater involvement of children and parents/carers in assessment and planning.³⁹⁷ Warwickshire County Council considered³⁹⁷ that this assessment best achieves a "*holistic assessment of vulnerability*", rather than screening children 'in' or 'out'.³⁹⁸

16. Similarly, Tower Hamlets has developed a rounded assessment form that moved away from a tick-box approach.³⁹⁹

17. The latest approach in Wales is also positive. Prior to 2019, all agencies in Wales used the Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (SERAF). Research commissioned by the Welsh Government in 2017 showed that reliance on the SERAF and other risk assessment documents had led to a short-term and process-driven approach to risk management, which

³⁹¹ [DUC000783](#)

³⁹² [HOM003358_031](#)

³⁹³ [BRD000275_007](#), para 25; Sophie Hallett 22 September 2020 [120/24-121/3](#)

³⁹⁴ [DUC000783](#)

³⁹⁵ [INQ005149_014](#) para 4.4

³⁹⁶ [INQ005149_016](#) para 4.10

³⁹⁷ [INQ005149_014-015](#) paras 4.5–4.7; [WCC000363_010](#) paras 51, 54 and 56

³⁹⁸ Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 [87/14-20](#)

³⁹⁹ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 [13/4-14/20](#)

did not secure longer-term safeguarding and well-being outcomes for children.⁴⁰⁰ Further research in 2019 found problems with the risk-based approach to tackling child sexual exploitation, which focussed on managing young people's 'risky' behaviours.⁴⁰¹

18. As a consequence, and following consultation, the Welsh Government decided to move away from risk assessment forms to encourage a more holistic approach. From November 2019, the revised *All Wales Practice Guide: Safeguarding children from child sexual exploitation (CSE)* included the prompt for practitioners, using four headings of physical signs, emotional signs, material signs and behavioural signs.⁴⁰² Reference to the SERAF was removed from Welsh safeguarding procedures.⁴⁰³ Despite this, Ms Julie Thomas, Head of Children's Services at the City and County of Swansea Council (Swansea Council), told us in September 2020 that all agencies in its area continued to use the SERAF, which they understood was a "national requirement".⁴⁰⁴ This misinterpretation of national guidance is troubling, given her seniority. Swansea Council should ensure that practitioner prompts required under the *All Wales Practice Guide* are included in all risk assessments as a matter of urgency. New statutory guidance issued by the Welsh Government in March 2021 did not prescribe any specific risk assessment.⁴⁰⁵

19. In Bristol, Operation Topaz focusses on "identifying the source of the risk to the child and then removing or disrupting that source", noting that risk assessments often focus "almost entirely on the child, and not the links to those who pose a CSE [child sexual exploitation] risk to the child".⁴⁰⁶

20. An evaluation of Operation Topaz in October 2017 found that its Topaz Risk Assessment Profile (TRAP) had "more appropriately risk assessed victims and subjects and made the connections between information that would not have met the threshold for intelligence recording, and could previously have been missed".⁴⁰⁷ However, there is an issue in Bristol in that multiple assessment tools are used.

F.4: Risk assessments and services for children

21. Risk assessments and screening tools are also used to determine whether and how children's social care professionals, police and health professionals respond to children. For example, they are used to decide whether children are referred to early help services, whether children receive a full assessment of their needs by children's social care and whether multi-agency action is taken to protect them.⁴⁰⁸

22. Research commissioned by the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, published in 2017, found that some assessments appeared to be used to allocate resources rather than identify vulnerabilities and that, in some, the threshold for access to services for being

⁴⁰⁰ WGT000464_008 para 40; INQ006087_002 para 3; INQ006446

⁴⁰¹ INQ006087_002-003; INQ006085

⁴⁰² Albert Heaney 1 October 2020 72/13-73/24; INQ006455_017; INQ006466

⁴⁰³ WGT000464_009 para 45

⁴⁰⁴ Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 73/8-18; SCC000550_014-016 paras 80-88; SCC000550_017 paras 95-97; SCC000550_046 paras 268-270

⁴⁰⁵ INQ006455

⁴⁰⁶ ASP000434_012

⁴⁰⁷ ASP000199_006-008; ASP000434_012 paras 49-51

⁴⁰⁸ HOM003358_039

identified as a potential victim of child sexual exploitation was very high. There were varying definitions of high, medium and low risk in use across the country, with potentially serious consequences for the safeguarding of children.⁴⁰⁹

23. Ms Amanda Naylor, Assistant Director of Impact at Barnardo's, expressed reservations about the continued link between risk assessment and the assigning of resources. She said that risk assessments are often completed in the first instance by practitioners who may not have received extensive training on the complex dynamics of abuse, how children respond to trauma and the barriers to disclosure:

*"the risk assessment can only ever be viewed as a partial snapshot of what is happening in a child's life. If it is used as the only mechanism to determine whether a child receives a service, this will result in children being missed, and screened out of a more specialist assessment."*⁴¹⁰

24. There was evidence that children had been prematurely removed from the list of those discussed at multi-agency meetings when they were experiencing harm.

25. For example, in October 2018, a decision was taken in Durham to remove all but a small number of high-risk child sexual exploitation cases from monitoring at multi-agency meetings.⁴¹¹ Mr John Pearce, Director of Children and Young People's Services at Durham County Council, accepted that this had resulted in two high-risk children (CS-A29 and CS-A118) being removed from the supervision of the child sexual exploitation meeting.⁴¹² He also said the assessed risks to CS-A29 were downgraded too soon because the child was being dealt with under a single agency care planning process.⁴¹³ Mr Pearce explained that children would not be classified as high risk where there was no identified perpetrator.⁴¹⁴ While we saw no evidence of this approach being put into practice, such an approach is wholly unacceptable. It is possible that, if the perpetrator is unknown, a child might be at even higher risk.

26. Since November 2019, the approach to risk assessment in County Durham has been supported by the use of a Child Exploitation Vulnerability Tracker (CEVT), created by adapting a previous county lines tracker. Referring agencies surveyed in August 2020 reported concerns that child sexual exploitation cases were being 'missed' off the CEVT because they were often scored as 'medium' risk.⁴¹⁵ Guidance on the use of the CEVT states that only high-risk child sexual exploitation cases should be included.⁴¹⁶ This concern was illustrated by the case of an 11-year-old child who failed to meet the threshold for CEVT monitoring in late 2019, even though adult males had exposed themselves to her online and told her to insert a pencil into her vagina.⁴¹⁷ This child should have met the threshold.

⁴⁰⁹ [HOM003358_005-006_032](#)

⁴¹⁰ [BRD000275_007](#) para 25

⁴¹¹ [John Pearce 23 September 2020 49/21-50/13](#)

⁴¹² [John Pearce 23 September 2020 40/9-41/2](#)

⁴¹³ [John Pearce 23 September 2020 40/9-41/13](#)

⁴¹⁴ [John Pearce 23 September 2020 48/19-49/11](#); [DUC000796](#)

⁴¹⁵ [DHP000528_006](#)

⁴¹⁶ [DHP000467_001](#)

⁴¹⁷ [DHP000505_006](#) row 20

27. Durham County Council’s approach of only tracking cases on the CEVT where children were considered to be at high risk led to a reduction in the number of children being monitored in this way, although children not included on the CEVT may still receive some services. There are clear areas for improvement in both the assessment forms and processes for monitoring risk in County Durham.

28. In St Helens, the Catch22 missing children and child sexual exploitation support service is only able to accept referrals which are deemed medium or high risk. Ms Vikki McKenna, Senior Service Coordinator at Catch22, said that this left young people in need of preventative work potentially being missed.⁴¹⁸ There was evidence that children who were in need of support to prevent sexual exploitation in St Helens were not always appropriately classified as of sufficiently high risk and therefore did not receive adequate support. It was accepted that it had been wrong to remove CS-A26 from consideration by the Multi-Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) meeting in October 2016 on the basis that it was “*just risky behaviour*” when the child had been assessed as at high risk of sexual exploitation around four months earlier.⁴¹⁹

29. In Swansea, CS-A24 and CS-A25 were both removed from the child sexual exploitation protocol (Swansea’s list of children who are at risk of sexual exploitation) whilst still at significant risk.⁴²⁰ Swansea Council noted that it had “*identified a theme about premature removal*” during that period.⁴²¹

30. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets has a target of completing 90 to 95 percent of risk assessments within three months. However, the written evidence of the Council stated that this target was not met at any time between June 2018 and March 2019 – the highest completion rate was 87 percent and the lowest 27 percent.⁴²² After the hearing, the Council told the Inquiry that:

*“risk assessment is completed imminently when any concerns are raised by a professional or family member that a young person is being exploited and is reviewed every 12 weeks or if a significant event occurs”.*⁴²³

31. The evidence on this matter was not satisfactory and the Inquiry was provided with no evidence on how long risk assessments took to be completed, as opposed to reviewed.

F.5: Protection of children in the case study areas

32. Durham County Council’s assessment of the risks relating to CS-A29, CS-A114, CS-A118 and CS-A50 was inadequate.⁴²⁴ The assessment for each child described a catalogue of harm by networks of perpetrators with little evidence of effective action to stop the sexual abuse of the child. The levels of intervention and protection given, and the outcomes for these children, were very poor. Durham County Council accepted that the assessed risks to CS-A29 moved from high to low too quickly and that the risk assessment was clear that CS-A50 was at high risk “*but the way in which the classification was used at that time, they*

⁴¹⁸ Vikki McKenna 28 September 2020 14/15-15/16; INQ004924_001 para 3

⁴¹⁹ Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 111/10-113/14

⁴²⁰ SCC000550_037 paras 209–211; SWP000151_036-037 paras 3.5 and 3.8

⁴²¹ Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 95/16-96/11, 98/2-13

⁴²² LBT004214_014 para 49

⁴²³ LBT004338_016 para 54

⁴²⁴ CS-A50 29 October 2020 3/3-7/7; CS-A29 29 October 2020 7/9-13/18; CS-A114 29 October 2020 13/21-16/4; CS-A118 29 October 2020 16/6-18/9

were not identified at high risk”.⁴²⁵ In respect of CS-A50, there was evidence of improved practice by children’s social care from early 2019, when appropriate interventions resulted in protection from harm and improved outcomes.⁴²⁶

33. In Swansea, past abuse did not appear to have been properly taken into account when considering the risks posed to CS-A24. The focus was instead on immediate risk. Swansea Council acknowledged that past harm is a good predictor of future harm and “*it would have been important to consider that as part of the risk assessment*”.⁴²⁷

34. There were concerns about how the risk assessment process operated in Warwickshire. CS-A1 was accommodated by Warwickshire County Council in May 2016, aged 13, as her family felt they could not keep her safe at home. She had a series of short-term placements. She absconded from school on an almost daily basis and stayed out late. Her family repeatedly emphasised that CS-A1 was at high risk of sexual exploitation throughout the second half of 2016. It was not until May 2017 that Warwickshire County Council agreed that she was at high risk. On review of the relevant material, this assessment was flawed – the high risk should have been identified and CS-A1 protected earlier. CS-A2, CS-A1’s mother, considered the fact that CS-A1 had nine social workers in four years interfered with attempts to protect CS-A1.⁴²⁸ Warwickshire County Council accepted the delay and stressed the changes in the risk assessment process that have taken place since then.⁴²⁹ CS-A2 emphasised that early intervention could have prevented her daughter from being further sexually exploited.⁴³⁰ The abuse CS-A1 experienced included being exposed to drugs and alcohol from an early age, being expected to deliver drugs to other people, a lack of access to appropriate education and being sexually abused by older males.

35. In St Helens, CS-A26 was a looked after child who was considered to be at very high risk of child sexual exploitation. St Helens Council accepted that the initial placement in fact increased the risk to CS-A26. The outcomes for CS-A26 only improved in October 2018 when a specialist child sexual exploitation placement was arranged, three years after risk was evident.⁴³¹

36. St Helens Council also accepted that the risk assessments for CS-A27 and CS-A71 were inadequate. In the case of CS-A27, Mr Jim Leivers, Interim Director of Children’s Services, said that he did not understand what risk assessment had been done by the placing local authority when staff were escorting this child to the homes of people that were not known to him and had contacted him through the Grindr online dating app.⁴³² In relation to CS-A71, Mr Leivers considered that the risk assessments undertaken between September 2018 and January 2019 were not appropriate to safeguard the best interests of the child. The assessment that the risks to the child had reduced because she was living in the home of a new boyfriend was “*certainly a real issue*”.⁴³³

⁴²⁵ 29 October 2020 13/21-16/4; John Pearce 23 September 2020 49/12-50/13; John Pearce 23 September 2020 49/6-11

⁴²⁶ CS-A114 29 October 2020 16/7-19/9

⁴²⁷ Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 97/1-98/1

⁴²⁸ INQ006363_002

⁴²⁹ CS-A2 25 September 2020 44/13-24; Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 95/1-97/25

⁴³⁰ INQ006363_001

⁴³¹ Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 111/10-113/14

⁴³² Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 103/21-104/21

⁴³³ Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 106/23-109/22

37. The evidence relating to the Tower Hamlets case study children showed its previous risk assessment documents being ineffective in assessing risk. Three assessments of 13-year-old CS-A81 were completed in 2018. One in July 2018 considered her to be at medium risk. In September 2018, she was assessed as being at high risk after frequent episodes of going missing and being seen on Snapchat (a social media platform) and by other young people at house parties. In the same month, the Police Sexual Exploitation Team closed her case (against the advice of children’s social care).⁴³⁴ The risk assessments did not record the age or date of birth of CS-A81. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets accepted that she should have been graded high risk and that the assessments were generally “*on the back foot*” and “*reactionary*”. Overall, it recognised that CS-A81’s case was “*of the utmost concern*”.⁴³⁵

38. A more positive approach to risk assessment was apparent in the case of CS-A59 in Bristol. He was at risk of sexual exploitation via the dating app Grindr and was in a range of extremely dangerous, abusive situations. The evidence suggests that Bristol City Council took a proactive approach to reducing harm, including exploring the use of Grindr with CS-A59, discussing the risks and what he was getting from its use. This led to him choosing to not use the app for a period.⁴³⁶

F.6: Protecting and supporting children

39. Recent examples of prevention from the case study areas include a Barnardo’s CSE training and outreach project worker in Warwickshire and the Operation Topaz CSE prevention and coordination officer in Bristol.⁴³⁷

40. As part of managing local authority financial pressures, youth services in councils have tended to shift from offering universal to targeted services. As a result, children deemed to be at low risk of sexual exploitation may be referred to youth services and receive targeted support from youth workers. Examples include Durham, Warwickshire, St Helens and Bristol.⁴³⁸ As we have seen in other investigations, there is a concern that when financial pressures arise, non-statutory services of this kind are amongst the first to face budget reductions despite their important role.

41. In the context of youth work, outreach is typically aimed at particularly vulnerable and/or marginalised groups that, for a variety of reasons, are not effectively reached by mainstream services. Outreach workers can be effective in reaching vulnerable children, helping to identify unmet needs and building trusting relationships that allow other work to take place.⁴³⁹ They can also have a role in gathering intelligence from street work with young people that the police may not otherwise have obtained and often work closely with statutory agencies sharing information about specific perpetrators and particular locations where exploitation takes place.

42. Outreach specifically targeted to victims of child sexual exploitation did not occur in some of the case study areas.

⁴³⁴ CS-A81 29 September 2020 6/14-9/7

⁴³⁵ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 83/2-86/17

⁴³⁶ Ann James 30 September 2020 84/4-85/9

⁴³⁷ WCC000207; ASP000217

⁴³⁸ DUC000817; WCC000163_006_020; STH000942_001; STH000943_001; BSC000186_024

⁴³⁹ INQ005176_063-064

43. Direct support work with sexually exploited young people takes place in a variety of contexts, ranging from specialist therapeutic services to practitioners who do some child sexual exploitation support work as part of a more generalist role.⁴⁴⁰ There was specialist provision by Barnardo's in Swansea, Warwickshire and Bristol. The South Wales National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) Protect and Respect project also delivers specialist services in Swansea. St Helens commissions Catch22 to provide a child sexual exploitation support service and Tower Hamlets provides child sexual exploitation support services through the NSPCC Protect and Respect service, the St Giles Trust and the London-wide services offered by the Children's Society.⁴⁴¹

44. The need for services for sexually exploited children to adopt trauma-informed approaches and to have an understanding of the impact of adverse childhood experiences were recurrent themes in the Inquiry.⁴⁴² The importance of services being delivered by suitably trained and experienced staff cannot be overemphasised and more should be done to support non-specialist staff. There were several examples of children being sexually abused and traumatised while living in residential homes before eventually being moved to specialist residential services which had an understanding of trauma and were able to provide therapeutic support. These include CS-A26 in St Helens, CS-A22 in Tower Hamlets and CS-A302 in Bristol.⁴⁴³

45. The evidence demonstrated that in some areas care leavers and older children aged 16 or 17 years did not receive adequate support in all cases. In St Helens, Ms McKenna of Catch22 identified an issue with 16–17-year-olds being “overlooked” in St Helens and an “apathy” from various agencies.⁴⁴⁴ Whilst aged 16, CS-A34 was considered to be at significant risk of sexual exploitation. He had been the victim of a sexual offence whilst living in temporary accommodation, following which he was taken into care. He then had a large number of separate placements during a two-month period, two of which were in temporary overnight accommodation, and was the victim of further sexual offences during this period. He did not always feel safe in the accommodation that was being provided. An independent reviewing officer at a looked-after-child review recommended that a foster care placement be found for CS-A34.⁴⁴⁵ More positive practice was evidenced in Swansea, where CS-A220 and CS-A56, both care leavers, had supported accommodation and specialist care provided beyond their 18th birthdays.⁴⁴⁶

46. Revised statutory guidance on child sexual exploitation should place greater emphasis on the responsibilities of local authorities to sexually exploited care leavers and other 16 and 17-year-old children.

47. There is also evidence that children are struggling to access necessary mental health support from Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS). This appears to be a national problem with care being described as “rarely available” or not meeting needs.⁴⁴⁷ One particular problem is that, in most areas CAMHS referral criteria exclude trauma symptoms.⁴⁴⁸ Concern has also been raised that when appointments are offered they

⁴⁴⁰ [INQ005176_101](#)

⁴⁴¹ [NSP000168_001-003](#); [INQ005103](#); [INQ005080](#)

⁴⁴² [INQ006133_062-070](#); [INQ006088_064](#); [INQ005297_032-033](#); [SWP000151_031_068-070](#)

⁴⁴³ [CS-A26 30 September 2020 1/19-5/16](#); [CS-A22 29 September 2020 1/21-4/9](#); [CS-A302 30 September 2020 21/1-23](#)

⁴⁴⁴ [Vikki McKenna 28 September 2020 11/1-11](#); [INQ004924_002 para 5\(d\)](#)

⁴⁴⁵ [30 September 2020_19/12-15](#)

⁴⁴⁶ [CS-A220 & CS-A56 24 September 2020 36/25-37/21](#)

⁴⁴⁷ [INQ005148_003](#); [INQ005462_040](#)

⁴⁴⁸ [BRD000275_008](#)

are insufficiently flexible in terms of timing and location.⁴⁴⁹ There is also evidence that some CAMHS referrals have been declined because the mental health difficulties being experienced by children have been attributed to a “normal” reaction to abuse.⁴⁵⁰ The Care Quality Commission has said that “sometimes children and young people and the families reach the crisis point before they end up getting help”.⁴⁵¹ Issues with a lack of access to CAMHS in the case study areas are discussed further in Part J. CAMHS has told us that it is taking steps to improve capacity and flexibility.

F.7: Contextual safeguarding

48. Contextual safeguarding focusses on the environments in which children spend their lives (such as neighbourhoods, schools and online spaces) and seeks to understand and respond to the experiences of significant harm suffered outside of the family home. The Department for Education’s evaluation of a contextual safeguarding pilot in Hackney concluded that it provides a “workable framework” in which to consider extra-familial risk and harm and that there are some “slight indicators” that it has the potential to exert a positive impact on practice.⁴⁵² Following the pilot, the University of Bedfordshire is working on a three-year ‘Scale-Up’ project in nine areas, including Bristol and Swansea.⁴⁵³

49. Through its contextual safeguarding project, Bristol City Council has implemented oversight meetings which look at “*extrafamilial harm in the round*”.⁴⁵⁴

50. In Swansea, a January 2020 systems review found that Swansea Council was “*identifying extra familial harm within current practice better than the other sites that they looked at across the UK, and responding to this in a coordinated manner*”.⁴⁵⁵

51. The contextualised safeguarding approach may have merit in its wider consideration of factors affecting child sexual exploitation but the evidence base to date is relatively thin and it should not unintentionally result in a dilution of focus on the child’s needs.

⁴⁴⁹ INQ005149_027

⁴⁵⁰ NSP000168_008

⁴⁵¹ Rosie Benneyworth 1 October 2020 167/24-168/1

⁴⁵² INQ006441_009

⁴⁵³ INQ006443

⁴⁵⁴ Ann James 30 September 2020 55/17-56/9

⁴⁵⁵ INQ005274_004; STH000942_001

Part G

Children who go missing

Children who go missing

G.1: Introduction

1. It is well recognised that there is a link between children going missing and child sexual exploitation. When a child goes missing, this can be both a cause and a consequence of the child being sexually exploited.⁴⁵⁶
2. In 2018/19, there were 143,453 incidents of children going missing, involving 51,408 children across England and Wales.⁴⁵⁷ Almost all children who go missing will return or be found.⁴⁵⁸ National Crime Agency data indicated that 9 percent (22,786) of all missing children incidents in 2018/19 had a child sexual exploitation ‘flag’ associated with them. Of those, 69 percent (12,392) involved girls and 26 percent (4,595) involved boys.⁴⁵⁹
3. Children in care are much more likely to go missing than children who are not in care.⁴⁶⁰ In England and Wales, 19 percent of children who went missing in 2018/19 were in care, although only 0.65 percent of children across England and 1.09 percent of children in Wales were in care.⁴⁶¹ Children in care accounted for 36 percent of children’s missing incidents.⁴⁶²
4. A recent investigative report by *The Times* identified that:
 - since 2018, children known to be at risk of abuse, some as young as 11 years old, have gone missing more than 55,000 times in Britain;
 - at least 26 children have been reported missing 100 times or more;
 - four children each went missing more than 100 times in the Humberside Police area, with one of them going missing 156 times within three years;
 - a child went missing 36 times in North Wales before the police added a marker to the file to suggest he was at risk of sexual abuse; and
 - internal police reports included a finding that there is “*little evidence of the exploiters being investigated*” and child protection experts said officers wrongly viewed victims who went missing repeatedly as lost causes.⁴⁶³

⁴⁵⁶ INQ005148_002 para 7; *A Safer Return – An analysis of the value of return home interviews in identifying risk and ensuring returning missing children are supported*, Missing People, NCA000410_004; *Briefing report on the roundtable on children who go missing and are criminally exploited by gangs*, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, March 2017, INQ006569_002

⁴⁵⁷ INQ006431_024

⁴⁵⁸ As set out in the National Crime Agency’s *Missing Persons Data Report 2019/20*, in England and Wales, there were 4,543 long-term missing (adults and children) on 31 March 2020.

⁴⁵⁹ *UK Missing Persons Unit Missing Persons Data Report 2018/19*, National Crime Agency, June 2020, INQ006431_025-026

⁴⁶⁰ *No Place at Home: Final report on the Inquiry into children and young people who go missing from out of area placements*, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, September 2019, INQ006285_006

⁴⁶¹ INQ006431_024-025; INQ006445_004; *Experimental statistics: children looked after by local authorities*, Welsh Government, 2018–19, INQ006562_001

⁴⁶² *UK Missing Persons Unit Missing Persons Data Report 2018/19*, National Crime Agency, June 2020, INQ006431_024-025

⁴⁶³ ‘Police “failing to protect” thousands of girls at risk of sexual abuse’, *The Times* 27 May 2021, INQ006484; ‘The Times view on protecting vulnerable girls from abuse: Missing Children’, *The Times* 28 May 2021, INQ006496; and ‘Police “covered up” failings on child sex cases’, *The Times* 27 May 2021, INQ006495

5. Despite the significant scale of the challenge, police forces and local authorities must take steps to prevent children from going missing, to protect those who do go missing and to conduct meaningful return home interviews (RHIs) when children return.⁴⁶⁴

6. Department for Education statutory guidance (which is under review) makes clear that a local authority in England should agree a protocol with local police and other partners (as well as neighbouring authorities or administrations) for responding to children who run away or go missing in its area. In addition, a child's care plan should include details of the arrangements to be in place to minimise the risk of a child going missing. Where a child in care has an established pattern of going missing, the care plan should include a strategy to keep the child safe and minimise the likelihood of future episodes of the child going missing.⁴⁶⁵ Similar procedures for missing children in Wales are contained within the All Wales Protocol for Missing Children (revised and reissued in November 2019).⁴⁶⁶

G.2: The experiences of the case study children who went missing

7. Going missing from home and school was a feature in the lives of almost all the case study children in this investigation.

8. CS-A114 went missing in Durham many times over a six-month period, apparently due to factors such as bullying and aggression by her mother's partner. An audit in 2017 of the RHIs conducted with her found no record of meaningful steps taken to protect her over this period. Had the RHIs properly examined why CS-A114 was going missing so often, the causes might have been addressed and her subsequent episodes of going missing and the harm caused by sexual exploitation might have been reduced.⁴⁶⁷ The links between going missing and sexual exploitation were evident in the cases of several other Durham children, including CS-A50, CS-A29 and CS-A118.⁴⁶⁸

9. CS-A1 went missing from care in Warwickshire 11 times in 6 weeks up to May 2017 whilst aged 14 years.⁴⁶⁹ While in one placement for 84 days, CS-A1 went missing 48 times.⁴⁷⁰ The first missing from home trigger plan was not created by Warwickshire Police until June 2017.⁴⁷¹ CS-A1 disclosed being supplied with drugs by named individuals in at least two RHIs.⁴⁷² It is unclear if this led to any investigation or action by Warwickshire Police or fed into wider intelligence about child sexual exploitation in the force area and beyond. CS-A146 went missing frequently and was trafficked to towns outside her home area.⁴⁷³

10. In St Helens, CS-A26 went missing from home 30 times in a three-month period when she was aged 12 and was found numerous times with adult males. By the age of 15, she was missing from home a lot of the time.⁴⁷⁴ She was taken into care but she went missing even

⁴⁶⁴ HOM003339_048; INQ005148_002 para 7; *A Safer Return – An analysis of the value of return home interviews in identifying risk and ensuring returning missing children are supported*, Missing People, June 2019, NCA000410_004

⁴⁶⁵ *Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care*, DfE, January 2014, INQ006447.

⁴⁶⁶ WGT000464_010 para 51; *All Wales Practice Guide: Safeguarding children who go missing from home or care*

⁴⁶⁷ DUC000754

⁴⁶⁸ CS-A22, CS-A29, CS-A114 & CS-A118 29 October 2020 3/2-7/7; 7/8-13/18; 13/19-16/4; 16/5-18/9

⁴⁶⁹ WCC000177_004

⁴⁷⁰ CS-A2 25 September 2020 40/7-20

⁴⁷¹ WSP000205_013; A 'trigger plan' (outlining key actions to be taken) should be put in place where the police assess that a child is at risk of going missing again, INQ006570

⁴⁷² WCC000277_005; WCC000280_005-007

⁴⁷³ CS-A146 2 October 2020 82/20-84/4

⁴⁷⁴ CS-A26 30 September 2020 1/19-5/16

more as she tried to return to her parent's home. CS-A71 often went missing together with CS-A212, a younger child in care. They travelled to other parts of the country after men made contact with CS-A71 online. Both children were sexually exploited when missing.⁴⁷⁵

11. CS-A77 was in care in Tower Hamlets from 2015. In 2017/18 and 2018/19 she went missing 40 and 47 times respectively from an unregulated placement.⁴⁷⁶ An internal police audit found that CS-A90, who was deemed to be a victim of modern slavery following a National Referral Mechanism assessment, had been missing on numerous occasions but the Metropolitan Police Service had not developed a trigger plan for future incidents.⁴⁷⁷

12. CS-A221 went missing from his home in Swansea when he was 14. He was found in another part of Wales with a registered sex offender who befriended and groomed him and his family.⁴⁷⁸ CS-A25 lived between relatives and was regularly missing, including on seven occasions between May and August 2018. While missing, she was taken to events organised by adults and supplied with drugs. She also experienced a number of serious sexual assaults.⁴⁷⁹

13. In Bristol, CS-A32 went missing nine times in one year. She was seen outside licensed premises with adults and on one occasion stayed overnight at the home of a man and woman she had met that day.⁴⁸⁰ There was no evidence of information from RHIs being used to prevent further episodes of going missing.⁴⁸¹ CS-A59 also often went missing from care and was sexually exploited while missing.⁴⁸²

G.3: Police investigations when children go missing

14. Investigating missing persons reports is the responsibility of the police, with appropriate input from those responsible for the care of children if it appears that a child may need to be safeguarded.

15. When a missing person (adult or child) is found, the police carry out a prevention interview (also known as a safe and well check or a welfare check) to check the person is no longer missing and is safe and well. In the case of missing children, an RHI should be offered (in England, after each missing incident; in Wales, after three missing incidents), as discussed below. For children assessed as being at risk of going missing again, key actions to be taken are recorded in a 'trigger plan' to be implemented in response to any future missing incident.⁴⁸³

16. The police record every instance of a child or adult being reported missing. If a child (or vulnerable adult) requires additional help, police procedures and joint protocols should specify the circumstances when a referral should be made to children's social care or adult services.⁴⁸⁴ The data captured by children's social care will therefore generally be a subset of the total missing children reports recorded by the police.

⁴⁷⁵ CS-A71 & CS-A212 30 September 2020 8/16-11/10; 11/11-13/19

⁴⁷⁶ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 62/6-63/2

⁴⁷⁷ CS-A90 29 September 2020 9/9-11/7

⁴⁷⁸ CS-A221 24 September 2020 38/16-39/23

⁴⁷⁹ CS-A25 24 September 2020 31/11-35/6; SWP000150_002-011

⁴⁸⁰ CS-A32 30 September 2020 17/18-25

⁴⁸¹ ASP000476

⁴⁸² ASP000446; ASP000447

⁴⁸³ Missing Persons Strategic Responsibilities, College of Policing, online version November 2021, INQ006570

⁴⁸⁴ Missing Persons Strategic Responsibilities, College of Policing, online version November 2021, INQ006570

- 17.** Research undertaken in 2019 – *A Safer Return*, which analysed information provided in RHIs by over 200 children following almost 600 missing incidents, with a focus on incidents judged to be low or medium risk by the police – found that 14 percent of this group of children were either current victims of sexual exploitation or had been victims in the past.⁴⁸⁵ A much higher proportion, 43 percent, had one or more of five indicators that the study considered a ‘red flag’ for sexual exploitation, including gang association, sexually exploited friends and associating with older friends or an older boyfriend or girlfriend.⁴⁸⁶
- 18.** A robust police response to an episode of a child going missing is essential, to improve the prospects of apprehending the perpetrators of any sexual exploitation that occurred during the episode and ensure better protection for the child.
- 19.** In half of the case study areas the police response to episodes of children going missing was assessed as ‘poor’, ‘inadequate’ or ‘requires improvement’.
- 19.1.** In 2016, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) concluded the Metropolitan Police Service (which covers Tower Hamlets) provided a “*poor*” response to children who regularly went missing and that in some cases there was a lack of understanding of the link between children going missing and the increased risk of sexual exploitation.⁴⁸⁷
- 19.2.** In 2018 and 2019, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) found that the management of the risks to missing children by Merseyside Police (which covers St Helens) was “*not always appropriate*” and that activity to find missing children was too often desk-based.⁴⁸⁸
- 19.3.** In March 2020, HMICFRS recommended that Durham Constabulary “*immediately improves practice in cases of children who go missing from home*”. HMICFRS identified limited activity to locate children overnight, children’s cases wrongly assessed as ‘low’ or ‘no apparent’ risk, a failure to refer cases to children’s social care, lost opportunities to understand why children went missing and failures to transfer cases onto a computer system.⁴⁸⁹
- 20.** By October 2018, HMICFRS found in an inspection review that the use of trigger plans had “*improved significantly*” in Tower Hamlets but further work was required to ensure consistent practice. It concluded that children in Tower Hamlets, including vulnerable looked after children, continued to be inappropriately categorised as absent rather than missing and as a result there were missed opportunities to gather valuable information on risk to these children.⁴⁹⁰
- 21.** There were some signs of improvement in Merseyside. By May 2019, HMICFRS found that Merseyside Police had put in place “*a range of initiatives to raise awareness of the vulnerability of children reported missing, and it [had] significantly reduced the number of those assessed as being at no apparent risk*”.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁵ NCA000410_005_016

⁴⁸⁶ NCA000410_005_016

⁴⁸⁷ INQ005333_006

⁴⁸⁸ INQ005332_008; MSP000296_005_016

⁴⁸⁹ INQ005331_013_020-021; DHP000518_002

⁴⁹⁰ INQ005334_016-018

⁴⁹¹ *National Child Protection Merseyside Police Post-Inspection Review, August 2019, INQ005332_007*

22. There does not appear to have been such improvement in Durham yet. By May 2020, an internal audit noted that there remained significant areas for improvement in relation to the management of missing children investigations, in particular where children went missing frequently, were in the care of the local authority or went missing overnight.⁴⁹²

G.4: Data from the case study areas

23. Police services, local authorities and specialist agencies are likely to record episodes of children going missing for different purposes. The existence of different data sets between these organisations is not necessarily problematic. It is important that there are clear multi-agency arrangements for sharing information about these children and effective monitoring of them, including those placed out of area: in the year ending 31 March 2018, 41 percent of missing incidents in children's homes in England were related to out-of-area placements.⁴⁹³

24. Some of the case study areas provided data about the extent to which those children who went missing had already been identified as at risk of, or harmed by, sexual exploitation. When such data were available, the overall picture was concerning.

24.1. South Wales Police indicated that the number of occasions on which children flagged as at risk of sexual exploitation were recorded as missing was 1,072 in 2018, 981 in 2019 and 560 in 2020 (up to 25 November). During this almost three-year period, 10 children went missing in excess of 50 times each; one went missing 115 times.⁴⁹⁴

24.2. A London regional child sexual exploitation problem profile was produced in 2016, using data for the period November 2014–October 2015. It stated that half of child sexual exploitation victims had gone missing previously and just under a quarter were reported missing at the time of the offence. Missing child sexual exploitation victims accounted for 31 percent of all missing children.⁴⁹⁵

24.3. Avon and Somerset Police indicated that the number of occasions on which children flagged as at risk of sexual exploitation were recorded as missing was 1,829 in 2018, 1,432 in 2019 and 984 in 2020 (up to 25 November). During this period (from April 2018 to November 2020), five children went missing in excess of 70 times each; one child went missing 100 times.⁴⁹⁶

G.5: Return home interviews

25. Statutory guidance in England provides that when a child is found, an RHI should be offered to the child (although there is no requirement that the child participates in it). This should be conducted within 72 hours of the child returning to their home or care setting.⁴⁹⁷ RHIs are not a statutory requirement in Wales but there is an expectation on the part of the Welsh government that they will be offered after a child has three episodes of going missing.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹² DHP000529_001

⁴⁹³ *No Place at Home: Final report on the Inquiry into children and young people who go missing from out of area placements*, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, September 2019, INQ006285_025

⁴⁹⁴ SWP000172

⁴⁹⁵ MPS004607_041-042

⁴⁹⁶ ASP000529_005-006

⁴⁹⁷ DFE003186_010; INQ006447_014 paras 31–32

⁴⁹⁸ Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 138/14-15; Albert Heaney 1 October 2020 91/16-92/7

26. Statutory guidance in England states that RHIs should be conducted by someone who is not involved in caring for the child, is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow up any actions that emerge.⁴⁹⁹ Ideally, RHIs should be carried out by a designated team of practitioners who can develop relationships with the children.⁵⁰⁰

27. There is considerable professional debate about the optimal timing of RHIs and who should carry them out (for example, an independent person or someone the child knows and trusts).⁵⁰¹ Ms Ann James from Bristol City Council told us that the RHI process was “*highly bureaucratic*” and that:

*“for children who perhaps are the ones we are most concerned about who have repeated missing episodes, that that process can feel meaningless for them, and we also know that perpetrators – they know our processes and they may bring pressure to bear on those young people not to engage in a Return Home Interview”.*⁵⁰²

If a child has been sexually exploited while missing, he or she may have immediate needs for medical treatment, food and shelter and may be physically unable to participate in an RHI until they have had time to recover.⁵⁰³

28. In three of the case study areas specialist agencies have been commissioned to carry out RHIs (Catch22 in St Helens, the Children’s Society in Tower Hamlets and Barnardo’s Safe Choices in Bristol – unless the child already has an allocated social worker, in which case they will carry out the RHI).⁵⁰⁴

29. An RHI is an important opportunity to demonstrate to a sexually exploited child that there is a concern for his or her welfare, to develop a relationship with the child and to build a support and protection plan. It can also be a vital way of gathering relevant information about sexual exploitation that has occurred or particular factors about the missing episode indicating potential harm or a heightened risk of exploitation.⁵⁰⁵

30. However, Ofsted has noted that provision for missing children varies across local authorities in England.⁵⁰⁶ Some children receive intensive and holistic support and intervention plans, whereas others receive only a single RHI.⁵⁰⁷ The Care Inspectorate Wales has found that ‘debrief’ meetings with children are not always called, as expected, after three occasions of going missing.⁵⁰⁸

31. In the case study areas, performance was variable in terms of the proportion of RHIs offered and taken up.

31.1. In Durham, a 2019 audit found that some RHIs missed key warning signs of exploitation and failed to note steps taken to safeguard children when “*high risk activity*” was disclosed.⁵⁰⁹ The statutory guidance to the effect that an RHI should be offered after every episode of a child going missing was not implemented until

⁴⁹⁹ INQ006447_014 para 32

⁵⁰⁰ Wendy Ghaffar 1 October 2020 179/9-17; BRD000278_005 para 22

⁵⁰¹ Amanda Naylor 30 September 2020 178/6-14

⁵⁰² Ann James 30 September 2020 63/9-64/21

⁵⁰³ Amanda Naylor 30 September 2020 177/5-179/14

⁵⁰⁴ Vikki McKenna 28 September 2020 20/17-21/7; Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 143/14-144/1; LBT004214_009 para 33; BSC000186_006_016 paras 22–23 and 73

⁵⁰⁵ Wendy Ghaffar 1 October 2020 178/11-22; Amanda Naylor 30 September 2020 177/22-179/5

⁵⁰⁶ Wendy Ghaffar 1 October 2020 178/1-179/23

⁵⁰⁷ BRD000275_009 paras 30–32

⁵⁰⁸ CIW000018_006 para 36; Albert Heaney 1 October 2020 94/7-13

⁵⁰⁹ DUC000770_002

November 2019.⁵¹⁰ Information was supplied showing the percentage of total police missing reports which resulted in an RHI. For monitoring purposes, however, a more relevant figure would be how many RHIs were conducted for children referred by the police because of safeguarding concerns and this was not provided.⁵¹¹

31.2. In Swansea, the 2019–20 Annual Report for the West Glamorgan Safeguarding Board noted that “*qualitative data i.e. that found in Return Home Interviews (RHI) is not routinely shared or analysed by agencies*”.⁵¹² It also noted that “*only those Children and Young People reported missing and perceived as medium to high risk receive a RHI*”.⁵¹³

31.3. In the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, an internal audit from January to December 2019 of 40 young people who regularly went missing identified that the quality of RHIs needed to improve, that there needed to be better engagement and work with young people and that episodes of children going missing were not routinely discussed or explored with the Independent Review Officer.⁵¹⁴ In March and July 2020, two multi-agency audits again found that the quality of RHIs needed to improve, the causes of episodes of children going missing were not always understood and information obtained from RHIs was not always used in safety planning.⁵¹⁵ Separately, the Children’s Society highlighted that the recommendations it made were not being followed, such that “*young people saw no point in talking to us*”.⁵¹⁶

31.4. Ms James accepted that, in Bristol, completion of RHIs was at a very low level in April 2018, when only 29 percent of children who went missing accepted an RHI. In light of this, Bristol City Council introduced a missing from care coordinator and a reducing offending of children in care officer to track looked after children who go missing and report internally about whether they are at risk of exploitation. As a result of improvement action, 92 percent of 114 eligible children were offered an RHI in June 2020 and 52 percent of them accepted one.⁵¹⁷

32. The provision of RHIs for children placed out of area has presented particular challenges to placing councils who are responsible for arranging for them to be done. Research has shown that data on carrying out RHIs for children living away from home are limited. Children placed out of area were more likely to have their RHI conducted by a social worker rather than a designated RHI service. This led to delays and inadequate recording of information from the interview.⁵¹⁸ High numbers of children were moving between out-of-area care placements.⁵¹⁹ These problems are compounded by difficulties in information-sharing between the police and placing authorities and the absence of a centralised mechanism to record episodes of going missing in relation to children who are placed out of area.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁰ John Pearce 23 September 2020 60/6-60/13; DUC000763_003-004; DHP000423_007

⁵¹¹ DUC000807_009; Mr John Pearce, Director of Children and Young People’s Services at Durham County Council, thought that there was a disconnect between missing episodes recorded on the police system and the children for whom they would undertake an RHI, which made this figure unhelpful, John Pearce 23 September 2020 56/12-24

⁵¹² INQ006560_014

⁵¹³ INQ006560_014

⁵¹⁴ LBT004327

⁵¹⁵ LBT004338_012 para 37

⁵¹⁶ INQ005080_010 para 58

⁵¹⁷ Ann James 30 September 2020 62/10-63/2-8; BSC000316_012; BSC000118_005; BSC000139_006-007; BSC000186_016-017 paras 75–79; BSC000284_020 para 84; OFS012558_002

⁵¹⁸ NCA000409_092

⁵¹⁹ NCA000409_092

⁵²⁰ DUC000685_007 paras 36–37; DUC000793_005 paras 19–20

33. In 2018, St Helens Council stopped commissioning Catch22 to complete RHIs for children placed in St Helens by another local authority, unless that local authority paid for that service. Catch22 considered that this led to a “*huge intelligence gap*” as agencies in St Helens are not aware of the risks posed to children in their area. This gap was also acknowledged as an area for development by the St Helens Safeguarding Partnership and Merseyside Police, albeit considering it “*a national problem*”.⁵²¹

34. The Inquiry was told that Missing Practitioners from Warwickshire County Council carried out RHIs when children were placed in the county by other authorities and the information was shared with the placing authority. The Council also stated that any sexual exploitation concerns would be followed up in the same way as for a Warwickshire child, with communication with the placing authority and local multi-agency meetings.⁵²² While the exploitation team should be informed of any out-of-area placements notified to the multi-agency safeguarding hub, not all placing authorities complied with the obligation to notify Warwickshire when placements were made.

35. In autumn 2018, Durham Constabulary initiated the Philomena Protocol, designed to coordinate and focus responses to young people in children’s homes going missing. It encourages carers, staff, families and friends to compile information that could be used in the event of a young person going missing from care.⁵²³ Durham Constabulary told us that fewer children were going missing from children’s homes, which it partly attributed to the use of the protocol.⁵²⁴ The Philomena Protocol was recently commended by the National Police Chiefs’ Council as an example of good practice and is being adopted by other forces.⁵²⁵

⁵²¹ INQ004944_004 para 2.5; MSP000218_026 para 178; Vikki McKenna 28 September 2020 19/23-20/10, 23/11-24/13

⁵²² WCC000236_013-014 paras 77–79 and 81–82; WCC000420 paras 84–86; WCC000421; WCC000422_002-003 paras 8 and 12; Nigel Minns 25 September 2020 105/10-106/15

⁵²³ DUC000685_006 paras 31–32; DUC000793_004 para 17

⁵²⁴ DHP000440_035-036_038 paras 122–125 and 135–136; DHP000456_035 paras 115–119; INQ005331_005

⁵²⁵ NAP000016_025-026; DHP000440_046 para 166; WSP000232_010 para 44

Part H

Profiling

Profiling

H.1: Introduction

1. The need for accurate profiles of the nature and extent of child sexual exploitation has been recognised since the 2013 reports on child sexual exploitation by the Home Affairs Committee and the Children’s Commissioner.⁵²⁶
2. In March 2015, following a report by the Chair of this Inquiry on Rotherham, the Cabinet Office produced its *Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation* plan.⁵²⁷ In recognition of significant gaps in knowledge about child sexual exploitation, Home Office funding was provided from 2015 to 2018 to support the production of regional problem profiles (a form of data analysis), coordinated through regional and organised crime units.⁵²⁸

H.2: The purpose of problem profiles

3. Problem profiling involves the drawing together of information about child sexual exploitation from different agencies into one place. The purpose of a problem profile should be to enable agencies to fully understand the nature and extent of the problem of sexual exploitation and to commission services, train staff and prioritise action based on an accurate picture.

⁵²⁶ *Child sexual exploitation and the response to localised grooming*, House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 5 June 2013, [HOM003355](#); “*If only someone had listened*”, Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, Final Report November 2013, [HOM003339_078_093](#).

⁵²⁷ [ADC000023_003](#) para 2

⁵²⁸ [HOM003378_017](#) paras 60–62

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Warwickshire Police child exploitation problem profile

WSP00208_002

4. The Children's Commissioner's 2013 report made clear that a problem profile should include:

- data about how many children and young people have been sexually exploited and how many are suspected of harmful sexual behaviour with their peers;
- intelligence on businesses and schools of concern (recognising that these are good examples of locations where children may be at risk of sexual exploitation); and
- information on local street gangs and other networks, groups and individuals who present a risk of sexual harm to children and young people.⁵²⁹

5. A meaningful child sexual exploitation profile requires accurate data and intelligence. Ms Katherine Riley, Portfolio Director for the Joint Criminal Justice Inspections and Protecting Vulnerable People Portfolio within Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), stated that:

"a proper problem profile ... needs to be symbiotic, drawing information in from the partnership information held about a child or, indeed, an offender, and it also needs to be feeding information consistently into that partnership".⁵³⁰

6. The evidence considered in this investigation made clear that the child sexual exploitation profiles in the case study areas were inaccurate in a number of ways.

⁵²⁹ HOM003339_093

⁵³⁰ Katherine Riley 1 October 2020 145/4-146/4

H.3: Inaccurate prevalence information

7. In Part B, we described the subjective and inconsistent process of ‘flagging’ criminal offences as child sexual exploitation. The case study evidence indicated that issues with the flagging process have often made the prevalence information provided in local profiles inaccurate.

7.1. The Durham Constabulary 2019 problem profile noted that “*Where no explicit mention of grooming or exploitative techniques was mentioned*” by the inputting officer, “*crimes were classed as CSA [child sexual abuse] rather than E [child sexual exploitation]*”. The police and local safeguarding partnership accepted that the consequence was that “*we could be underestimating*” the extent of child sexual exploitation in the local area.⁵³¹

7.2. In Swansea, South Wales Police’s 2019 problem profile indicated that due to the inconsistencies in reporting and use of the flag system “*any occurrence where the exchange between victim and perpetrator is not clear has been categorised as child sexual abuse*”. It was accepted that this meant that there may have been “*significantly more occurrences that involve sexually exploiting a child than the profile reflected*”.⁵³²

7.3. The pan-London profile, which included Tower Hamlets, identified gaps in intelligence due to, among other things, inconsistent flagging.⁵³³ Some officers wrongly used the child sexual exploitation flag as there was no separate flag for child criminal exploitation until July 2019.⁵³⁴

7.4. In Bristol, cases flagged as sexual exploitation could have included criminal exploitation cases, until the system was changed so that cases could be flagged for both criminal and sexual exploitation.⁵³⁵ Avon and Somerset Police’s 2019 problem profile for Bristol recognised that:

*“Discrepancies in the identification of CSE offences by officers in general has resulted in a high number either being wrongly identified as CSE or not being identified as CSE ... Officer and staff understanding of what constitutes CSE offences is lacking in some areas ... Frequently we are seeing occurrences where the CSE flag is used without any evidence of exploitation but in addition there are also incidents where there is clear exploitation where the offence determination is not being used”.*⁵³⁶

The force also noted that, while 464 offences were flagged on its ‘Niche’ system, a manual review identified that only 276 met the definition of child sexual exploitation. There were also 177 offences which involved child sexual exploitation which had not been flagged.

⁵³¹ DHP000379_013; Michael Banks 23 September 2020 93/3-94/7

⁵³² SWP000079_007_014; SWP000151_013-014 paras 1.40-1.41

⁵³³ MPS004318_014-015 paras 60-61

⁵³⁴ Sue Williams 29 September 2020 116/14-23, 117/5-23

⁵³⁵ Ann James 30 September 2020 43/25-45/4, 89/4-8; BSC000186_007-008 paras 27-31; BSC000082_004; BSC000317_002; BSC000284_010 para 40

⁵³⁶ ASP000438_021

H.4: Failures to record victim and perpetrator ethnicity

8. There were widespread failures to record data about the ethnicity of both perpetrators and victims in the case study areas:

- in Durham, data provided for 2018/19 showed that ethnicity was not recorded for suspects in 35 percent of 1,900 cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation, and for 14 percent of 1,138 victims separate figures for sexual exploitation were not provided;⁵³⁷
- in Swansea, across the South Wales Police area, less than half of the 56 incidents of child sexual exploitation in 2018/19 recorded the victim's ethnicity;⁵³⁸
- in the Warwickshire 2019 profile, the ethnicity of over 40 percent of 137 perpetrators and over 50 percent of 162 victims of child sexual exploitation was unknown;⁵³⁹
- in St Helens, Merseyside Police noted that, between April 2017 and March 2019, 41 percent of 435 victims and 28 percent of 217 alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse and exploitation did not provide their ethnicity; separate figures for sexual exploitation were not provided;⁵⁴⁰
- in the Tower Hamlets 2019 profile, ethnicity was not recorded for 86 percent of offenders involved in 147 reports of child sexual exploitation and 14 percent of 166 victims of child sexual exploitation in the Central East Area BCU;⁵⁴¹ and
- in Bristol, the ethnicity of 28 percent of 137 suspects and 19 percent of 474 children at risk of child sexual exploitation was unknown or unrecorded.⁵⁴²

9. Internal research by Avon and Somerset Police in 2020 highlighted that:

- some of its systems did not make it easy to record ethnicity;
- it was sometimes not clear who is responsible for recording ethnicity;
- there was some lack of knowledge about how to record ethnicity and why it is important; and
- some officers were not confident in asking members of the public to define their ethnicity.⁵⁴³

10. As set out in Part B, collating accurate and reliable data on the ethnicity of victims and perpetrators has long been recognised as an important exercise. The failures to do so in the case study areas mean that the police and other agencies in those areas are unable to identify local patterns and trends of child sexual exploitation in respect of ethnicity. This is compounded by the subsuming of data about child sexual exploitation victims and perpetrators within the wider category of child sexual abuse and exploitation, detrimentally affecting the quality of data that is produced and so the adequacy of the response by institutions, including to children who have already been abused.

⁵³⁷ DHP000440_016 para 54; David Orford 23 September 2020 122/2-122/16

⁵³⁸ SWP000151_003 para 1.4

⁵³⁹ WSP000208_024; WSP000208_022; Peter Hill 25 September 2020 129/15-21

⁵⁴⁰ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 127/2-14; MSP000218_005-006 paras 29-31; MSP000220_005

⁵⁴¹ MPS004300_010; MPS004318_005 para 15; The Metropolitan Police Service operates across London in 12 Basic Command Units (BCU) which cover the different London Boroughs. The Central East Area BCU encompasses the boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets.

⁵⁴² ASP000221

⁵⁴³ ASP000484_002-003 paras 6-11

H.5: Lack of information about perpetrator groups

11. It was clear from the evidence that none of the police forces or local authorities in the case study areas in this investigation had an accurate understanding of networks sexually exploiting children in their area.

12. Durham Constabulary's 2019 problem profile noted that its sample contained examples where *"more than one person will offend against the child at the same time"*, which Deputy Chief Constable (DCC) David Orford acknowledged would fit the Inquiry's definition of organised networks.⁵⁴⁴ Despite this, no evidence was provided about the number of cases of child sexual exploitation by networks using the Inquiry's definition. The profile suggested that *"Lone offenders remain the key threat, to date there is no evidence of organised group offending"*, although that term (taken from the College of Policing guidance) is narrower than the Inquiry's definition.⁵⁴⁵ The force's Operational Threat and Risk Document, dated October 2019, noted under 'information gaps' that no OCGs (organised crime groups) were mapped for child sexual abuse and exploitation *"locally or regionally"*.⁵⁴⁶ DCC Orford spoke of the difficulty in being absolutely certain that an OCG had *"its entire focus on exploiting children"*.⁵⁴⁷ This is another definition, which appears to further limit the type of group of abusers being considered by Durham Constabulary.

13. In the evidence disclosed to us, there were examples in Swansea of child sexual exploitation by organised networks, using the Inquiry's definition. For example, four individuals were described in an October 2019 report as *"linked in one way or another to each other"* and displaying *"inappropriate sexual behaviour towards vulnerable young persons"*.⁵⁴⁸ There were also networks referred to in the case study of CS-A56 and in the case of CS-B319, referred to by the City and County of Swansea Council.⁵⁴⁹ These instances of exploitation by networks or groups should have been identified by the police and the local authority. However, South Wales Police incorrectly told us that there were no data to suggest sexual exploitation by organised networks, whether according to the Inquiry's definition or at all, and *"no data to support suggestions that there is a gang related CSE issue within the Swansea area"*.⁵⁵⁰ Detective Chief Superintendent Daniel Richards accepted in evidence that *"there is a likelihood that there are organised criminal networks that we haven't discovered"* and that increased county lines activities meant there was an increased likelihood of sexual exploitation.⁵⁵¹

14. CS-A2 reported in April 2017 that there was a network of older people abusing her daughter in Warwickshire but, in her view, this was not explored because the police did not recognise it as a network due to the perceived absence of other criminal activity.⁵⁵² Police operations (such as Operation Jive) indicated that there were associations between perpetrators.⁵⁵³ Nonetheless, Warwickshire Police's October 2019 problem profile did not record any groups or networks involved in or perpetrating child sexual exploitation in

⁵⁴⁴ DHP000379_014; DHP000456_013 para 34

⁵⁴⁵ DHP000379_002; DHP000456_012 para 31

⁵⁴⁶ DHP000492_006

⁵⁴⁷ David Orford 23 September 2020 116/19-117/5

⁵⁴⁸ SWP000085_011-012

⁵⁴⁹ CS-A56 24 September 2020 37/6-38/12; SCC000550_028 paras 148-152

⁵⁵⁰ SWP000151_008 para 1.27; SWP000163_002-003 para 6; SWP000151_016 para 1.49; SWP000151_040 para 3.21

⁵⁵¹ Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 115/17-116/11, 135/7-14

⁵⁵² CS-A2 25 September 2020 17/23-19/23, 53/18-54/5

⁵⁵³ Operation Jive was an operation in Warwickshire which led to the arrest of three perpetrators in 2018. Two of the case study children (CS-A151 and CS-A146) were victims who were identified in the operation. At least one of the perpetrators was identified as linked to a gang in Coventry. WSP000206_007-010 paras 30-37

the county.⁵⁵⁴ Detective Superintendent Peter Hill told us that organised criminal gangs exploiting young people were “*relatively rare*”, although he recognised exploitation was more often by ‘disorganised’ groups with loose associations such as through friendship groups or interactions through social media.⁵⁵⁵ It appears that Warwickshire Police conducted little, if any, analysis of the extent to which child sexual exploitation was being committed by groups or networks.⁵⁵⁶

15. St Helens’ 2018 problem profile considered organised criminality but did not identify any OCGs engaged in child sexual exploitation.⁵⁵⁷ However, Assistant Chief Constable (ACC) Ian Critchley told us that, as at September 2019, Merseyside Police had identified 11 OCGs for the Merseyside region with child sexual exploitation as a primary or secondary crime type.⁵⁵⁸ Other evidence provided to the Inquiry by Merseyside Police, however, showed that there were instances of child sexual exploitation which involved a “*group/gang*”.⁵⁵⁹ ACC Critchley explained that networks involved in exploitation tended to incorporate online exploitation, county lines and sexual exploitation.⁵⁶⁰ In November 2019, there were “*three live cases of child sexual exploitation by organised networks being investigated in this local authority area*” but there were no ongoing investigations by August 2020.⁵⁶¹ ACC Critchley said, however, that there was only “*a limited amount of resource*” to identify children who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation by a group not formally classed as an OCG. As a result, in St Helens, networks not formally classed as OCGs did not appear to be a focus of the policing response to child sexual exploitation.

16. In Tower Hamlets, as at November 2019, there was “*no identified evidence of organised networks being investigated within this policing area currently*”, albeit the Metropolitan Police Service considered that a gang model was more prevalent in other parts of London.⁵⁶² The 2019 problem profile covering Tower Hamlets and Hackney identified that 15 percent of all child sexual exploitation reports in 2018/19 showed links to gangs or organised groups; the figure for Tower Hamlets alone was 9 percent. Its overview accepted that “*young people affected by, or associated with, gangs are at high risk of sexual exploitation*”.⁵⁶³ Commander Sue Williams explained that, when looking at organised criminal networks, the force used the Serious Crime Act 2015 definition, that of OCGs. On that basis, she said “*what we have seen is a number of adults in various locations, but not necessarily seen as an organised criminal network*”.⁵⁶⁴ The Metropolitan Police Service told us that there were no cases or issues with child sexual exploitation by networks in Tower Hamlets, using the Inquiry’s definition.⁵⁶⁵ Given the breadth of the Inquiry’s definition of a network this cannot be right.

17. Mr Richard Baldwin, Divisional Director for Children’s Social Care at the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, said that there was “*no evidence to suggest that currently any of the young people [with cases] open through the Pan-London Sexual Exploitation Operating Protocol are part of organised networks*”.⁵⁶⁶ He said that the local authority had not identified

⁵⁵⁴ WSP000208

⁵⁵⁵ Peter Hill 25 September 2020 161/21-162/8

⁵⁵⁶ WSP000206_008 paras 33–34

⁵⁵⁷ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 124/15-125/5; MSP000322_001 para 3

⁵⁵⁸ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 128/13-17

⁵⁵⁹ MSP000172_001

⁵⁶⁰ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 38/1-39/18

⁵⁶¹ MSP000218_011 para 78; MSP000322_001 para 3

⁵⁶² MPS004318_010 para 42; Sue Williams 29 September 2020 138/10-13

⁵⁶³ MPS004300_002_007

⁵⁶⁴ Sue Williams 29 September 2020 173/20-175/13

⁵⁶⁵ MPS004584_005 paras 22–23

⁵⁶⁶ LBT004214_026 para 89

any cases of sexual exploitation by networks applying the definition of an OCG.⁵⁶⁷ Applying the Inquiry's definition of an organised network, Mr Baldwin considered that four operations within the borough would fall under that definition.⁵⁶⁸ He acknowledged, however, that:

*"just because we haven't seen it doesn't mean to say it's not there, and, clearly, we need to remain very open and alive to the fact that organised networks are, you know, an element of exploitation".*⁵⁶⁹

18. Avon and Somerset Police had considerable information about potential perpetrators in Bristol, as a result of its Topaz Risk Assessment Profile (TRAP) system described below. In 2019, this showed 510 potential adult perpetrators of child sexual exploitation within the force area, of whom 290 were flagged to Operation Topaz and were reviewed and assessed as posing a potential risk to children. Of the 290 flagged, 236 were within Bristol.⁵⁷⁰ Despite this significant number of adults who posed a risk to children, there was less information about offender networks. Avon and Somerset Police's 2019 problem profile noted that:

- the police had not identified significant OCG involvement in child sexual exploitation;⁵⁷¹
- the majority of offenders offend alone "or with small groups which are socially motivated"; and
- any incidents that have involved groups "have not been in a traditional organised groups structure but rather a loose collection of associates who may be involved in other criminal activity".⁵⁷²

The second and third groups would be regarded as an organised network according to the Inquiry's definition and we do not know the number of cases falling within this definition.⁵⁷³ When asked about this, Chief Superintendent William White of Avon and Somerset Police referred to work that had been done to map the connections between different victims and different potential subjects. He explained that networks using the Inquiry's definition were difficult to "segment" and added:

*"in terms of the overall picture of networks around CSE, what we know is, there's lots of people involved with that and there's lots of potential groups but to define them as different networks is virtually impossible".*⁵⁷⁴

H.6: Other aspects of profile inaccuracy

19. In addition to the flagging issues summarised above, profiling in the case study areas was poor in other respects. Typically the profile was no more than a snapshot in time, based on inaccurate or incomplete data.

19.1. Durham Constabulary's 2019 problem profile only considered data over a period of three months.⁵⁷⁵ While DCC Orford suggested that this was a "comprehensive" problem profile, the profile itself stated that the "three-month sample size did not lend

⁵⁶⁷ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 21/9-24

⁵⁶⁸ LBT004289_018 para 61

⁵⁶⁹ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 20/21-21/8

⁵⁷⁰ ASP000438_015

⁵⁷¹ ASP000438_015-017

⁵⁷² ASP000438_015-017

⁵⁷³ ASP000438_017

⁵⁷⁴ William White 30 September 2020 113/11-114/21; ASP000199_021 (figure 5)

⁵⁷⁵ DHP000379_002_013; DHP000456_011 para 29

itself to adequate analysis of child sexual exploitation”.⁵⁷⁶ DCC Orford explained it as an “initial snapshot” due to resourcing challenges but, given that the purpose of the profile was to analyse child sexual abuse and exploitation, this was a fundamental problem and an unsatisfactory explanation.⁵⁷⁷

19.2. Merseyside Police completed a serious and organised crime local problem profile for St Helens in December 2018. Although ACC Critchley explained that there was an initial plan to complete a further profile in December 2019, this was not completed due to a focus on other areas of Merseyside at that time and a reduction in staffing.⁵⁷⁸ Merseyside Police is therefore operating on the basis of data which may not accurately reflect the current position in St Helens.

19.3. In the Metropolitan Police Service’s 2019 problem profile, which included Tower Hamlets, 31 percent of reports did not specify the type of child sexual exploitation suffered by a victim.⁵⁷⁹ There was also little information about the level of risk to a child (which was missing in 39 percent of crime reports considered) and the vulnerabilities of the child.⁵⁸⁰ The profile stated that:

*“a notable absence of higher-harm CSE cases featured heavily in the interview data from exploitation-focused partners. These participants stated their concern over the low volume of high-harm CSE cases as it was not reflecting the situation as they saw it.”*⁵⁸¹

H.7: Predictive analytics

20. Avon and Somerset Police uses modelling to collect data about offenders, through the TRAP system.⁵⁸² This identifies suspects from a cohort of subjects, who are given a score indicative of their risk of carrying out child sexual exploitation offences. A score is based on a number of factors which are common to identified suspects, such as having “sexual offences, violent offences, antisocial behaviour, drugs, criminality with children, links to MISPERs [missing persons], links to gangs and organised crime groups and trafficking”.⁵⁸³ Officers within Operation Topaz then consider whether to flag an individual based on that score and other intelligence, before deciding whether and how to intervene based on the views of the analyst, the researcher, the police sergeant and partners, as well as the score.⁵⁸⁴ From TRAP, a weekly ‘offender’ list is circulated between multi-agency partners, which includes the reason why each subject has been identified.⁵⁸⁵

21. Bristol City Council uses its Think Family Database to create a profile of children at risk of sexual exploitation. This brings together 35 different datasets about children from education, housing services, the police, welfare systems, the number of episodes of children going missing and mental health concerns.⁵⁸⁶ The ‘Insight’ team, funded jointly with the police, used that data to create a predictive risk model to analyse the extent to which

⁵⁷⁶ DHP000440_010 para 34; DHP000379_013

⁵⁷⁷ David Orford 23 September 2020 114/13-115/12; DHP000456_009 para 23

⁵⁷⁸ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 123/13-124/2; There is also a pan-Merseyside child sexual exploitation problem profile which was completed in January 2016, MSP000223_001 para 2. The local St Helens profile identified the main vulnerabilities in St Helens as being child sexual exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery, MSP000224

⁵⁷⁹ MPS004576_040; Sue Williams 29 September 2020 124/20-125/6

⁵⁸⁰ MPS004300_003

⁵⁸¹ MPS004576_037

⁵⁸² ASP000321_014-015 paras 57-58; ASP000434_003-004 paras 10-15

⁵⁸³ William White 30 September 2020 103/19-104/7

⁵⁸⁴ ASP000484_004-005 paras 14-16; William White 30 September 2020 105/16-23

⁵⁸⁵ See, for example, ASP000473_001_003

⁵⁸⁶ BSC000290; ASP000218_002

children are at risk of sexual exploitation.⁵⁸⁷ The model produces an initial score for each child based on known risk factors (such as episodes of going missing). Their risk level is then analysed, based on wider information.⁵⁸⁸

22. The Think Family Database also produces a weekly, automated list of children at heightened risk of sexual exploitation, which is provided to Avon and Somerset Police's Operation Topaz. This list is then analysed alongside flags on the Operation Topaz system to create a 'victim list' which is shared with partner agencies at multi-agency meetings every four weeks.⁵⁸⁹ In June 2020, for example, more than 1,000 children in the force area were identified as at heightened risk of sexual exploitation.⁵⁹⁰ Avon and Somerset Police told us that this allows them to understand who may be vulnerable to sexual exploitation so that it can support them proactively, rather than reactively when they come to the attention of professionals.⁵⁹¹

23. The use of predictive analytics to identify children at risk in Bristol and elsewhere has been subject to press comment and academic review.⁵⁹² Concerns have been raised about the quality of the data inputted into the model, the risk of reinforcing the errors and biases of those making the original records and the potential to focus on factors linked to socio-economic and racial discrimination.⁵⁹³ Bristol City Council responded to many of the issues raised and was clear that the model identified vulnerability but did not replace professional judgement.⁵⁹⁴ It described the model as 'mirroring':

"it's not predicting you will be sexually exploited ... it's saying you are demonstrating exactly the same characteristics and behaviours as someone who was sexually exploited".⁵⁹⁵

24. Bristol's statistical analysis of the model in September 2020 found it to have 'Very Strong' precision ("*how accurately the model found those who go on to be sexually exploited*") and 'Very Strong' recall ("*the % of young people that were sexually exploited that the model found*").⁵⁹⁶

25. However, research published in September 2020 by What Works for Children's Social Care was more cautious about predictive models in other areas. It found that, of predictive models used in four different areas, none had sufficient precision to be considered a success. They missed four out of every five children at risk (false negatives) and of the children the models did identify as being at risk, they were wrong six out of ten times (false positives). The improved collection and use of data is critical to the response to child sexual exploitation but it is important that agencies do not over-rely upon it. Caution must be exercised; predictive analytics on its own may produce too many misleading assessments. While it may be a helpful supplement, predictive analytics should not be used as a principal tool.

⁵⁸⁷ BSC000288; INQ005324_048

⁵⁸⁸ BSC000288; BSC000314

⁵⁸⁹ ASP000321_012-014 paras 51-55; BSC000186_003 para 12

⁵⁹⁰ ASP000487; William White 30 September 2020 103/13-104/7

⁵⁹¹ ASP000522_003 para 10

⁵⁹² INQ005323; INQ005325; INQ005328_001-005_028-036_075-083; INQ005324; INQ005322

⁵⁹³ For example, some datasets (such as arrest records) have a lot of errors, INQ005328_034; An ethics review carried out in January 2020 identified that the major problem with using predictive analytics in children's social care is that "*the features that are indicative of social disadvantage and deprivation, and that are simultaneously linked to socioeconomic and racial discrimination, are also highly predictive of the adverse outcomes used to measure child maltreatment and neglect*", INQ005322_035

⁵⁹⁴ Ann James 30 September 2020 26/5-16; INQ005324_048; BSC000284_009-010 para 39

⁵⁹⁵ INQ005328_032

⁵⁹⁶ BSC000314_010

H.8: Improving profiling in the future

26. The inadequacy of profiles, as described above, reflects a problem throughout England and Wales.

27. HMICFRS noted that other forces either do not have problem profiles at all or they are poorly populated and not updated.⁵⁹⁷

28. This is also emblematic of wider concerns about the recording of child sexual exploitation by police forces: a recent investigative report by *The Times* identified that:

- at Dyfed-Powys Police, 9 of 10 crimes categorised as child sexual exploitation were misrecorded, according to a 2018 report;
- Lancashire Police's 15-year-old IT system was described in an internal 2018 report as "not fit for the changing nature of child exploitation";
- around half of the child exploitation cases in one year had not been flagged correctly by Hertfordshire Police, according to an internal 2019 report; and
- in 2021 West Yorkshire Police admitted that an intelligence database including information on perpetrators could not be easily searched by officers.⁵⁹⁸

29. These data issues may be part of the reason why the government still does not provide an annual child sexual exploitation overview or profile, as recommended by the Children's Commissioner in 2013.⁵⁹⁹

30. In 2016, following *Time to Listen* joint thematic inspection (which looked at responses to child sexual exploitation and missing children), the Care Quality Commission recommended the appointment of a dedicated professional in each area who has access to all the information held by different agencies to ensure that children at heightened risk and the profile of offenders is understood and managed.⁶⁰⁰ This recommendation has been acted upon by some clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and local safeguarding children partnerships (LSCPs) but not consistently.⁶⁰¹

31. The National Police Chiefs' Council's ongoing Tackling Organised Exploitation project intends, in the long term, to establish permanent national exploitation hubs to harvest and assess intelligence data, and analyse and understand patterns of offending.⁶⁰² It remains to be seen whether this helps to resolve the issues identified. We note that local police forces which are performing well with profiling are those with dedicated analysts who are continually updating databases.⁶⁰³

⁵⁹⁷ Katherine Riley 1 October 2020 145/4-146/4

⁵⁹⁸ 'Police "covered up" failings on child sex cases', *The Times* 27 May 2021, INQ006495; We understand that Hertfordshire Police is taking steps in an attempt to improve this situation. The position in relation to West Yorkshire was connected with the functionality of the Niche database, used by several police forces. We understand that West Yorkshire Police has taken steps to address this issue.

⁵⁹⁹ HOM003339_078_093; Christian Papaleontiou 1 October 2020 15/4-23

⁶⁰⁰ HOM003364; Rosie Benneyworth 1 October 2020 149/4-150/8

⁶⁰¹ Rosie Benneyworth 1 October 2020 149/18-150/21; INQ005462_050; CQC000371_010 para 29

⁶⁰² NAP000015_002 para 5

⁶⁰³ Katherine Riley 1 October 2020 145/4-146/4

32. The Home Office's December 2020 paper said that:

*"a commitment to improve the collection and analysis of data on group-based child sexual exploitation, including in relation to characteristics of offenders such as ethnicity and other factors, will be included in the forthcoming Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy ... In the future, further research could be commissioned to triangulate between police data, court records and other data sources to provide a more reliable picture of the characteristics of offenders."*⁶⁰⁴

33. In its 2021 *Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy*, the government committed to several measures with relevance to problem profiling, including:

- *"Enhancing the Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit to provide strategic guidance to local agencies in profiling, preventing and disrupting this form of offending";*
- *"Engaging with criminal justice partners, academics, think tanks, charities and frontline professionals on improving the range, quality and analysis of data collected on offender and victim characteristics to help protect children by preventing and detecting offending";* and
- *"Investing in regional analysts to continue to develop a quarterly data collection on the totality of the child sexual abuse cases undertaken by police forces, as well as refreshing the Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Operations Database" which will "capture details of victims and offender numbers, characteristics and modus operandi".*⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁴ [HOM003399_005_053](#)

⁶⁰⁵ [Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy](#), HM Government, 2021, [INQ006448_039-041](#)

Part I

Disruption, investigation and prosecution

Disruption, investigation and prosecution

I.1: Introduction

1. Police forces and local authorities use a range of tactics to ‘disrupt’ child sexual exploitation. These include:

- direct disruption: using notices and orders against individual suspects and arresting them for criminal offences; arrests (even if not for a sexual offence) can have the effect of preventing the suspect from continuing to sexually exploit children;
- indirect disruption: focussing on others linked to a suspect and their activities, such as those who supply hire cars to suspects; and
- locational disruption: concentrating on the places where sexual exploitation takes place (such as a park or a house) or which support the exploitation in some way (such as a car used to transport victims).

2. There are a number of disruption mechanisms.

2.1. Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs) may be issued by the police against a potential offender. Although CAWNs were designed to be used in potential cases of abduction, we heard that police forces may use them where grooming or exploitation is suspected but there is insufficient evidence of an offence having been committed to make an arrest. The CAWN will inform a suspect that they are not permitted to associate with a named child and, if they continue to do so, they may be arrested for an abduction offence under the Child Abduction Act 1984 and Children Act 1989. There are no statutory or legislative provisions dealing specifically with the issue of warning notices but the Home Office toolkit provides guidance on when and how CAWNs can be used and more detailed guidance is provided by the National Police Chiefs’ Council.⁶⁰⁶

2.2. Sexual risk orders (SROs) and sexual harm prevention orders (SHPOs) can include a range of restrictions if necessary to protect the public from sexual harm. For example, they might prohibit individuals from contact with children or certain internet use.⁶⁰⁷ SROs can be made where there has been no conviction but the person is proven (to the criminal standard of proof) to have committed an act of a sexual nature, whilst SHPOs can be made after a person has been convicted of a sexual offence.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁶ [HOM003365_008](#); [NAP000027](#)

⁶⁰⁷ [HOM003365_017-018](#)

⁶⁰⁸ SROs were considered by the Inquiry in the context of including restrictions on foreign travel in the *Children Outside the United Kingdom: Investigation Report*, January 2020. The Inquiry considered whether the standard of proof for SROs should be lowered or whether applicants should be permitted to rely on closed evidence but did not consider that these reforms would be likely to lead to a substantial increase in the number of orders being made: see p24, para 28; Sections 103A–K and 122A–K of the [Sexual Offences Act 2003](#)

2.3. Section 49 of the Children Act 1989 makes it a criminal offence to knowingly and without lawful authority or reasonable excuse take or keep a child (who is the subject of a care order, an emergency protection order, or who is in police protection) away from care, or encourage, assist or incite them to run away from care.⁶⁰⁹

2.4. The police or local authority can apply for a recovery order if a child has been unlawfully taken or kept away from a person with lawful control of the child, which requires the child to be returned and information about the whereabouts of the child to be disclosed to police.⁶¹⁰

2.5. Longer-term disruption methods include youth service providers conducting outreach work in areas of concern. These can be a useful source of intelligence for police.⁶¹¹

3. In April 2019, the Home Office published a national *Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit* to present options for disruption action for all local agencies, not just those directly involved in law enforcement. It also includes best practice in information-sharing and multi-agency working, as well as intelligence and evidence-gathering.⁶¹² The various inspectorates are important in identifying weaker practices and improving consistency and quality.⁶¹³

I.2: Effectiveness of disruption tactics in the case study areas

4. Institutions in each of the six case study areas appeared to recognise the importance of proactively disrupting perpetrators of child sexual exploitation and those posing a risk to children, rather than simply responding to allegations. However, the individual children's cases reviewed by the Inquiry often demonstrated that these tactics had not secured adequate protection for the children.

5. Generally, the use of SROs and SHPOs to disrupt child sexual exploitation appears to be low. This reflects the evidence the Inquiry heard in the second phase of its Children Outside the United Kingdom investigation.⁶¹⁴

6. CAWNs were the most commonly used disruption mechanism in relation to child sexual exploitation but there is a risk that they will be used as an easier alternative to investigation and prosecution. Additionally, they are by nature limited to child abduction and therefore will not effectively address sexual exploitation taking place by other means, such as online exploitation.

7. Disruption tactics were sometimes used but were not well recorded. The 2020 inspection report on Durham Constabulary by HMICFRS noted that there was good use of CAWNs to protect children from perpetrators,⁶¹⁵ although they were not visible within Durham Constabulary's police systems, making it difficult to search across systems to see whether they had been used.⁶¹⁶ In St Helens, Merseyside Police accepted that the information on the extent to which Merseyside Police had used each of the disruption tactics from the toolkit

⁶⁰⁹ INQ004929_030; section 49 Children Act 1989

⁶¹⁰ HOM003365_011

⁶¹¹ HOM003365_049

⁶¹² Christian Papaleontiou 1 October 2020 38/7-24; HOM003365

⁶¹³ Christian Papaleontiou 1 October 2020 44/1-45/15

⁶¹⁴ *Children Outside the United Kingdom: Investigation Report*, January 2020, B1-B3, pp18-24

⁶¹⁵ INQ005331_013

⁶¹⁶ David Orford 23 September 2020 129/22-130/16; INQ005331_025

“was not easily available”.⁶¹⁷ Warwickshire Police also accepted that not all the disruption tactics used are formally recorded in a format that can identify which tactics have been used and when. A review is being completed on how disruption tactics can be better recorded so that the information is readily available and can help develop the response to child sexual exploitation.⁶¹⁸

8. It is important that the use and effectiveness of disruption techniques can be audited easily. The data gathered should also be used to inform problem profiles that are created. In many of the areas considered by the Inquiry there was a lack of evaluation of the disruption strategy, perhaps because of the inability to access and analyse data on the techniques.

9. The ability of Durham Constabulary and other police forces to disrupt child sexual exploitation may have been adversely affected by the deficiencies in their problem profiling work. Durham Constabulary has a sexual behaviour analysis team which identifies individuals posing a risk to children and then produces a problem or target profile to disrupt that risk.⁶¹⁹ It also has a multi-agency disruption and intervention panel, used to disrupt organised crime groups suspected to be involved in child sexual exploitation and modern-day slavery.⁶²⁰ However, it does not have organised crime groups mapped for sexual offending. This illustrates the difficulties caused by using the definition of organised crime groups in this context, rather than considering networks more widely. The 2020 HMICFRS inspection report on Durham Constabulary found limited evidence of disruption activity, hotspot locations patrolling or taskings in relation to known child sexual exploitation perpetrators.⁶²¹

10. There was some evidence of Durham Constabulary issuing CAWNs to disrupt child sexual exploitation in relation to the case study children. CS-A29 was sexually exploited between the ages of 13 and 15. Two adult males (aged 19) were issued with CAWNs when the child went missing and was found to have spent the night with them.⁶²²

11. However, there are concerns about the disruption efforts in some of the other Durham cases.

12. CS-A114 had a pregnancy terminated when she was 13. She later disclosed to a police community support officer that she was 12 at the time she became pregnant and also disclosed the name of a 17-year-old male who was responsible for the pregnancy. The offence was wrongly recorded as “*sexual intercourse with a female aged 13*” and the police closed the case as ‘not resolved’ due to evidential difficulties.⁶²³ The offence was not treated with the gravity it merited. It should have been investigated as an offence of rape against a child under 13 years. Some time later, the police made an arrest of another male for abduction in respect of CS-A114. The suspect had previously been issued with a CAWN and he was remanded in custody for a short time.⁶²⁴

13. CS-A50 was seen getting into cars with older men when aged 13. She also had social media contact with strangers and had been seen by her father climbing out of the window of someone else’s house whilst missing from home. Although her father was able to identify the

⁶¹⁷ MSP000218_014 paras 91–92; MSP000223_008 para 29

⁶¹⁸ WSP000206_009-010 paras 37–38; WSP000176_015 para 52

⁶¹⁹ DHP000440_018-019 para 61; DHP000456_026-027 paras 77–80

⁶²⁰ DHP000440_018 para 60; DHP000456_026 paras 75–76

⁶²¹ INQ005331_025

⁶²² CS-A29 29 October 2020 10/6-10

⁶²³ CS-A114 29 October 2020 14/4-20; DUC000801_004; DUC000802_001, 007, 009

⁶²⁴ CS-A114 29 October 2020 15/16-16/4; DHP000545

address of the house and this was recorded in a child sexual exploitation assessment, there was no police investigation of whose cars she was getting into or who owned the house that she was seen leaving.⁶²⁵ Later the same year, a strategy meeting heard that there were concerns that this child was being groomed by a male who lived near her. Responsibility to investigate this was left with children's social care.⁶²⁶ Durham Constabulary should have taken action to investigate these matters.

14. In Swansea, examples of successful disruption by South Wales Police included placing a child in police protection, disrupting a specific address on the premise of antisocial behaviour and encouraging inspections of a takeaway about which concerns were raised.⁶²⁷ The City and County of Swansea Council has also requested a number of CAWNS, used passport markers, engaged with the National Referral Mechanism⁶²⁸ and communicated with housing services where there are properties of concern.

15. There were also examples of proactive disruption activity in relation to CS-A56. This included encouraging her to submit a Clare's Law application⁶²⁹ and the use of CAWNS. The police also worked with housing authorities to restrict access to the premises which CS-A56 was using and collaborated with the regional organised crime unit in relation to county lines activity.⁶³⁰

16. However, there was also evidence of missed opportunities for disruption in particular cases in Swansea. An internal review conducted by South Wales Police in March 2020 identified a series of missed disruption opportunities in relation to alleged perpetrators. One was the subject of similar allegations in the past (regarding sexual exploitation of young people doing work experience with him) but was never spoken to formally, with the case being closed with no rationale given. No child sexual exploitation 'flag' was placed on his record; no referral was made for him to be discussed as a 'Potentially Dangerous Person'; and no application for an SRO was made even though "*the frequency and similarities of the allegations would have made him a likely candidate*" for such an order.⁶³¹ Other similar issues were identified in relation to other alleged perpetrators outside of Swansea but within the force area.⁶³² In light of his experience in collating evidence for the Inquiry, Detective Chief Superintendent Daniel Richards confirmed that South Wales Police would carry out a similar review of all individuals identified as actual or potential perpetrators of child sexual exploitation, to assess the management of the risk they pose and how that is being managed, on an annual basis.⁶³³

17. Warwickshire Police issued 15 CAWNS in 2018/19 and has used disruption tactics on licensed premises, including issuing hotel notices against five different hotels in the last two years.⁶³⁴

⁶²⁵ DHP000558_009-011

⁶²⁶ DHP000579_009 paras 29–31

⁶²⁷ SWP000151_017-019 paras 1.48–1.55

⁶²⁸ INQ006444

⁶²⁹ This is an application for a police force to disclose information relating to an individual's past offending to a potential victim of abuse, also known as the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme.

⁶³⁰ Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 162/1-163/6. 'County lines' is defined in Part C.

⁶³¹ Both of these would have meant that he was managed by MOSOVO, the managing sexual offenders and violent offenders unit: SWP000162; SWP000162_009 row 6

⁶³² SWP000162_009-010 rows 7 and 10

⁶³³ SWP000155_003-004 paras 7–8

⁶³⁴ WSP000176_014-019 paras 51 and 64; WSP000206_010 para 37

18. However, it accepted that it had been too slow in using CAWNs in 2017 in relation to the sexual exploitation of CS-A1. The child's mother (CS-A2) was also given conflicting information by police about when a CAWN was considered to have been breached. The police also accepted missed opportunities to use other options such as recovery orders when CS-A1 was aged 14 and particularly spending time with one older male. CS-A2 described the disruption tactics used as causing just a "*small dent*" in her daughter's abuse.⁶³⁵ This child was frequently missing whilst at high risk of child sexual exploitation.

19. Warwickshire Police conducted an investigation into males who were suspected of having sexually exploited CS-A300. It reported that delays in the examination of the suspects' phones were likely to slow down the investigation. The child's carer reported incidents that suggested the child was being stalked and that the child was very embarrassed about being asked the details of sexual assaults by a female police officer. It is unclear what action, if any, the police took in relation to the stalking allegations.⁶³⁶

20. In St Helens, the 2018 inspection of Merseyside Police by HMICFRS identified "*the limited use*" of CAWNs as a tactic for disruption and prevention.⁶³⁷ Improvement has been slow since then. An internal review showed that from 253 episodes of children going missing between October and December 2019, only two CAWNs had been issued. Merseyside Police accepted that there were "*a very limited number of CAWNs issued*" and that there had been "*missed opportunities*" in the use of CAWNs as a disruption mechanism.⁶³⁸ Merseyside Police appears to have made relatively little use of civil orders. In the two-year period ending September 2019, it applied for only three SROs and one SHPO.⁶³⁹

21. Although missing coordinators should regularly look for opportunities to issue a CAWN if a child is found with an adult, an internal review in St Helens has revealed that Merseyside Police officers "*were not probing children enough on where they had been and with whom*" when found after an episode of going missing.⁶⁴⁰

22. CS-A212 and CS-A71 were sexually exploited outside the St Helens area, across police force boundaries. Merseyside Police did share information to assist another force to disrupt perpetrators but that other force issued CAWNs to the abusers of CS-A212 rather than taking substantive action and the case being taken to the Crown Prosecution Service.⁶⁴¹

23. There were numerous failures to investigate the possible sexual exploitation of CS-A26 in St Helens, including when aged 11 she was found drunk in a park with older males, when an older male took her to a holiday park for several nights and when the police found CS-A26 (aged 13) in bed with an older male and another male hiding under the bed. The following year, it was discussed in a multi-agency meeting that CS-A26 was having sex with a named 17-year-old. Despite the known child sexual exploitation risk, the male was not interviewed until at least seven months later and ultimately no further action was taken because he denied the offence. Merseyside Police acknowledged that the police and partnership response should have been more considered and rigorous in relation to the males that this child was found with.⁶⁴²

⁶³⁵ CS-A2 25 September 2020 57/1-59/16

⁶³⁶ CS-A300 2 October 2020 91/2-92/11

⁶³⁷ MSP000296_027

⁶³⁸ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 140/9-141/21; MSP000322_002 para 9; MSP000218_012 para 82

⁶³⁹ MSP000528_002 para 10

⁶⁴⁰ MSP000322_001-002 paras 5-7

⁶⁴¹ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 154/11-155/20

⁶⁴² Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 149/20-151/25; STH000463; STH000448; STH000451_001-007

24. The Children’s Society (which provides a commissioned service to support missing and looked after children and children with disabilities in Tower Hamlets) was critical of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets’ practice with respect to disruption. Its view was that:

- disruption strategies were often not shared with the Children’s Society;
- little was being done on disruption apart from within the hotel industry;
- the use of intelligence-reporting across services was low, which prevented early disruption measures being utilised; and
- there was a training need within the local authority to ensure more proactivity around disruption and intelligence at the early stage of a case.⁶⁴³

25. In recent years the Metropolitan Police Service has used CAWNs against young victims to stop them associating with one another.⁶⁴⁴ Disruption tactics should be primarily aimed at perpetrators and locations where it is occurring. Restrictive measures such as CAWNs may be appropriate to use against younger perpetrators but they should not be used against young and vulnerable victims of sexual exploitation.

26. CS-A81 was a Tower Hamlets child. Two males were arrested and issued with CAWNs. The Metropolitan Police Service was planning the use of CAWNs against the child when she was 13 years old, with threats of arrest to stop her from associating with her peer group.⁶⁴⁵ This was challenged by children’s social care, which was concerned that a CAWN would criminalise CS-A81.⁶⁴⁶

27. CS-A21 had been sexually exploited at the age of 15, when she disclosed that she was attending parties with adult males where she was supplied with alcohol and drugs and expected to take part in sexual acts. She described these as “*uck parties*”. The Metropolitan Police Service response was weak. The child was not spoken to by officers for five weeks after the case was opened. The police also told a multi-agency meeting that the parties the child was attending where there were older men, alcohol and drugs were not “*uck parties*” and by implication no threat to her when the evidence suggested otherwise. Commander Williams could not explain the rationale for that decision.⁶⁴⁷

28. CS-A90 was a frequent missing child in Tower Hamlets and was attending parties in hotels when he was only 13 years old. At the age of 14 there were concerns about exploitation but Metropolitan Police Service officers decided that this was not a child sexual exploitation case, based solely on a telephone call with children’s social care. The police did not speak to the child or any of his family about the concerns; no trigger plan for the episodes of the child going missing was developed; a mapping exercise of the child’s friendship group was agreed but did not take place; and there was no direct disruption of the hotel. A case audit later found that the Metropolitan Police Service should have fully considered the potential for child sexual exploitation.⁶⁴⁸

29. Disruption practice in Bristol was more progressive. In 2016, a Serious Case Review into Operation Brooke identified that focus had been primarily placed on trying to stop victims from having involvement with perpetrators, and that there had been a lack of focus on

⁶⁴³ [INQ005080_007-008_013](#) paras 42–45 and 77.3

⁶⁴⁴ [Sue Williams 29 September 2020 145/20-146/19](#)

⁶⁴⁵ [LBT004011_010](#)

⁶⁴⁶ [LBT004011_011](#)

⁶⁴⁷ [CS-A21 29 September 2020 4/11-5/8, 157/3-158/8](#)

⁶⁴⁸ [CS-A90 29 September 2020 9/9-10/25, 163/22-165/6](#)

the prevention of abuse and the disruption and prosecution of perpetrators.⁶⁴⁹ As a result, over the following two years, Avon and Somerset Police developed a specific team called Operation Topaz to focus on disruption of perpetrators. Avon and Somerset Police has used a range of direct disruption tactics such as CAWNs, child sexual exploitation warning letters, SROs and SHPOs, as well as arresting suspects for other offences such as theft, robbery or drug-related offences. It has used indirect disruption tactics less frequently but provided two recent examples, including the targeting of a person hiring out vehicles to child sexual exploitation suspects. The force's location-specific disruption activities have included working with housing officers to evict suspects from an illegal sub-tenancy and a two-week operation at a park in Bristol.⁶⁵⁰

30. Disruption activities and prosecutions undertaken by Operation Topaz are often done without disclosures from, or support of, child victims.⁶⁵¹ This meets one of the key difficulties in responding to child sexual exploitation which we have seen on a national level, namely the considerable barriers to disclosure of exploitation by children.

31. Avon and Somerset Police's 2019 problem profile concluded that:

"Positive use of risk assessments to proactively identify suspects for disruption has enabled Topaz to considerably increase engagement with young people and improved overall detection rates (although this will not always be directly for CSE [child sexual exploitation] offences)".⁶⁵²

32. A deep dive audit in February 2020 found that disruption opportunities were taken in a timely manner, which enabled safeguarding of children and the prevention of future offences.⁶⁵³ In 2019, disruption in Bristol led to 13 arrests, with 5 suspects charged with a total of 14 offences and 10 convictions for offences connected to child sexual exploitation.⁶⁵⁴ In June 2020, Operation Topaz had a cohort of 160 suspects who had been assessed and were being managed through a range of disruption tactics.⁶⁵⁵

33. In the case of CS-A59 in Bristol, there was disruption activity in response to evidence of the child being targeted by older males via social media apps and concerns that the supported accommodation where it was proposed he should be placed was being targeted by unsafe adults.⁶⁵⁶ A CAWN was issued but did not prevent the exploitation continuing. This was a complex case and a police engagement officer worked alongside Barnardo's and children's social care while disruption officers took action against the perpetrators. One of the main perpetrators of the sexual exploitation of CS-A59 was arrested and subsequently convicted for knowingly inducing a child to run away or stay away from care.⁶⁵⁷ This is a good example of the use of the power to prosecute offences of abducting children from care under section 49 of the Children Act 1989. Other police forces could be more proactive in taking such action.

⁶⁴⁹ Operation Brooke was an investigation into organised child sexual exploitation in Bristol between 2012 and 2014, leading to the conviction of 15 men, BSC000186_001 para 2

⁶⁵⁰ ASP000321_025-027 paras 107-116

⁶⁵¹ William White 30 September 2020 127/4-128/22; ASP000321_001-009_022 paras 5-36 and 95; ASP000199; ASP000211; ASP000503_023; ASP000479_002; CPS004977_004 paras 16-17

⁶⁵² ASP000438_024

⁶⁵³ ASP000505_008

⁶⁵⁴ ASP000321_028-029 paras 121-123

⁶⁵⁵ ASP000487

⁶⁵⁶ William White 30 September 2020 146/3-10; ASP000449

⁶⁵⁷ William White 30 September 2020 146/22-147/2

I.3: Investigation and prosecution of offenders

34. Responsibility for gathering evidence to prosecute offences involving the sexual exploitation of children rests primarily with the police. Bringing offenders to justice will lead to sanctions (such as imprisonment) and other restrictions on their activities, such as orders restricting contacts and movement. It can also enable rehabilitation work to be carried out. Rehabilitation and restriction on the actions of offenders can prevent further children from becoming victims of sexual exploitation.

35. HMICFRS has identified that, while understanding of child sexual exploitation has improved among police officers, further opportunities exist to improve the quality and consistency of police responses.⁶⁵⁸ In particular, while police officers often respond appropriately to children at clear risk of harm, they may not be consistent in looking beyond that immediate need to the wider circumstances of a child's life. They may also not consider other children to whom an identified perpetrator has had access.⁶⁵⁹

36. Once evidence is gathered by the police, cases may be presented to the Crown Prosecution Service, which will decide whether there is sufficient evidence to prosecute and whether it is in the public interest to do so. It may also provide early investigative advice to police investigators dealing with complex matters such as child sexual exploitation. Mr Gregor McGill, Director of Legal Services at the Crown Prosecution Service, stressed the importance of prosecutors working closely with police to provide early investigative advice on particular cases.⁶⁶⁰

37. However, we saw limited evidence of early investigative advice being used by police forces in the six case study areas. None of the police witnesses (other than Avon and Somerset Police)⁶⁶¹ were able to articulate a case where it had been used in relation to child sexual exploitation. The Unit Head for the Crown Prosecution Service West Midlands Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) Unit confirmed that there are very few cases of child sexual exploitation referred to the Crown Prosecution Service in Warwickshire for early investigative advice and that when such cases are referred there appears to have been a lack of understanding of the purpose of early investigative advice and the process by which to access it.⁶⁶² In Bristol, Senior District Crown Prosecutor Rachael Scott provided early investigative advice in the Operation Brooke case in 2016, persuading the police to treat a 16-year-old girl as a victim rather than a facilitator of offending against younger girls and advising the need to resource the investigation properly.⁶⁶³ More recently, she was involved in Operation Bulldog, in which early investigative advice was provided by a specialist prosecutor and ongoing advice has been provided.⁶⁶⁴

38. Victims and survivors often have a mistrust of police and other authorities. This mistrust can arise for a number of reasons, including previous negative experiences with the police or children's social care, concern about the impact on a victim's immigration status and a feeling, particularly among ethnic minority groups, that they have been targeted and

⁶⁵⁸ For example, the 2020 HMICFRS inspection report on Durham Constabulary found that officers displayed an appropriate awareness and understanding of child sexual exploitation, [INQ005331_013](#)

⁶⁵⁹ [Katherine Riley 1 October 2020 147/7-18; HIC000032_006](#)

⁶⁶⁰ [Gregor McGill 2 October 2020 14/1-5; 53/24-54/11](#)

⁶⁶¹ [ASP000434_021](#) paras 88–89

⁶⁶² [CPS004976_009](#) para 7(a)

⁶⁶³ [CPS004977_002](#) para 4

⁶⁶⁴ [CPS004977_008-009](#) paras 48–52

discriminated against by public authorities.⁶⁶⁵ In response, the Home Office is seeking to promote a victim-centred response through initiatives such as the National Vulnerability Action Plan (NVAP) and the 'Child House' (or 'Barnahus') model which encourage a joint approach between police and social workers.⁶⁶⁶ A child-centred approach based on individual needs and identity is also embedded into the approach taken in Wales.⁶⁶⁷

39. Research conducted by Dr Ella Cockbain (Associate Professor in the Department of Security and Crime Science at University College London) found that the vulnerabilities of victims were widely seen as a major challenge for enforcement, as although police officers did not suggest that they did not believe victims, they thought that victims were not or would not be credible in the eyes of the Crown Prosecution Service and jurors.⁶⁶⁸

40. As we explained in Part B, dissatisfaction with the police response to reports of exploitation featured in almost all of the complainant accounts and in some of the case study evidence. This is part of a worrying wider pattern. Dr Helen Beckett of the University of Bedfordshire told us that criminal justice responses were:

"perhaps the most frequently identified source of dissatisfaction with institutional responses to CSE, both by children and young people themselves and those who care for/work with them".⁶⁶⁹

41. In the case study areas, there were several issues of concern regarding the quality of investigations. For example, a lack of timely victim contact was identified in a supervisory review of a Bristol case (CS-A32) where an investigation ran for several months without an interview in accordance with the Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) guidance being arranged for the victim.⁶⁷⁰

42. There were several examples of cases of sexual exploitation which did not lead to prosecution. Evidence considered by the Inquiry indicates that this is for a range of reasons. For example:

- The primary suspect denied the offence; CS-A29 did not disclose the details of one male and also did not want to be medically examined. In a sexting case, the matter was dealt with by the school by way of words of advice.⁶⁷¹
- Although CS-A114 made disclosures to the police about a rape, the police did not appear to appreciate that she was under 13 at the time and so there was no prosecution for rape against a child under 13 years.⁶⁷²
- There was no prosecution for certain offences against CS-A50 because she was not supportive of the prosecution⁶⁷³ (albeit at least one individual was convicted of breach of a Sexual Harm Prevention Order and sexual activity with a child following sexual exploitation of CS-A50).⁶⁷⁴ This was the most common reason why sexual offences against children did not lead to a prosecution in Durham between 2016 and 2019.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁶⁵ Rosie Lewis 2 October 140/16-25; Zlakha Ahmed 2 October 130/8-13

⁶⁶⁶ Christian Papaleontiou 1 October 2020 39/19-40/24; HOM003378_041

⁶⁶⁷ Albert Heaney 1 October 2020 37/6-20

⁶⁶⁸ INQ006279_008-009 paras 18-19

⁶⁶⁹ INQ005150_010

⁶⁷⁰ HOM003372

⁶⁷¹ DHP000454_012-013 para 45; DHP000454_014 para 49; DHP000454_014-015 para 51

⁶⁷² DUC000802_007; DHP000579_005 para 15

⁶⁷³ DHP000454_011-020; DUC000801_004; DUC000802_001, 007, 009; DHP000563

⁶⁷⁴ CS-A50 29 October 2020 4/23-5/4

⁶⁷⁵ DHP000379_011

- In Swansea, there was a police investigation into serious sexual assault against CS-A25 which led to the arrest of two males but no further action was taken due to evidential difficulties.⁶⁷⁶
- In Tower Hamlets, in the case of CS-A22, the child made disclosures of assault and rape but these allegations did not lead to prosecution.⁶⁷⁷ Although a number of named potential perpetrators were added to a crime report and suspects database, the report was closed. Some information was passed to the local force but there is no evidence of any arrests.

43. An investigation by *The Times* in May 2021 noted that some councils and charities working with the Metropolitan Police Service expressed concern that the threshold for police to ‘accept’ investigations was too high.⁶⁷⁸

44. Child sexual exploitation has received a higher profile in recent years, which is to be welcomed. However, some of the processes in place to identify and address child sexual exploitation have created an institutional hesitancy to intervene and take the necessary action to protect children and catch perpetrators. If the nature of risk and harm is not recognised, the seriousness of cases is downgraded and leads to opportunities for investigation, disruption and prosecution being missed.

I.4: The future

45. Overall, HMICFRS has published child protection inspection reports on over 30 police forces. It observed in evidence to this investigation that “*without exception, police departments are operating at or beyond their intended capacity*”.⁶⁷⁹ This inevitably impacts on the ability of all police forces to use disruption tactics to their maximum potential.

46. The government’s January 2021 *Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy* included several specific measures aimed at disruption, including enhancing the *Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit*; continuing and building on the Children’s Society’s Prevention Programme; and continuing to fund a number of major investigations into group-based child sexual exploitation through the Police Special Grant.⁶⁸⁰

47. In relation to the disruption of online sexual exploitation of children, the toolkit currently states that SROs and SHPOs can be used to limit or manage internet use or prohibit contact with children.⁶⁸¹ A number of the case study children, whose experiences are set out in Part D, were contacted by their abusers via online dating apps such as, but not limited to, Grindr. In light of this, the next version of the toolkit should include more information about how such activity could be disrupted.

48. The perpetrators of child sexual exploitation commit serious crimes and more effort must be made to prosecute them effectively. The law should recognise the particular nature of these offences and apply an aggravating factor in the sentencing guidelines for those found guilty of offences relating to children under Part 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

⁶⁷⁶ Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 158/18-159/7

⁶⁷⁷ CS-A22 29 September 2020 3/15-4/9; MPS004353_001-004

⁶⁷⁸ ‘Police “covered up” failings on child sex cases’, *The Times* 27 May 2021, INQ006495

⁶⁷⁹ HIC000032_013 para 52

⁶⁸⁰ *Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy*, HM Government, 2021, INQ006448_041-042

⁶⁸¹ HOM003365_018

Part J

Partnership working

Partnership working

J.1: Introduction

1. The police, children's social care, health services, education, specialist voluntary organisations and private providers all have a role in relation to preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation.⁶⁸²
2. Government guidance on child sexual exploitation in 2017 identified a number of areas for improvement in inter-agency or partnership working, including information and intelligence-sharing, common risk assessment and clarity about professional roles and thresholds for services.⁶⁸³
3. Similar issues arose during this investigation. While acknowledging that there are resource pressures across all agencies, partners should consider whether there is more they can do working together to help children at risk of, or who have experienced, sexual abuse.

J.2: Multi-agency child sexual exploitation structures

4. The 2016 thematic joint targeted area inspections of child sexual exploitation (JTAs) found that collective commitment at a strategic level did not always translate into effective practice.⁶⁸⁴ The report stated that *"tackling child sexual exploitation can be done, but only if all partners take responsibility for their role as a discrete agency, work collaboratively with each other and have a shared understanding"*.⁶⁸⁵ This is no different from any other aspect of child protection.
5. The 2019 thematic inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) found that partnership working on child protection was *"generally effective"* but can be undermined by ineffective processes that hinder decision-making and protective planning.⁶⁸⁶
6. Multi-agency meetings have widened beyond child sexual exploitation to deal with all forms of child exploitation. The ability and willingness of local partnerships to track and report on child sexual exploitation cases specifically may have reduced as a result of this wider approach. It is important that agencies do not dilute the focus on child sexual exploitation as they tackle other forms of child exploitation.
7. There was evidence of good partnership working on child sexual exploitation in Durham, dating back to 2015 when the police-led ERASE (Educate and Raise Awareness of Sexual Exploitation) team was formed.⁶⁸⁷ It received positive comment in recent inspections by

⁶⁸² See, for example, *Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation: Multi-agency working*, Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, March 2017, [INQ005144](#)

⁶⁸³ *Child sexual exploitation: Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation*, Department for Education, February 2017, [HOM003340_017](#)

⁶⁸⁴ These inspections are carried out by Ofsted, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), the Care Quality Commission and HM Inspectorate of Probation, [OFS012588_005](#) third bullet point.

⁶⁸⁵ [OFS012588_005](#)

⁶⁸⁶ [INQ005166_019](#)

⁶⁸⁷ [John Pearce 23 September 2020 44/17-24](#)

Ofsted and HMICFRS.⁶⁸⁸ Flagging of concerns on the systems of all relevant agencies is overseen by ERASE and implemented consistently, although it is not clear whether from 2020 this applies to only high-risk child exploitation cases.

8. A 2018 Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) inspection found that partnership working between the City and County of Swansea Council (Swansea Council) and its external agencies was generally effective but obtained evidence that working relationships between children's social care and education could be strengthened.⁶⁸⁹ The Council's practice lead on child exploitation speaks on a daily basis with the supervisor of the police's exploitation team and they are said to have an extremely close working relationship.⁶⁹⁰ South Wales Police considered that its partnership working systems are robust but that difficulties can arise where agencies have different approaches. For example, the police had "*overwhelming concerns*" that a 15-year-old girl was at risk of, or had experienced, sexual exploitation but Swansea Council would not initiate care proceedings. The use of police protection resulted in Swansea Council reviewing and finding suitable alternative accommodation.⁶⁹¹

9. Warwickshire County Council has engaged the Tackling Child Exploitation support programme to help improve its service. This has identified a need to engage a wider group of partners and develop integrated systems.⁶⁹² External input can help to identify and reflect upon what improvements can be made to tackling child exploitation.

10. St Helens Council reported that there are close working relationships between the local authority, its agency colleagues, police and health partners.⁶⁹³ Merseyside Police consider that partnership working in St Helens is "*still developing*" – it remains an ambition to have a co-located team at operational level.⁶⁹⁴ A review of the children's cases from St Helens suggested partnership work was variable and, in some cases, ineffective. For example, CS-A213 was a male victim of sexual exploitation and online grooming through dating apps. There was no evidence of effective partnership working at the stage of referral in 2019.⁶⁹⁵ In respect of both CS-A71 and CS-A212, there were concerns about how well the police forces and children's social care departments worked together when sexually exploited children were moved across police force and local authority boundaries. There was evidence of good partnership working between an education provider, Catch22 and health services when CS-A71 engaged particularly successfully with the education provider, the Cool Project.

11. In Tower Hamlets, the Children's Society has observed that changes to partnership meeting structures over a two-year period had led to some disjointed working. However, it welcomed the Multi-Agency Risk Panel, which has clear terms of reference and an information-sharing agreement.⁶⁹⁶ The London Borough of Tower Hamlets acknowledged that, in the past, there had been high turnover of staff which had disrupted professional relationships but believed there are effective structures in place.⁶⁹⁷ The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) stated that the partnership now works well.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁸⁸ OFS012544_010 para 46; INQ005331_009 para 2

⁶⁸⁹ INQ004834_005

⁶⁹⁰ Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 81/11-17; Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 128/12-15

⁶⁹¹ SWP000151_061-062 paras 7.47-7.48

⁶⁹² WSP000232_005-006 paras 24-26; WSP000226

⁶⁹³ Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 93/21-25

⁶⁹⁴ INQ004294_037 para 4.14

⁶⁹⁵ Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 110/4-111/9

⁶⁹⁶ INQ005080_012 para 69

⁶⁹⁷ LBT004318_025 para 75

⁶⁹⁸ NSP000168_012 para 47

12. There was evidence of good partnership working in Bristol. There is considerable partnership work with Barnardo's BASE service, which supports child victims of sexual exploitation in the area.⁶⁹⁹ BASE, children's social care, sexual health services and Operation Topaz also worked together to protect CS-A59, with regular multi-agency risk management meetings and strategy meetings evident.⁷⁰⁰ There were also some areas where improvement is needed in Bristol. For example, one particular concern is the sharing of information from return home interviews to identify and address the reasons for a child going missing.⁷⁰¹

J.3: Multi-agency information and intelligence-sharing

13. The government recognises that information-sharing is "*absolutely key*" to partnership working but that there is some way to go in terms of gathering and linking child sexual exploitation data.⁷⁰²

14. The 2019 HMICFRS thematic inspection identified that, as a result of stretched resources, police forces commonly prioritised sharing large volumes of information with partner agencies at the expense of considering what the information told them about risks to children. This meant action was not being taken by the police to mitigate risks.⁷⁰³ A two-way process of information-sharing is required, so that police systems and child sexual exploitation profiles continuously draw in information and intelligence from all agencies and feed information back into partnerships.⁷⁰⁴ HMICFRS found that early identification and response to vulnerability is advanced and well coordinated in Wales but underdeveloped in England, where far more work is needed.⁷⁰⁵

15. The Care Quality Commission (CQC) has observed that information-sharing about children at risk of exploitation is inconsistent between local areas in England.⁷⁰⁶ It considers it important for each area to have a dedicated professional with access to all information so that children can be tracked through the entire system.⁷⁰⁷ This was also a finding of the 2016 JTAI themed inspection.⁷⁰⁸ Whilst there may be merit in this proposal, any such arrangement would have to operate within an information-sharing protocol that protected sensitive and confidential information.

16. Barnardo's says that it receives very little information from the police and others on offenders and its networks⁷⁰⁹ but there is evidence to suggest that it receives information from Operation Topaz in Bristol and from South Wales Police's Child Sexual Exploitation Team in Swansea. Without this intelligence, providers are unable to work effectively with other agencies to make sure that offenders' behaviours are disrupted. Problems can also be caused by differences in local interpretation of the General Data Protection Regulation.⁷¹⁰

⁶⁹⁹ BRD000278

⁷⁰⁰ ASP000446_001-002; ASP000448; ASP000449; ASP000450

⁷⁰¹ ASP000507_009-011

⁷⁰² Sophie Langdale 1 October 2020 32/2-7, 100/13-1; Albert Heaney 1 October 2020 46/6-9

⁷⁰³ INQ005166_019

⁷⁰⁴ Katherine Riley 1 October 2020 145/10-146/4

⁷⁰⁵ INQ005166_038-039

⁷⁰⁶ CQC000371_015 para 55

⁷⁰⁷ Rosie Benneyworth 1 October 2020 150/16-21; CQC000371_015 para 55

⁷⁰⁸ OFS012588_005 fourth bullet point

⁷⁰⁹ Amanda Naylor 1 October 2020 158/3-21; BRD000275_003 para 13

⁷¹⁰ Amanda Naylor 30 September 2020 162/19-166/17; BRD000275_003 para 13

17. There was evidence of effective information-sharing in Bristol – between police engagement officers, BASE, children’s social care, and Avon and Somerset Police’s Operation Topaz team – for example, working to protect CS-A59 and disrupt his abusers.⁷¹¹ In Durham, detailed information about children was shared between all relevant agencies at ERASE meetings and there was a clear delegation of responsibility to share information with professionals who were not at the meeting, such as GPs, school nurses and sexual health services. This was evident when ERASE discussed CS-A50.⁷¹² However, ERASE minutes provided for CS-A114 from August 2019 onwards lacked this detailed approach. With regards to the police, the minutes merely recorded the fact that the police had shared information, without giving any indication of the content, and systems for ensuring information is shared with all relevant professionals were no longer in place.⁷¹³

18. Improving the Child Protection – Information Sharing (CP-IS) system, which provides live linking of local authority and health systems, is one of the Department for Education’s priorities, along with information-sharing more generally.⁷¹⁴ It will be important to monitor whether use of the CP-IS results in improvements to outcomes for children who have been or are at risk of being sexually exploited.

J.4: Cross-border working

19. Government guidance on child sexual exploitation stresses that cases of child sexual exploitation frequently cross local authority, police force and sometimes national boundaries. Agencies and organisations should therefore be prepared to work together across them.⁷¹⁵

20. Cross-boundary data and intelligence-sharing between statutory safeguarding partners has been found to be particularly problematic when children have been trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation across geographical boundaries.⁷¹⁶

21. The Inquiry’s review of individual cases included some children who were trafficked or travelled across boundaries, or were in care placements at a distance from their home area. Much cross-boundary working did not appear to be effective. In one case, covert policing techniques were successfully used to disrupt sexual exploitation but it appears that the primary focus of the operation was the county lines criminality rather than the sexual exploitation of vulnerable children.⁷¹⁷

J.5: Partnership with schools and health services

22. In Durham, a 2017 CQC report found strengths in joint working by sexual health services, school nursing and substance misuse services, all of which were commissioned by Durham County Council. It also identified concerns about urgent care centres, where young people being harmed by sexual exploitation may not be identified.⁷¹⁸ Data for March to September 2019 showed that health and education did not share many information reports about child exploitation, accounting for just 5 percent of the 649 reports submitted

⁷¹¹ William White 30 September 2020 146/22-147/2

⁷¹² DUC000794_007-008

⁷¹³ DHP000539_003; DHP000540_002; DHP000541_002; DHP000542_002

⁷¹⁴ Sophie Langdale 1 October 2020 100/19-101/18, 119/25-120/3; DFE003186_014

⁷¹⁵ *Child sexual exploitation: Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation*, Department for Education, February 2017, HOM003340_017

⁷¹⁶ BRD000275_004 para 14

⁷¹⁷ CS-A22 29 September 2020 1/21-4/9

⁷¹⁸ CQC000371_007

to ERASE.⁷¹⁹ While there was some variability, there was positive involvement of schools, health services and other agencies in the evidence about the Durham case study children. For example, the importance of suitable education for CS-A29 was recognised. After some delay, a personal education plan was put in place. A specialist education day placement was arranged and she made good progress educationally and socially. Her school attendance improved and episodes of going missing reduced.⁷²⁰

23. In Swansea, Evolve (youth services), Choices (the youth drugs service), the child's school and the school nurse were all appropriately involved in multi-agency work about CS-A24. The school took account of her disability and offered practical solutions to prevent her going missing from school.⁷²¹

24. The evidence from several of the case study areas showing a lack of access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) was a significant concern. This is an issue to which the Inquiry will return in its final report. We are informed that CAMHS is taking steps to improve capacity and flexibility.

25. The most recent Ofsted inspection (May 2017) of Warwickshire noted delays in accessing CAMHS.⁷²²

26. Ms Vikki McKenna, Senior Service Coordinator at Catch22 in St Helens, raised concerns about delays for the CAMHS service.⁷²³ These concerns were echoed by the CQC, which in January 2018 noted that health services are fragmented and that children who are in care are not being fully supported to access services to meet their mental health needs.⁷²⁴

27. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets considered that good progress had been made on engagement with health and education partners.⁷²⁵ The Metropolitan Police Service recognised that further work needs to be done to improve links with health services.⁷²⁶

28. The Bristol local safeguarding partnership has identified a number of good practice initiatives relating to partnership working with health providers, including:

- sexual health clinics for sexual exploitation victims;
- a dedicated CAMHS nurse in the BASE project to ensure sexual exploitation victims receive quick and flexible access to mental health services; and
- a service for 18 to 25-year-olds who are victims of sexual exploitation or are recovering from child sexual exploitation.⁷²⁷

⁷¹⁹ DUC000815_007

⁷²⁰ DUC000613

⁷²¹ SCC000532; SCC000533; SCC000534

⁷²² OFS012549_031 para 106

⁷²³ Vikki McKenna 28 September 2020 28/4-19; BRD000275_008 para 28

⁷²⁴ INQ004294_034 paras 4.2 and 4.4

⁷²⁵ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 72/19-73/18

⁷²⁶ MPS004401_015 para 85

⁷²⁷ INQ005293_009-010 paras 44-49

J.6: Partnership with third sector organisations

29. There was some evidence of positive partnership working with third sector organisations. The introduction of Barnardo's child sexual exploitation advocates in all of South Wales Police's command units appears to have been very successful.⁷²⁸ Catch22, a specialist service which conducts return home interviews for young people reported missing to Merseyside Police in St Helens, described a "really good" multi-agency working agreement and noted that partnership working had improved.⁷²⁹

⁷²⁸ Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 133/16-134/22

⁷²⁹ Vikki McKenna 28 September 2020 26/7-10

Part K

Audit, review and performance improvement

Audit, review and performance improvement

K.1: Introduction

1. Public institutions have a responsibility to assure the quality of their response to child sexual exploitation, as part of accountability for delivering services to children in need of protection. They should actively and regularly evaluate their performance using a range of methods, including:

- seeking the views of children and families to find out their experience of services and identify what improvements are needed;
- case file audits (single and multi-agency); and
- service reviews.

2. Auditing processes are essential for driving improvement in child protection, for ensuring that policies and procedures are effective and, importantly, for ensuring that they are actually being implemented in practice.

3. In England and Wales, there are independent inspectorates for the police, children's social care and health services:

- Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspects police forces in England and Wales.
- In England, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspects local authority children's social care and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) carries out inspections of health services concerned with safeguarding and children in care.
- In Wales, Care Inspectorate Wales, Estyn and Health Inspectorate Wales inspect local authority children's social care, education and health services respectively.

K.2: Thematic inspections and reports

4. In 2015, Ofsted undertook a thematic inspection into the effectiveness of English local authorities' responses to child sexual exploitation. Its report, *The sexual exploitation of children: it couldn't happen here, could it?*, identified serious weaknesses in leadership, performance management, disruption, risk assessment, child protection and missing children.⁷³⁰

5. In England, the cross-government child sexual exploitation action plan included a commitment to a new system of multi-agency inspections. The first joint targeted area inspections (JTAs) carried out in 2016⁷³¹ focussed on the theme of child sexual exploitation

⁷³⁰ OFS012579_006-010

⁷³¹ Joint inspections carried out by Ofsted, HMICFRS, the CQC and HM Inspectorate of Probation.

and missing children.⁷³² The findings were set out in a 2016 thematic report, entitled ‘*Time to listen*’ – a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children.⁷³³ It stated that since 2014 many areas had improved support for children at risk of, or subject to, sexual exploitation. Engagement with young people was good where professionals were persistent and understood their specific needs and strengths, as well as the impact of abuse and trauma. This was, however, not evident in all cases. There were particular concerns that frontline health professionals did not all have the skills needed to identify child sexual exploitation and not all children had easy access to sexual health services. The timeliness of police responses was variable and, in most areas visited, required improvement.⁷³⁴ In most areas, responses to missing children required improvement.

6. An addendum to the *Time to listen* report was published in 2018, covering child criminal exploitation. It identified improvements in tackling child sexual exploitation and learning what could be taken from this.⁷³⁵ Subsequent JTAs have focussed on all forms of criminal exploitation, rather than specifically on child sexual exploitation. It is essential that joint inspections retain a clear focus on child sexual exploitation.

7. In 2014, HMICFRS began a national programme of child protection inspections. These have led to the publication of two thematic reports, the first in 2015 and the second in 2019.⁷³⁶ By 2019, there had been some improvements in understanding child sexual exploitation. However, HMICFRS said that all police forces were at or above their capacity to deal with child protection work, risk was not being assessed properly and many investigations were still below an acceptable standard.⁷³⁷

K.3: External inspections in the case study areas

8. There is a clear focus on child sexual exploitation in HMICFRS national child protection inspections. Reports are explicit about the numbers of child sexual exploitation and missing children cases that inspectors review in each area and provide details of how many cases were found to be good, requiring improvement or inadequate. A summary of the main findings in respect of the cases reviewed is also provided. The evidence base for findings on child sexual exploitation and missing children is therefore transparent. The Inquiry focussed on the most recent HMICFRS reports for the case study areas.⁷³⁸

9. Unlike HMICFRS, Ofsted does not report the number of child sexual exploitation or missing children cases it reviews. Its records, some of which are in paper notebooks, are not stored in a way that enables it to routinely provide this for its inspections of local authority children’s services (ILACS).⁷³⁹ Recent Ofsted reports from the case study areas refer only in broad terms to child exploitation and lack sufficient focus on the issue.⁷⁴⁰

⁷³² DFE003186_008 para 24; The inspections involved Central Bedfordshire, Croydon, Liverpool, Oxfordshire and South Tyneside.

⁷³³ HOM003364

⁷³⁴ ‘*Time to listen*’ – a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children, Ofsted, September 2016,

HOM003364_003-007

⁷³⁵ *Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: an addendum*, Ofsted, November 2018, HOM003360_001

⁷³⁶ INQ005730; INQ005166

⁷³⁷ *National Child Protection Inspections: 2019 thematic report*, HMICFRS, February 2020, INQ005166_009-012_013-015

⁷³⁸ Durham Constabulary, INQ005331; Merseyside Police, MSP000296; Metropolitan Police Service, INQ005333 and INQ005334

⁷³⁹ OFS012733_002

⁷⁴⁰ See, for example, the Durham report (September 2019, OFS012544) and the Tower Hamlets report (June 2019, LBT004243). There are brief mentions of child sexual exploitation in the Bristol report (September 2018, OFS012547). By contrast, the Warwickshire report (July 2017, OFS012549) has detailed findings on child sexual exploitation.

10. Findings and recommendations from external inspectorates can act as a catalyst for improvement, provided their input is accurate and evidence-based. However, to do so, the published reports must be sufficiently detailed. Positive inspection reports which do not contain a detailed evidence base hinder the ability of third parties to interrogate and compare their findings with those of other reports. There is a risk that, if the detail underpinning these reports cannot be adequately understood, they can give rise to false reassurance and lead to complacency.

11. One example of this can be found in Ofsted's inspection of Durham County Council's children's social care in September 2019. Inspectors reviewed 18 child sexual exploitation cases plus the case of one missing child where there was a specific mention of sexual exploitation.⁷⁴¹ The inspection rated the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection as requiring improvement. Areas for improvement included management oversight, the timeliness of assessments, the quality of children's plans and the response to children with disabilities. However, the report made a positive comment about the response to missing and exploited children, without indicating how the wider identified weaknesses impacted on them:

*"The strength of the local authority's and partners' response to missing children and children at risk of exploitation is helping to reduce risks, disrupt the activity of perpetrators and protect children. Children who go missing from home or care are routinely offered return home interviews. Information is well shared and well used. Actual and potential risks are carefully considered, regularly reviewed and closely monitored."*⁷⁴²

The evidence for this finding was not set out in the report nor was any detail provided about the quality of child sexual exploitation cases reviewed during the inspection.

12. A March 2020 HMICFRS inspection featured criticism of Durham Constabulary's response to missing children, which was described as "*inconsistent and inappropriate for some children*". HMICFRS recommended that the Constabulary "*immediately improves practice in cases of children who go missing from home*".⁷⁴³ Of nine cases involving missing and absent children which were reviewed, one was considered 'good', two as 'requires improvement' and six as 'inadequate'. HMICFRS identified limited activity to locate children overnight, children's cases wrongly assessed as 'low' or 'no apparent' risk, failure to refer cases to children's social care, lost opportunities to understand why children went missing and failures to transfer cases onto a computer system.⁷⁴⁴ The lack of detail provided in Ofsted's assessment of the Council and its partners' performance in respect of missing children makes it difficult to understand the interaction between this and the apparently poor performance of the police as observed by HMICFRS.

13. A further example can be found in the October 2019 review by Ofsted of 10 cases of child sexual exploitation in St Helens plus two other cases where sexual exploitation was specifically mentioned.⁷⁴⁵ This concluded that children's social care in St Helens was "*inadequate*" overall (and had declined in quality since 2014).⁷⁴⁶ The inspection found failings in areas such as the quality of assessments and plans, management oversight and support

⁷⁴¹ OFS012733_003 para 10

⁷⁴² OFS012544_005 para 14

⁷⁴³ INQ005331_020-021

⁷⁴⁴ INQ005331_013

⁷⁴⁵ OFS012733_003 para 11

⁷⁴⁶ OFS012534_001

for children and families on the edge of care. It determined that the “*progress of children who need help and protection*” required improvement.⁷⁴⁷ However, in relation to child exploitation specifically, Ofsted found that:

“*Children at risk of exploitation are recognised and responded to effectively. Multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meetings are held to facilitate multi-agency consideration of risk, and plans are put in place to protect children.*”⁷⁴⁸

14. Without more detail, it is difficult for the reader to understand the interaction between this more positive finding and the wider failings in the quality of assessments. There is a risk that this can hinder learning and improvement and give rise to complacency.

15. In some cases, the findings of external inspections appear to be at odds with the experiences of children. For example, although the Ofsted inspection of Warwickshire children’s social care in July 2017 identified shortcomings in some areas, such as too many placement changes and inadequate access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (both of which were issues in CS-A1’s case), it found that risk assessments were “*detailed and thorough*” and that children in care who went missing were “*consistently well addressed*”.⁷⁴⁹ This was not the case for CS-A1.⁷⁵⁰

16. The extent to which criticism by external agencies has driven improvement in the case study areas is mixed.

17. Durham Constabulary’s action plan for responding to the March 2020 HMICFRS report included the introduction of a Children and Family Practice Scrutiny Panel to review police interactions with children on a monthly basis.⁷⁵¹ A deep dive audit carried out in May 2020 reviewed cases across the themes identified by HMICFRS, finding that positive progress had been made but that there were still areas for improvement in relation to the management of missing children investigations.⁷⁵²

18. Mr Jim Leivers (Interim Director of Children’s Services at St Helens Council) explained that Ofsted’s 2019 inspection was “*a real wake up call for the authority*”.⁷⁵³ In August 2020, an Ofsted monitoring visit recorded that St Helens has continued to invest substantial funds in children’s services – an increase of up to 30 percent – and that changes within the service were starting to improve responses for children and families. This has included increased capacity across children’s services and an increase in quality assurance through audit. Ofsted cited areas which required improvement across different aspects of the service but noted that there had been a concerted effort to act upon and improve the service children receive.⁷⁵⁴ The Department for Education conducted a progress review in July 2020 and came to similar conclusions.⁷⁵⁵ However, in January 2020, St Helens’ own internal audit found that more than four out of every five referrals were either inadequate or required improvement.⁷⁵⁶ Mr Leivers accepted that this was “*not a good picture*”.⁷⁵⁷ It is unacceptable

⁷⁴⁷ OFS012534_001

⁷⁴⁸ OFS012534_006 para 13

⁷⁴⁹ OFS012549_003_019

⁷⁵⁰ CS-A2 25 September 2020 51/6-52/10, 40/7-22

⁷⁵¹ DHP000506_001-022; DHP000579_013-015 paras 48–55

⁷⁵² DHP000529_001-002

⁷⁵³ Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 94/16-18

⁷⁵⁴ STH001239_002-003

⁷⁵⁵ STH001238

⁷⁵⁶ STH001229_002

⁷⁵⁷ Jim Leivers 28 September 2020 80/16-17

that only 16 percent of referrals reviewed were considered to be good. Risks to children will be missed because of this. St Helens has accepted that there was evidence in the past of poor risk assessments but said that “*isolated poor decisions*” did not demonstrate generally poor practice and the assessment of child sexual exploitation risks to children was not a particular failing of St Helens even when its children’s social care department was of a much lower standard.⁷⁵⁸

19. In the London Borough of Tower Hamlets inspections, Ofsted inspectors reviewed 28 child sexual exploitation cases, plus two criminal exploitation cases where sexual exploitation was specifically mentioned.⁷⁵⁹ The Ofsted 2017 inspection found serious weaknesses in child sexual exploitation and rated children’s social care overall inadequate.⁷⁶⁰ A further inspection was carried out in 2019, which rated children’s social care as ‘good’. The inspection found that:

“Highly vulnerable children at risk of exploitation, including those missing from home, school or care, receive effective, bespoke services, delivered sensitively by skilled and committed staff. Strong partnerships serve to protect these children from harm. This is a significant improvement since the inspection in 2017, when too many exploited children were left unprotected.”⁷⁶¹

20. In 2016, HMICFRS inspected child protection in the Metropolitan Police Service, including in Tower Hamlets. Significant failures were found in areas such as the police failing to request strategy meetings when children were at risk and not recognising the links between children going missing and their vulnerability to sexual exploitation. In fact, 36 of the 38 missing cases inspected were found to be inadequate or requiring improvement.⁷⁶²

21. The most recent HMICFRS post-inspection review of the Metropolitan Police Service area in 2019 found that there had been structural change and improvements in the approach to child protection. An internal dedicated inspection team was established after the earlier inspection and was found to be a strength. However, the management of online child sexual exploitation remained a major concern as was the investigation of offences of indecent images of children, which showed little sign of improvement since 2016. Children were still being recorded as absent with no apparent risk when they went missing, despite there being identified risk factors.⁷⁶³

22. HMICFRS inspected the approach of Merseyside Police (which covers the St Helens area) to child protection in 2018, with a revisit in 2019. Of the child sexual exploitation cases reviewed, six were good, eight required improvement and five were inadequate. Investigations were being conducted promptly but there was insufficient recording of strategy discussions and their outcomes and of the views of the children.⁷⁶⁴

⁷⁵⁸ [STH001241_004-005 para 16](#)

⁷⁵⁹ [OFS012733_003 para 9](#)

⁷⁶⁰ [OFS012566_001](#)

⁷⁶¹ [LBT004243_005 para 14](#)

⁷⁶² [INQ005333_050-060](#)

⁷⁶³ [INQ005334_004_016](#)

⁷⁶⁴ [MSP000296_015-016](#)

K.4: Internal audit and improvement activity in the case study areas

- 23.** The importance of local agencies and partnerships having their own internal audit and performance management systems has been noted by several inspectorates, with Ms Katherine Riley (Portfolio Director for Criminal Justice Joint Inspection at HMICFRS) describing this as “essential”.⁷⁶⁵
- 24.** A number of institutions indicated that being selected as a case study area had generated improvement activity in relation to child sexual exploitation and in some cases this had led to significant service improvements. This is to be welcomed but it also raises questions about the effectiveness of internal performance improvement systems, as well as scrutiny by the inspectorates.
- 25.** Partner agencies in Durham and Darlington have agreed a Child Exploitation Group delivery plan for 2020/21. A revised performance scorecard was jointly developed. Quarterly data includes eight child sexual exploitation indicators as well as statistics on missing children, return home interviews and children referred to the Child Exploitation Vulnerability Tracker (CEVT) meeting.⁷⁶⁶
- 26.** Mr John Pearce, the Corporate Director of Children and Young People’s Services, was appointed in September 2019. He has accepted that aspects of the children’s case studies, considered by the Inquiry, were not acceptable but said that major improvements had been made since November 2019. Durham County Council had historically been “information rich” but had not analysed information in ways that led to improvements in performance.⁷⁶⁷
- 27.** In January 2020, Durham County Council identified that improvement was needed in several of the Inquiry’s themes, including raising awareness of issues affecting those from LGBTQ+ communities, children with special educational needs, male victims and those with disabilities, as well as missing children and return home interviews.⁷⁶⁸ Progress was made during 2020 on involving children in the co-production of a document about professionals’ use of language.⁷⁶⁹
- 28.** Recent improvement activity by Durham Constabulary centred on an action plan to implement the recommendations of the March 2020 HMICFRS report, with improvements made in information systems and the response to missing children.⁷⁷⁰ During the public hearing, Deputy Chief Constable David Orford of Durham Constabulary was unable to comment on the cases of children in the Durham timelines.⁷⁷¹ He subsequently arranged for the cases to be internally reviewed but this did not conclude that there were weaknesses in the police response. Concern about Durham Constabulary’s internal audit activity was expressed in HMICFRS’s 2019 inspection, which noted that although the police conducted audits and reviews, these focussed more on processes than performance outcomes.⁷⁷²

⁷⁶⁵ Katherine Riley 1 October 2020 191/3-12; Wendy Ghaffar 1 October 2020 177/15-16

⁷⁶⁶ DUC000815_077

⁷⁶⁷ John Pearce 23 September 2020 42/17-24, 58/7-10, 60/9-13

⁷⁶⁸ DUC000809_002 para 5; DUC000811_003

⁷⁶⁹ DUC000809_002 para 7

⁷⁷⁰ DHP000586_001-007

⁷⁷¹ David Orford 23 September 2020 136/15-138/22

⁷⁷² INQ005331_005

29. The City and County of Swansea Council accepted that its current information systems were limited and that this has impacted its ability to capture performance data robustly for improvement purposes.⁷⁷³ Its participation in the University of Bedfordshire three-year contextual safeguarding pilot was considered an opportunity to redesign and improve its response to child exploitation. It described its quality assurance framework as being under development.⁷⁷⁴ Ms Julie Thomas, Head of Children’s Services at Swansea Social Services, accepted that aspects of the cases in the Swansea timelines were not acceptable.⁷⁷⁵ She was confident that recent initiatives, including a new integrated safeguarding hub and two new posts of practice lead and senior social worker for child sexual exploitation, were bringing about improvements in practice and quality assurance capacity.⁷⁷⁶

30. Child sexual exploitation and missing children have been a focus of improvement activity by South Wales Police since HMIC child protection inspections in 2015 and 2016. Detective Chief Superintendent (DCS) Daniel Richards described the introduction of Barnardo’s child sexual exploitation advocates in all of the force’s command units as “*probably one of the main components [of] how we have transformed our organisational culture in terms of CSE [child sexual exploitation]*”.⁷⁷⁷ His view was that in operational terms the initiative had been a huge success in assisting the police to engage with victims of child sexual exploitation who might be distrustful of the police.⁷⁷⁸ The force has also successfully rolled out an adverse childhood experience (ACE) approach to vulnerability which has also assisted engagement with victims.⁷⁷⁹

31. Warwickshire County Council and the Warwickshire Safeguarding Partnership have taken a systematic approach to quality assurance and improvement based on lessons learned.⁷⁸⁰ The Partnership has a Quality Learning and Improvement Hub. One of its first actions when established in 2019 was to undertake a thematic review of the exploitation of children and adults. Recommended improvements included having a designated safeguarding lead in each agency and improving referral processes. The Partnership also has a Quality Assurance Framework and is able to evidence learning from regular case audits of sexually exploited and missing children.⁷⁸¹ Some examples of improvement include taxi licensing with mandatory training for drivers, training for hotel staff (following the suspension of a hotel licence in a case involving child sexual exploitation), thorough staff training on achieving best evidence and providing 24-hour support to child victims giving evidence in court. The Council also identified gaps in transition support for older children and has established a transitions project to address this.⁷⁸²

32. Mr Leivers was appointed Interim Director of Children’s Services in St Helens Council in March 2020. He told the Inquiry that after Ofsted found children’s social care to be inadequate in 2019, there had been major investments in resources and recruitment. In his evidence, he accepted that there had been weaknesses in the case studies examined by the Inquiry in relation to victim-blaming language and attitudes and risk assessment and

⁷⁷³ SCC000550_040 para 231

⁷⁷⁴ SCC000550_039-042 paras 222-242

⁷⁷⁵ Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 98/15-20, 42/13-15, 52/3-8

⁷⁷⁶ Julie Thomas 24 September 2020 55/11-16; SCC000571_001 para 3

⁷⁷⁷ Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 133/23-24

⁷⁷⁸ Daniel Richards 24 September 2020 133/16-134/22

⁷⁷⁹ SWP000151_067-068 paras 8.9-8.13

⁷⁸⁰ WSP000232_007-011 paras 35-39

⁷⁸¹ WSP000232_008-009 paras 40 and 43

⁷⁸² WCC000236_025 para 151; WCC000363_024 para 139

decision-making. Practice was now more systematically audited. Merseyside Police has an audit team which performs daily sexual offence audits, including child sexual exploitation cases, and produces monthly reports.⁷⁸³

33. In April 2017, an Ofsted inspection of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets found its children’s social care to be “*inadequate*”.⁷⁸⁴ Mr Richard Baldwin (Divisional Director of Children’s Social Care) explained that a key element of the Council’s response to this has been to develop an “*unrelenting focus*” on audit, particularly of exploitation cases.⁷⁸⁵ Two multi-agency audits of exploitation cases have been conducted in March and July 2020, reviewing the files for young people who have been missing from home and care.⁷⁸⁶ Since June 2020, all cases open to the exploitation team are subject to a “*two minute audit*” every three months, which considers whether supervision was regular and purposive and whether key documents such as chronologies, single assessments, risk assessments and safety plans were up to date.⁷⁸⁷ The Council has also proposed to undertake an audit of closed child sexual exploitation cases to identify good practice and areas for improvement, something which the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children supports.⁷⁸⁸ Auditing in Tower Hamlets is undertaken by the Council’s social work academy under the supervision of a manager appointed from a different team. This is an attempt to bring a degree of independence to the process.⁷⁸⁹ We recognise that the Council has undertaken substantial work to address the 2017 findings of Ofsted.

34. The Metropolitan Police Service’s dedicated inspection team has conducted inspections of child sexual exploitation cases in June and August 2020 by dip sampling eight cases at random.⁷⁹⁰ As a result of these audits, officers have been “*buddied*” with other officers who perform well in audited cases to facilitate the sharing of knowledge.⁷⁹¹ In addition, the Central Specialist Crime unit undertook an audit review of all open child sexual exploitation cases in Tower Hamlets.⁷⁹²

35. Bristol City Council and Avon and Somerset Police have undertaken extensive auditing of their practice in relation to child sexual exploitation over the past four years, particularly in relation to our selected themes. This has included:

- an internal evaluation of the Operation Topaz pilot in 2017, conducted by the police;⁷⁹³
- a 2018 external audit of child sexual exploitation and missing practice by the National Working Group (NWG) Network (which made 10 recommendations, including three for additional audit);⁷⁹⁴ and
- a 2019 audit into casework relating to children with disabilities at risk of child sexual exploitation (which was commissioned to support Bristol City Council’s submissions to this Inquiry).⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁸³ MSP000322_008 para 28

⁷⁸⁴ LBT004216_001-002

⁷⁸⁵ Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 76/4-17

⁷⁸⁶ LBT004318_007 para 19; Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 75/22-76/17

⁷⁸⁷ LBT004318_007 paras 20–21; LBT004214_061-062 para 235

⁷⁸⁸ NSP000169_015 para 75

⁷⁸⁹ LBT004338_011 para 28

⁷⁹⁰ MPS004583_004 paras 20–23

⁷⁹¹ MPS004583_005 para 24

⁷⁹² MPS004583_005 para 26

⁷⁹³ ASP000199

⁷⁹⁴ BSC000139; ASP000316_001_008

⁷⁹⁵ BSC000132

Part L

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions and recommendations

L.1: Conclusions

1. Children are sexually exploited by networks in all parts of England and Wales in the most degrading and destructive ways. Each of these acts is a crime. This investigation has revealed extensive failures by local authorities and police forces to keep pace with the pernicious and changing problem of the sexual exploitation of children by networks.

The nature and scale of child sexual exploitation by networks

2. Many exploited children are raped or sexually assaulted repeatedly, over months or years.

3. Parental neglect, substance misuse, domestic violence or mental health issues may increase the vulnerability of children to sexual exploitation. Around half of the case study children were in care and more than a third had complex disabilities or neurodevelopmental disorders.

4. It is widely recognised that alcohol, drugs and actual or threatened violence against the child, their friends and family are often used as a means to groom and coerce children. Perpetrators are finding new ways, including through mobile phones and other devices, social media and dating apps, to groom and abuse ever younger children.

5. Research suggested that many complainants report dissatisfaction with the responses of local authority staff and police officers to the sexual exploitation they faced and these themes were reflected in some of the experiences of the case study children. Some felt unprotected by care home staff failing to intervene when they knew or suspected that the children were being sexually exploited. Others were frustrated that those who had sexually exploited them were not held accountable through the criminal justice system.

6. As there is no specific criminal offence of child sexual exploitation that can be recorded and measured, police forces 'flag' criminal offences which fit the definition of child sexual exploitation. The application of this definition is a subjective and variable exercise.

7. Children's social care data on the number of reported cases of children identified as at risk of child sexual exploitation varies, amongst other things, according to local recording practices and the pattern or level of service.

8. The data provided by the six case study areas were inconsistent and showed some unexplained variations and trends in the figures. They do not give a reliable picture of child sexual exploitation in these areas. In particular, data from two areas indicating a reduction in child sexual exploitation are highly unlikely to provide an accurate reflection of prevalence.

9. Some of the high-profile child sexual exploitation prosecutions have involved groups of South Asian males. There has been heated and often polarised debate about whether there is any link between ethnicity and group-based child sexual exploitation. Poor data collection

on the ethnicity of perpetrators or victims fuels that debate and makes it difficult to identify whether there is any such link. It also hampers the ability of police and other services to provide culturally sensitive responses, interventions and support.

Defining child sexual exploitation by networks

10. The unique feature of child sexual exploitation is that children are coerced, manipulated or deceived into sexual activity. The issue of exchange is an unhelpful distraction. Exchange may be present in some cases of child sexual exploitation but not others. The current statutory definition in England, which provides that, in the absence of exchange, an element of financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator is necessary, is too restrictive. Child sexual exploitation can occur without these elements.

11. Police and children's social care should regularly review their understanding and practices in order to address the changing nature of child sexual exploitation, including the substantial increase in the use of online activity to groom children.

12. There were repeated examples across the case study areas of children being described as at high, medium or low risk of sexual exploitation, when in fact they had already experienced or were likely to be experiencing actual harm.

13. The networks or groups of perpetrators who sexually exploit children vary in nature. They might be a number of adults well known to each other 'passing' children between them or people with only loose associations. They might also be adults who do not sexually abuse children themselves but who use the children as a commodity for their own gain – financial or otherwise.

14. It is clear from the case study material that there were cases of child sexual exploitation by networks in all six case study areas but police forces were generally unable to provide evidence about the extent of sexual exploitation by networks using the Inquiry's definition, or indeed any other. Two of the areas (Swansea and Tower Hamlets) reported that there were no known or reported organised networks in their areas.

15. In order to protect children who have been, or are at risk of being, sexually exploited, police and social services should apply a broad understanding of networks, as used by this Inquiry. The focus should be on children who are being sexually exploited by multiple perpetrators, regardless of their activities and associations.

16. Recent trends involving recording instances of child sexual exploitation within wider criminal exploitation or child abuse data sets make establishing the prevalence of child sexual exploitation even more complex. There has been a widespread adoption of the model of considering sexual exploitation as part of child criminal exploitation and county lines activities. If this is maintained, agencies must have a distinctive and separate focus on child sexual exploitation in order that these offences are properly identified and investigated as well as to reflect the nature of the harm experienced by sexually exploited children.

Meeting the needs of particular groups of sexually exploited children

17. Children in residential care are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Several of the case study children had been exposed to sexual exploitation by networks while in care. Out-of-area placements continue to raise concerns and, in some cases, add to the risks to children. The use of unregulated accommodation for 16 and 17-year-olds who have been sexually exploited or are at heightened risk of child sexual exploitation must cease.

18. The sexual exploitation experiences of boys and young men are less understood and often overlooked. The use of social media and dating apps was particularly prevalent in respect of the boys and young men among the case study children. Often they were using such platforms to explore their sexual orientation and then were exposed to perpetrators. Ways should be found to identify and provide targeted and appropriate support to the male victims of sexual exploitation, while maintaining and improving services for girls and other groups.

19. Children with disabilities are at heightened risk of sexual exploitation. Of the children included in the Inquiry's sample of individual children's experiences across the six areas (the case study children), one third had a disability. In several examples, there was no or limited evidence that the agencies took into account the child's disability in assessing the risk of sexual exploitation they faced, or the harm they had already experienced.

20. Responses to some children from ethnic minority backgrounds who had been sexually exploited were not culturally sensitive. The ability to provide culturally specific services was hampered by the repeated failure by police forces to record the ethnicity of victims of child sexual exploitation.

Recognising the child as the victim

21. There were several examples of child victims of sexual exploitation being charged with criminal offences and consequently incurring criminal records when the background to their offending was inextricably linked with their sexual exploitation. The treatment of children as criminals in these circumstances is all the more troubling given that, too often, the perpetrators of child sexual exploitation were not investigated or prosecuted. Police and prosecutors should carefully consider whether it is in the public interest to prosecute children in these situations.

22. Victim-blaming attitudes and behaviours obscure the seriousness of the crimes committed against children. There was evidence of children being described as consenting to sexual acts and several instances of victim-blaming language in the case files. The use of such language is often symptomatic of unacceptable underlying attitudes and must be challenged.

Risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children

23. Child sexual exploitation assessments that score risk solely on a numerical basis should not be used. If numerical assessments are used, they must always be accompanied by a competent professional assessment which explores and records the harm a child has experienced and forms a holistic, professional judgement.

- 24.** The approach to identifying, assessing and managing the risk of sexual exploitation was deficient in several of the case study areas. Risk assessments often described children as being at high or medium 'risk' of sexual exploitation when in fact they had already been harmed and needed immediate intervention. The merging of risk and harm was apparent in the evidence concerning the case study children.
- 25.** The assessment tool prepared by the National Working Group (NWG) Exploitation Response Unit and used in Warwickshire, as well as the practitioner prompts in the *All Wales Practice Guide*, by contrast, illustrated holistic risk assessment practice.
- 26.** While some sexually exploited young people received support, including specialist therapeutic services, some care leavers and older children aged 16 or 17 years did not receive adequate support.

Missing children and return home interviews

- 27.** A recent investigative report by *The Times* suggested that, since 2018, an unknown number of children at risk of abuse, some as young as 11, had gone missing more than 55,000 times in Britain. Going missing from home and school was also a feature in the lives of almost all of the case study children in this investigation.
- 28.** It is essential that the police response to an episode of a child going missing is timely. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS; before 2017, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, HMIC) has found police responses to be poor, inadequate or requiring improvement in half of the case study areas. Some improvement has been noted in two of these areas but the police should locate missing children as soon as possible.
- 29.** For return home interviews to achieve their purpose of discouraging future missing episodes and identifying potential perpetrators of abuse, it is crucial that they be carried out in a sensitive and timely way. The information sought should include where the child has been, who they were with and what they were doing. Performance was variable in the case study areas in terms of the proportion of return home interviews offered and taken up and was often inadequate, including for children placed out of area (albeit that some of these problems were caused by difficulties in information-sharing between the police and placing authorities).

Profiling

- 30.** Problem profiling involves the drawing together by the police of information about child sexual exploitation from different agencies into one place. As the Children's Commissioner made clear in 2013, a profile should include data about how many children and young people have been sexually exploited, intelligence on places of concern, and information on gangs and other networks, groups and individuals who present a risk of sexual harm.
- 31.** Despite this, none of the police forces in the case study areas had an accurate profile setting out a clear picture of the networks sexually exploiting children in their area. Profiles were often based on limited, inaccurate or incomplete data. Issues with the flagging process contributed to these problems. There were widespread failures to collect data about the ethnicity of perpetrators and victims in the case study areas.

32. As a result, none of the police forces or local authorities in the case study areas had an accurate understanding of the networks sexually exploiting children in their area.

33. The improved collection and use of data is critical to the response to child sexual exploitation if these offences are to be properly investigated and resourced.

Disruption, investigation and prosecution

34. There is evidence from academic research that the response of the criminal justice system to child sexual exploitation by networks is the most frequently identified source of dissatisfaction with institutional responses to child sexual exploitation.

35. A range of disruption tools are available but they are underused. The most commonly used tool was the child abduction warning notice but use across the case study areas varied and lacked consistency.

36. There were also several examples of perpetrators who had harmed children but had not been the subject of effective investigation or disruption. There was little evidence of early investigative advice being sought from the Crown Prosecution Service and several cases in which perpetrators were not prosecuted. The downgrading of harm to risk by agencies has widespread consequences. The importance and seriousness of these cases is reduced, minimising opportunities to investigate, disrupt and prosecute offenders. Despite a welcome higher profile in recent years, some of the processes to identify and deal with child sexual exploitation have created an institutional hesitancy to intervene and take the necessary action to protect children and catch perpetrators.

37. The perpetrators of child sexual exploitation commit serious crimes and more effort must be made to prosecute them effectively. The law should recognise the gravity of this particular form of abuse and its impact on children.

Partnership working

38. Partnership working between the different agencies involved in protecting children from sexual exploitation requires more than attendance at multi-agency meetings. There were some strong examples of partnership work with third sector organisations. However, some of the individual children's cases suggested partnership working could have been better.

Audit, review and performance

39. Published inspection reports should be sufficiently detailed. Unlike HMICFRS, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) does not report the number of child sexual exploitation or missing children cases it reviews. Recent Ofsted reports from the case study areas refer only in broad terms to child exploitation and lack sufficient focus on the issue.⁷⁹⁶ Positive reports which do not contain a detailed evidence base mean that it is difficult to interrogate and compare their findings with those of other reports.

⁷⁹⁶ See, for example, the Durham report (September 2019, [OFS012544](#)) and the Tower Hamlets report (June 2019, [LBT004243](#)). There are brief mentions of child sexual exploitation in the Bristol report (September 2018, [OFS012547](#)). By contrast, the Warwickshire report (July 2017, [OFS012549](#)) has detailed findings on child sexual exploitation.

40. A number of institutions indicated that being selected as a case study area had generated improvement activity in relation to child sexual exploitation. This is to be welcomed but it also raises questions about the effectiveness of internal review, as well as scrutiny by the inspectorates.

L.2: Recommendations

The Chair and Panel make the following recommendations, which arise directly from this investigation.

The UK government, the Welsh government, police forces and local authorities in England and Wales should each publish their response to each relevant recommendation, including the timetable involved, within six months of the publication of this report.

Recommendation 1: Aggravation of offences relating to the sexual exploitation of children

The government should amend the Sentencing Act 2020 to provide a mandatory aggravating factor in sentencing in the case of the commission of an offence under Part 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 relating to a child, where (1) the child was exploited, (2) 'exploitation' means the child was controlled, coerced, manipulated or deceived into sexual activity and (3) two or more persons were concerned in the exploitation.

Recommendation 2: Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit

As referenced in its *Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy*, the government should publish an enhanced version of its Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit as soon as possible.

This Toolkit must:

- specify that the core element of the definition of child sexual exploitation is that a child was controlled, coerced, manipulated or deceived into sexual activity;
- include specific guidance on building effective problem profiles for child sexual exploitation and child sexual exploitation by networks, as differentiated from other forms of exploitation;
- specifically state the sources and types of data that agencies should use to build problem profiles; and
- indicate the minimum frequency at which problem profiles should be updated.

Recommendation 3: Government guidance on child sexual exploitation

The Department for Education should review and publish an updated version of its guidance on child sexual exploitation. The update should specify that the core element of the definition of child sexual exploitation is that a child was controlled, coerced, manipulated or deceived into sexual activity.

It should also include detailed information on:

- the role of the internet in the perpetration of child sexual exploitation; and
- how to identify and respond to child sexual exploitation perpetrated by networks of offenders.

The Welsh Government should also update its guidance on child sexual exploitation to provide detailed information on how to identify and respond to child sexual exploitation perpetrated by networks of offenders.

Recommendation 4: Categorisation of risk and harm

The Department for Education and the Welsh Government must ensure that their updated national guidance makes clear that signs that a child is being sexually exploited must never be treated as indications that a child is only 'at risk' of experiencing this harm.

In line with this, local authorities in England and Wales should ensure that their assessment of risk and harm enables them to accurately distinguish between:

- children who are at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation;
- children who are experiencing or have already experienced sexual exploitation; and
- children who have experienced sexual exploitation and are at risk of experiencing further abuse.

Recommendation 5: Child sexual exploitation data

Police forces and local authorities in England and Wales must collect data on all cases of known or suspected child sexual exploitation and child sexual exploitation by networks. These data should be separated from other data sets, including data on child sexual abuse, and be disaggregated by the sex, ethnicity and disability of both the victim and perpetrator.

This disaggregated data should be used by police forces to inform problem profiling and activities to disrupt and investigate offenders. Local authorities should take account of the disaggregated data when commissioning services for children.

The UK Government and the Welsh Government should take steps to ensure that these data are being collected and disaggregated in a consistent and accurate way by police forces and local authorities.

Recommendation 6: Unregulated placements

The Department for Education should ban the placement in semi-independent and independent settings of children aged 16 and 17 who have experienced, or are at heightened risk of experiencing, sexual exploitation. This should be implemented without delay.

Annexes

Annex 1

Overview of process and evidence obtained by the Inquiry

1. Definition of scope

The child sexual exploitation by organised networks investigation was a thematic investigation into institutional responses to the sexual exploitation of children by organised networks.

The scope of the investigation was as follows:

“1. The Inquiry will investigate the nature and extent of, and institutional responses to, sexual exploitation of children by organised networks incorporating case specific investigations alongside a review of information available from published and unpublished reports and reviews, court cases and previous investigations. In doing so the Inquiry will consider the experiences of victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation by organised networks.

2. The Inquiry will examine the extent to which:

2.1. children who were subjected to child sexual exploitation were known to local authorities and other public authorities such as law enforcement agencies, schools and/or the NHS;

2.2. the relevant public authorities, acting alone or working together, effectively identified the risk of child sexual exploitation in communities and took action to prevent it;

2.3. the response of the constituent parts of the criminal justice system was appropriate in cases of child sexual exploitation;

2.4. recommendations in previous reports and reviews have been implemented effectively in the wide range of relevant public authorities at national and local levels;

2.5. effective strategies have now been implemented to prevent child sexual exploitation in the future, and to monitor the safety of vulnerable children including missing children;

2.6. the applicable statutory and regulatory framework relevant to child sexual exploitation is effective in protecting children from sexual exploitation, including in respect of (i) taxi and other relevant licensing regimes; and (ii) other forms of noncriminal intervention such as the civil prevention order regime under the Sexual Offences Act 2003.”⁷⁹⁷

⁷⁹⁷ Child sexual exploitation by organised networks: Scope of investigation

2. Core participants and legal representatives

Counsel to this investigation:

Henrietta Hill QC
Paul Livingston
Antonia Benfield
Ben Fullbrook

Core participants and their legal representatives:

CS-A2	
Solicitor	Kim Harrison (Slater and Gordon)
Parents Against Child Exploitation (Pace)	
Counsel	William Chapman
Solicitor	David Greenwood (Switalskis)
Margaret Oliver	
Counsel	Christopher Jacobs
Solicitor	David Enright (Howe and Co Solicitors)
John Wedger	
Counsel	Christopher Jacobs
Solicitor	David Enright (Howe and Co Solicitors)
Centre for Women's Justice	
Counsel	Caoilfhionn Gallagher QC and Mary-Rachel McCabe
Solicitor	Harriet Wistrich
Sarah Champion MP	
Solicitor	Haafiz Suleman (Clifford Chance)
Durham Constabulary	
Counsel	Alan Payne QC
Solicitor	Stephen Mooney (Evolve Legal Services)
Durham County Council	
Counsel	Steven Ford QC
Solicitor	Kamila Coulson-Patel (Durham County Council Legal Services)
South Wales Police	
Counsel	Alison Hewitt
Solicitor	Louise Emmitt (South Wales and Gwent Police Joint Legal Services)
Warwickshire Police	
Counsel	Samantha Leek QC
Solicitor	Katharine Grasby (Warwickshire and West Mercia Police Legal Services)

Warwickshire County Council	
Counsel	Andrew Sharland QC
Solicitor	Victoria Gould (Warwickshire County Council Legal Services)
St Helens Council	
Counsel	Rory Dunlop QC
Solicitor	Mark Fisher (St Helens Council Legal Services)
Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis (Metropolitan Police Service)	
Counsel	Christopher Butterfield
Solicitor	Metropolitan Police Service's Directorate of Legal Services
London Borough of Tower Hamlets	
Counsel	Cleo Perry QC and Andrew Powell
Solicitor	Jill Bayley (London Borough of Tower Hamlets Legal Services)
Avon and Somerset Police	
Counsel	Elliot Gold
Solicitor	Shahzad Hamid (Avon and Somerset Police Legal Services)
Bristol City Council	
Counsel	Jane Rayson and Charlotte Baker
Solicitor	Nancy Rollason (Bristol City Council Legal Services)
National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC)	
Counsel	James Berry
Solicitor	Craig Sutherland (East Midlands Police Legal Services)
Home Office	
Counsel	Sian Reeves
Solicitor	Daniel Rapport (Government Legal Department)
Ofsted	
Counsel	Mathew Gullick
Solicitor	Juliette Smith (Ofsted Legal Services)

3. Evidence received by the Inquiry

Number of witness statements obtained:
157
Organisations and individuals to which requests for documentation or witness statements were sent:
Angelou Centre
Apna Haq
Ariel Trust
Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd (ADCS)
Avon and Somerset Police
Barnardo's
Basis Yorkshire
Bristol City Council
Care Inspectorate Wales
Care Quality Commission
Catch22
Centre for Women's Justice
Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse (CSA Centre)
Changing Lives
Children's Commissioner for Wales
Children's Society
Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis (Metropolitan Police Service)
Crown Prosecution Service
CS-A2, core participant
CS-A12, complainant witness
CS-A317, complainant witness
CS-A371, complainant witness
CS-A372, complainant witness
CS-A373, complainant witness
CS-A435, complainant witness
Department for Education
Durham Constabulary
Durham County Council
Durham Safeguarding Children Partnership
Dr Ella Cockbain
Essex Police (Project Goldcrest)
Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team Wales (EYST)

Organisations and individuals to which requests for documentation or witness statements were sent:

Greater Manchester Police

Healthcare Inspectorate Wales

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS)

Home Office

Independent Children's Homes Association Ltd

Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Merseyside Police

Missing People

Mountain Healthcare Ltd (Oakwood Place)

National Crime Agency (NCA)

National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC)

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)

National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)

Nazir Afzal

NWG Exploitation Response Unit

Ofsted

Parents Against Child Exploitation (Pace)

Pebbles Care

Proud Trust

Sarah Champion MP

Sikh Women's Action Network (SWAN)

Dr Sophie Hallett

South Wales Police

St Giles Trust

St Helens Council

St Helens Safeguarding Children Partnership

SurvivorsUK

Tower Hamlets Safeguarding Children Partnership

Trafford Council

Voices from Care Cymru

Warwickshire County Council

Warwickshire Police

Warwickshire Safeguarding Children Board

Organisations and individuals to which requests for documentation or witness statements were sent:

Welsh Government

Western Bay Safeguarding Children Board

Wigan Council

Wirral Council

The Inquiry also considered research it commissioned to explore the motivations and offending behaviours of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation who had been convicted alongside others.⁷⁹⁸

4. Disclosure of documents

Total number of pages disclosed: 40,797

5. Public hearings including preliminary hearings

Preliminary hearings

1	2 May 2019
2	15 January 2020

Public hearings

Days 1–5	21 September–25 September 2020
Days 6–10	28 September–2 October 2020

6. List of witnesses

Surname	Forename	Title	Called, read, summarised or adduced	Hearing day
CS-A12			Called	2
CS-A371			Called	2
CS-A317			Summarised	1
CS-A372			Summarised	1
CS-A373			Summarised	1
Beckett	Helen	Dr	Called	2
Dean	Ian	Mr	Adduced	2
Hallett	Sophie	Dr	Called	2
Taylor	Sheila	Ms	Called	2
Dean	Ian	Mr	Adduced	2
Pearce	John	Mr	Called	3
Banks	Michael	Mr	Called	3

⁷⁹⁸ *An explorative study on perpetrators of child sexual exploitation convicted alongside others*, May 2020, pp58–64

Surname	Forename	Title	Called, read, summarised or adduced	Hearing day
Orford	David	Deputy Chief Constable	Called	3
Ashton	David	Detective Superintendent	Adduced	3
Green	Adrian	Mr	Adduced	3
Quinn	Amanda	Ms	Adduced	3
Seebohm	Laura	Ms	Adduced	3
Thomas	Julie	Ms	Called	4
Richards	Daniel	Assistant Chief Constable	Called	4
Rees	Damien	Mr	Adduced	4
Khan	Shehla	Dr	Adduced	4
Maal	Joanna	Ms	Adduced	4
Jarrett	Andrew	Mr	Adduced	4
Holland	Sally	Professor	Adduced	4
CS-A2			Called	5
Minns	Nigel	Mr	Called	5
Hill	Peter	Detective Superintendent	Called	5
Coleridge-Smith	Elaine	Ms	Adduced	5
English	Lawrence	Mr	Adduced	5
McKenna	Vikki	Ms	Called	6
Leivers	Jim	Mr	Called	6
Critchley	Ian David	Assistant Chief Constable	Called	6
O'Brien	Sarah	Professor	Adduced	6
Carr	Sally	Ms	Adduced	6
Ainsworth	Paul	Mr	Adduced	6
Bottomly	Martin	Mr	Adduced	6
Hardman	Jacqui	Ms	Adduced	6
Baldwin	Richard	Mr	Called	6
Williams	Sue	Ms	Called	7
Jones	Debbie	Ms	Adduced	7
Jones	Evan	Mr	Adduced	7
Thomas	Gary	Mr	Adduced	7
James	Ann	Ms	Called	8
White	William	Chief Superintendent	Called	8
Naylor	Amanda	Ms	Called	8
Cullen	Stephen	Assistant Chief Constable	Adduced	8

Surname	Forename	Title	Called, read, summarised or adduced	Hearing day
Powell	Ivan	Mr	Adduced	8
Scott	Rachael	Ms	Adduced	8
Papaleontiou	Christian	Mr	Called	9
Langdale	Sophie	Ms	Called	9
Heaney	Albert	Mr	Called	9
Ghaffar	Wendy	Ms	Called	9
Stanley	Yvette	Ms	Called	9
Benneyworth	Rosie	Dr	Called	9
Alexander	Simon	Mr	Called	9
Riley	Katherine	Ms	Called	9
McGill	Gregor	Mr	Called	10
Gibbons	Gill	Ms	Called	10
Ahmed	Zlakha	Ms	Called	10
Lewis	Rosie	Ms	Called	10
English	Lawrence	Mr	Adduced	10
Cockbain	Ella	Dr	Adduced	10
Beckett	Helen	Dr	Adduced	10
Scott	Rachael	Ms	Adduced	10
Riley	Katherine	Ms	Adduced	10
Afzal	Nazir	Mr	Adduced	10
Wistrich	Harriet	Ms	Adduced	10

7. Restriction orders

On 23 March 2018, the Chair issued an updated restriction order under section 19(2)(b) of the Inquiries Act 2005, granting general anonymity to all core participants who allege they are the victim and survivor of sexual offences (referred to as ‘complainant core participants’). The order prohibited (i) the disclosure or publication of any information that identifies, names or gives the address of a complainant who is a core participant and (ii) the disclosure or publication of any still or moving image of a complainant core participant. The order meant that any complainant core participant within this investigation was granted anonymity, unless they did not wish to remain anonymous.

On 17 September 2020, the Chair issued a restriction order under section 19 of the Inquiries Act 2005 to prohibit the disclosure or publication of the name of any individual whose identity has been redacted or ciphered by the Inquiry, and any information redacted as irrelevant and sensitive, in connection with this investigation and referred to during the course of evidence adduced during the Inquiry’s proceedings.⁷⁹⁹

⁷⁹⁹ Restriction order 17 September 2020

On 22 September 2020, the Chair issued a restriction order under section 19 of the Inquiries Act 2005 to prohibit the disclosure or publication of information which is capable of identifying CS-A371 as specified at paragraph 2(a) of the Order.⁸⁰⁰

On 22 September 2020, the Chair issued a restriction order under section 19 of the Inquiries Act 2005 to prohibit the disclosure or publication of information which is capable of identifying CS-A12 as specified at paragraph 2(a) of the Order.⁸⁰¹

On 16 October 2020, the Chair issued two restriction orders under section 19 of the Inquiries Act 2005 to prohibit the disclosure or publication of information which is capable of identifying CS-A1 as specified at paragraph 2 of the Orders.⁸⁰²

On 21 October 2020, the Chair issued a restriction order under section 19 of the Inquiries Act 2005 to prohibit the disclosure or publication of information which is capable of identifying CS-B12 as specified at paragraph 2 of the Order.⁸⁰³

On 21 October 2020, the Chair issued a restriction order under section 19 of the Inquiries Act 2005 to prohibit the disclosure or publication of information which is capable of identifying CS-A161 as specified at paragraph 2 of the Order.⁸⁰⁴

On 21 October 2020, the Chair issued a restriction order under section 19 of the Inquiries Act 2005 to prohibit the disclosure or publication of information which is capable of identifying "School/College A" as specified at paragraph 2 of the Order.⁸⁰⁵

8. Broadcasting

The Chair directed that the proceedings would be broadcast, as has occurred in respect of public hearings in other investigations.

9. Redactions and ciphering

The material obtained for this phase of the investigation was redacted and, where appropriate, ciphers were applied, in accordance with the Inquiry's Protocol on the Redaction of Documents (the Protocol).⁸⁰⁶ This meant that (in accordance with Annex A of the Protocol), for example, absent specific consent to the contrary, the identities of complainants and victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and other children were redacted and if the Inquiry considered that their identity appeared to be sufficiently relevant to the investigation a cipher was applied.

Pursuant to the Protocol, the identities of individuals convicted of child sexual abuse (including those who have accepted a police caution for offences related to child sexual abuse) were not generally redacted unless the naming of the individual would risk the identification of their victim, in which case a cipher would be applied.

The Protocol also addresses the position in respect of individuals accused, but not convicted, of child sexual abuse or other physical abuse against a child, and provides that their identities should be redacted and a cipher applied. However, where the allegations

⁸⁰⁰ Restriction order 22 September 2020

⁸⁰¹ Restriction order 22 September 2020

⁸⁰² Restriction order 16 October 2020; Restriction order 16 October 2020

⁸⁰³ Restriction order 21 October 2020

⁸⁰⁴ Restriction order 21 October 2020

⁸⁰⁵ Restriction order 21 October 2020

⁸⁰⁶ Inquiry Protocol on Redaction of Documents (version 3)

against an individual are so widely known that redaction would serve no meaningful purpose (for example where the individual's name has been published in the regulated media in connection with allegations of abuse), the Protocol provides that the Inquiry may decide not to redact their identity.

Finally, the Protocol recognises that, while the Inquiry will not distinguish as a matter of course between individuals who are known or believed to be deceased and those who are or are believed to be alive, the Inquiry may take the fact that an individual is deceased into account when considering whether or not to apply redactions in a particular instance.

The Protocol anticipates that it may be necessary for core participants to be aware of the identity of individuals whose identity has been redacted and in respect of whom a cipher has been applied, if the same is relevant to their interest in the investigation.

10. Warning letters

Rule 13 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 provides:

- “(1) The chairman may send a warning letter to any person –*
- a. he considers may be, or who has been, subject to criticism in the inquiry proceedings; or*
 - b. about whom criticism may be inferred from evidence that has been given during the inquiry proceedings; or*
 - c. who may be subject to criticism in the report, or any interim report.*
- (2) The recipient of a warning letter may disclose it to his recognised legal representative.*
- (3) The inquiry panel must not include any explicit or significant criticism of a person in the report, or in any interim report, unless –*
- a. the chairman has sent that person a warning letter; and*
 - b. the person has been given a reasonable opportunity to respond to the warning letter.”*

In accordance with rule 13, warning letters were sent as appropriate to those who were covered by the provisions of rule 13 and the Chair and Panel considered the responses to those letters before finalising the report.

Annex 2

Acronyms

ACC	Assistant Chief Constable
ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
BASE	Barnardo's Against Sexual Exploitation
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CASH	Contraception and sexual health
CAWN	Child Abduction Warning Notice
CCE	Child criminal exploitation
CEVT	Child Exploitation Vulnerability Tracker
CSAE	Child sexual abuse and exploitation
CSE	Child sexual exploitation
CSEN	Child sexual exploitation by networks
CP-IS	Child Protection - Information Sharing
CQC	Care Quality Commission
CYPMHS	Children and Young People's Mental Health Services
DCC	Deputy Chief Constable
EFRH	Extra-familial risk and harm
EIA	Early investigative advice
ERASE	Educate and Raise Awareness of Sexual Exploitation
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HMIC	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary
HMICFRS	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services
LSCB	Local safeguarding children board
LSCP	Local safeguarding children partnership
MACE	Multi-agency child exploitation
MASH	Multi-agency safeguarding hub
NAIRA	No apparent immediate risk (absent)
NCA	National Crime Agency
NVAP	National Vulnerability Action Plan
NWG Network	National Working Group Network
Pace	Parents Against Child Exploitation

PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
RASSO Unit	Rape and Serious Sexual Offences Unit
RHI	Return home interview
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
SERAF	Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework
SHPO	Sexual Harm Prevention Order
SRO	Sexual Risk Order
TRAP	Topaz Risk Assessment Profile

Annex 3

Historical and legal context

England

Pre-2009: from child prostitution to exploitation

1. An understanding of child sexual exploitation first began to emerge in the early 1990s. In 1994, Barnardo's set up the UK's first child sexual exploitation programme in Bradford. It began as a pilot project working with "child prostitutes", as they were then called. Ms Kay Kelly, who worked for the Bradford Project (a child sexual exploitation programme) for 12 years, reported in 2014 that in the early years the reality of the problem was not recognised. Young people were not seen as victims but were treated as perpetrators, as prostitutes. This was despite the fact that they were below the legal age of consent.⁸⁰⁷
2. This coincided with a growing appreciation of the phenomenon of teenage girls in particular absconding and becoming involved in prostitution. For example, this was reported by Nottinghamshire County Council's social services in 1991. It was also the focus of the Coalition for the Removal of Pimping (now known as Parents against Child Exploitation) which was founded in West Yorkshire in 1996. Between 1996 and 1998, further work was done by Nottinghamshire County Council, which included the production of guidance in 1997 stating that all children involved in prostitution were "*being sexually exploited and are physically, emotionally and sexually at risk*", emphasising the need for an assessment to be undertaken.⁸⁰⁸
3. Between 1989 and 1995, almost 4,000 police cautions were given to children aged between 10 and 18 for offences relating to prostitution, with most given to those aged between 14 and 18 years.⁸⁰⁹
4. Supplementary statutory guidance to *Working Together to Safeguard Children (1999)* was issued by the Department of Health in 2000, entitled *Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution*. This explained that the primary law enforcement effort in such cases should be on taking action against those who coerced or abused children and that children involved in prostitution should be treated "*primarily as the victims of abuse*".⁸¹⁰ It made links between children going missing and becoming involved in prostitution and drew particular attention to heightened risks for children in care who were going missing and care leavers. However, sexually exploited children could still be prosecuted. In these circumstances, the supplementary guidance recommended that children be processed through the criminal

⁸⁰⁷ *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997-2013*, Alexis Jay OBE, August 2014, Appendix 4, [NAP000053](#)

⁸⁰⁸ *Children in Need – Children Involved in Prostitution*, Nottinghamshire Council, 1996, [NSC000054](#); *Nottinghamshire Area Child Protection Committee – Child Protection Procedures*, Nottinghamshire Council, April 1997, [NTP001474](#); *An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of a Multi-Disciplinary Approach in Providing Appropriate Services for Children Involved in Prostitution*, Sue Gregory, May 1998, [NSC001642](#)

⁸⁰⁹ 'Child Sexual Exploitation' in *South-East Wales: problems and solutions from the perspectives of young people and professionals*, Dr Sophie Hallett, July 2013, [INQ006086_020-023](#)

⁸¹⁰ *Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution*, Department of Health, 2000, [INQ006262_006](#)

justice system in the same way as other young offenders – after the practitioners concerned had satisfied themselves that the young person was not being forced into prostitution by another.⁸¹¹

5. In December 2000, the Home Office announced funding under its Crime Reduction Programme (CRP) for 11 multi-agency projects which aimed to reduce the number of children and women involved in prostitution, reduce crime and disorder associated with street-based prostitution and find out which interventions helped women to leave prostitution. An evaluation of the projects was published in 2004.⁸¹² In respect of the exploitation of children, its recommendations included: greater involvement of the police and Crown Prosecution Service, addressing the lack of prosecutions of men for abusing young people and working to encourage early identification of children at risk so as to allow preventative and diversionary work to take place.

6. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 replaced older sexual offences laws with more specific and explicit wording. It stipulated that a child under 13 is unable to consent to sexual intercourse, redefined sexual assault and provided for sexual offences protection orders (now sexual harm prevention orders) and sexual harm orders. It also created sexual exploitation offences, including arranging or facilitating the commission of a child sexual offence, paying for the sexual services of a child, causing or inciting the sexual exploitation of a child, arranging or facilitating the sexual exploitation of a child and controlling a child subject to sexual exploitation.⁸¹³

7. By 2010, in addition to the Home Office crime reduction projects, the problem of the sexual exploitation of children had become more visible.

7.1. In 2002, the National Children's Bureau, working with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), published a study exploring the experiences of 55 young women who had been sexually exploited.⁸¹⁴

7.2. In 2003, a young teenager, Ms Charlene Downes, disappeared in Blackpool. She was believed to have been a victim of sexual exploitation and killed by her abusers. A subsequent investigation revealed endemic sexual abuse in the town and Project Awaken was set up involving professionals from licensing, social services, education and the police.⁸¹⁵

7.3. Also in 2003, the police in Keighley, West Yorkshire, interviewed 33 girls aged between 13 and 17 years. Up to 50 men were suspected to have been involved in exploiting them. Charges were brought against ten men and two were convicted. The mothers of some children aged 12 and 13 had approached their local MP, Ms Anne Cryer, to ask for help because their children were being exploited by gangs of Asian men in their 20s and 30s. The MP began to campaign for the police and children's social care to take action.

⁸¹¹ *Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution*, Department of Health, 2000, [INQ006262](#)

⁸¹² *Tackling Street Prostitution: Towards an holistic approach*, Home Office Research Study 279, Marianne Hester, Nicole Westmarland, July 2004, [INQ006281](#)

⁸¹³ *Home Office Counting Rules for Recording Crime: Sexual Offences, Rape, Other Offences*, Home Office, 2000, [INQ006498_041](#)

⁸¹⁴ *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham, 1997–2013*, Alexis Jay OBE, August 2014, [NAP000053_134](#)

⁸¹⁵ 'Beyond the pleasure beach', Julie Bindel, *The Guardian* 30 May 2008, [INQ006497](#)

7.4. In 2005, the Coalition for the Removal of Pimping published a series of reports highlighting the plight of sexually exploited children and their parents and campaigning for action to end it.⁸¹⁶

7.5. In 2006, there was a prosecution in Blackpool of four men for the rape of a 16-year-old girl. The victim and a friend were given alcohol in an Indian restaurant before being taken to an attic and assaulted. One victim said she was abused by four men. Two men were convicted.

7.6. In 2007, 20 men were arrested and 3 were charged with rape in relation to the grooming and abuse of 20 girls in the Oldham area. Two convictions for abduction were secured.

7.7. In 2010, 5 men were convicted of sexual offences against girls aged 12 to 16 in Rotherham. Mr Andrew Norfolk, a journalist, began what would become a four-year investigation into allegations of grooming and sexual exploitation in Rotherham and other towns, by mainly Asian perpetrators. His first investigative piece was published in 2011.

2010–16: growing awareness of child sexual exploitation

8. From 2010 to 2016, there were various high-profile prosecutions involving child sexual exploitation. These included:

- Operation Lakeland (2008–10): three men convicted for the sexual exploitation of children in Cornwall; it was thought that they sexually exploited around 30 young girls;
- Operation Retriever (November 2010): 11 men convicted of offences connected with the sexual exploitation of children in Derbyshire;
- Operation Chalice (May 2011): the collapse of a trial relating to offences of child trafficking and exploitation in Telford;
- Operation Span (May 2012): convictions of men from Rochdale and Oldham, including in relation to sexual activity with a child and trafficking in persons for the purpose of prostitution/trafficking;
- Operation Bullfinch (June 2013): a child sexual exploitation trial in Oxford resulting in convictions for the rape of a child under 13 and trafficking;
- Operation Erle (2014–15): 10 men convicted in relation to a child sexual abuse ring in Peterborough;
- Operation Brooke (2014): 13 men convicted of the sexual exploitation of children in Bristol;
- Operation Doublet (February 2016): 10 men convicted of offences related to child sexual exploitation which took place in Rochdale between 2004 and 2008 against victims and survivors aged 13 to 23;
- Operation Clover (2015–17): 21 people, including two women, convicted after four trials of multiple offences, including rapes, false imprisonment and sexual intercourse with children under 13 in Rotherham;

⁸¹⁶ *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997–2013*, Alexis Jay OBE, August 2014, NAP000053_136-137

- Operation Sanctuary (2014–17): 17 men and one woman convicted of sexually exploiting girls in Newcastle and sentenced to between 4 and 20 years' imprisonment; and
- in 2019, 9 men convicted of the sexual exploitation of girls in Bradford, 7 of whom received prison sentences of between 17 and 20 years.

9. In August 2009, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published statutory guidance, *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation*.⁸¹⁷ This guidance provided a definition of child sexual exploitation for the first time. Key guiding principles were set out for how public bodies and other organisations should approach the issue of child sexual exploitation (for example, the need for a child-centred approach, being proactive in tackling the problem and the need for an integrated approach).

10. In January 2011, Barnardo's published its report into child sexual exploitation, *Puppet on a string: The urgent need to cut children free from sexual exploitation*, which recorded concern that child sexual exploitation was prevalent but noted that it was very difficult to say how many children and young people were being exploited in the UK because the hidden nature of the issue made it difficult to identify.⁸¹⁸ Barnardo's observed that practitioners often did not recognise child sexual exploitation, and young people frequently did not recognise that they had been exploited.

11. In November 2011, the Department for Education published its *Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation: Action Plan* in the wake of Operation Receiver and Operation Chalice. An important part of this action plan was to educate children and young people, and their parents, on the risks of child sexual exploitation and how to combat them. The report considered the link between children going missing and running away and child sexual exploitation. In addition, it noted concern that a lack of reported cases of child sexual exploitation may be due to people not looking for or reporting it.⁸¹⁹

12. In June 2013, the Home Affairs Committee published a lengthy report which found evidence that child sexual exploitation was a "specialised" form of abuse to which older children were particularly vulnerable.⁸²⁰ The report found that those involved in child protection were more used to dealing with cases of familial abuse and so professionals often failed to recognise localised child sexual exploitation as a form of abuse. They were therefore unable to "piece together the different parts of a puzzle" in order to create a clear picture of what was happening.⁸²¹ The Home Affairs Committee also concluded that there had been a cultural and attitudinal failing in relation to child sexual exploitation. Too many professionals referred to victims and survivors as being "promiscuous", engaging in "risky behaviour" or having "consented" to sexual activity.⁸²² Professionals were observed to be lacking in compassion and agencies were failing to work effectively together. Early warning signs often went unnoticed – grooming often took place in informal settings such as parks, streets, restaurants and taxi offices. The important role played by the voluntary sector was emphasised.⁸²³ The Home Affairs Committee also considered a widespread

⁸¹⁷ *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation: Supplementary guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, August 2009, [INQ006284](#)

⁸¹⁸ *Puppet on a string: The urgent need to cut children free from sexual exploitation*, Barnardo's, 1 January 2011, [NAP000031](#)

⁸¹⁹ *Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation: Action Plan*, Department for Education, November 2011, [INQ006499](#)

⁸²⁰ *Child sexual exploitation and the response to localised grooming*, House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 5 June 2013, [HOM003355](#)

⁸²¹ [HOM003355_009](#) para 12

⁸²² [HOM003355_014](#) para 20

⁸²³ [HOM003355_052-053](#)

perception that the majority of perpetrators were of Asian, British Asian or Muslim origin. It reported that the issue of race, and the fear of being seen as racist, may have hindered the detection and intervention in some cases of child sexual exploitation throughout the country for a number of years.⁸²⁴ Indeed, upon arrest, some of those in Rochdale alleged that the prosecution was motivated by race.⁸²⁵ The Home Affairs Committee found that it was essential that professionals were able to raise their concerns freely and without fear of being labelled racist.⁸²⁶ However, many of those involved in investigating child sexual exploitation cases warned against citing race as a key factor and a number of child sexual exploitation cases involving groups of offenders from other ethnic backgrounds were identified.⁸²⁷

13. In November 2013, the Office of the Children's Commissioner produced a report following an inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. It found that, whilst the picture remained inconsistent, no part of the country had a fully joined up, multi-agency, child-centred approach to addressing child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. In addition, too many local authorities were still failing to comply with the *Working Together to Safeguard Children* guidance on child sexual exploitation.⁸²⁸

14. In October 2013, following a public consultation, the Crown Prosecution Service published guidance for prosecutors looking at child sexual abuse. This was intended to cover similar cases to those seen in Operation Span and Operation Bullfinch.⁸²⁹ Prosecutors were told to focus on the overall credibility of an allegation rather than the perceived weakness of the person making it and to facilitate early consultation with police investigators to advise on strategy. A Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) unit was established as a specialist unit within the Crown Prosecution Service to provide a central point of expertise. A number of recommendations were made about the need to support victims and witnesses from the outset of the investigation and throughout criminal proceedings.

15. In August 2014, the Chair of this Inquiry, Professor Alexis Jay OBE, authored a report which identified the sexual exploitation of at least 1,400 children and young people in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013. The report analysed 66 children's case files, many of which showed classic evidence of grooming, including children being picked up from school, and given presents, mobile phones, free alcohol and sometimes drugs. The nature of the abuse perpetrated against the victims involved children being raped by multiple perpetrators, trafficked to other towns and cities in the north of England, and being abducted, beaten and intimidated. The report concluded with a number of key recommendations including, among others: improving the quality of risk assessments; improving how looked after children were dealt with; improving multi-agency working; and the need for more direct engagement with women and men from ethnic minority communities on the issue of child sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse. The report found no evidence of children's social care staff within Rotherham Council being influenced by concerns about the ethnic origins of suspected perpetrators when dealing with individual child protection cases, including child sexual exploitation.⁸³⁰ In the broader organisational context, however, it found a widespread perception that the message conveyed by some senior people in the Council, and also

⁸²⁴ [HOM003355_054](#) para 109

⁸²⁵ [HOM003355_055](#) para 111

⁸²⁶ [HOM003355_059](#) para 120

⁸²⁷ [HOM003355_057](#) paras 116–117

⁸²⁸ "If only someone had listened": Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, Final Report November 2013, [HOM003339](#)

⁸²⁹ *Child Sexual Abuse: Guidelines on Prosecuting Cases of Child Sexual Abuse*, Crown Prosecution Service, 17 October 2013, [DHP000453](#)

⁸³⁰ [NAP000053_097](#)

by the police, was to “downplay” the ethnic dimensions of child sexual exploitation.⁸³¹ Unsurprisingly, frontline staff appeared to be confused as to what they were supposed to say and do and what would be interpreted as “racist”.⁸³²

16. Following the publication of Professor Jay’s report, South Yorkshire Police invited the National Crime Agency to lead an independent investigation. By 2021, Operation Stovewood had secured 20 convictions and expected that number to rise. Those convicted have received prison sentences totalling around 250 years.

17. In October 2014, an independent report, *Real Voices: Child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester*, was produced by Ms Ann Coffey MP.⁸³³ This examined the work which had been undertaken to disrupt and respond to child sexual exploitation since the events in Rochdale. The report was largely prepared by speaking to victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation and other young people. It concluded that, whilst there had been a shift away from talking about child prostitution to child protection, a culture persisted in some areas that child sexual exploitation was the norm. A key to fighting against a culture of acceptance was to give young people the tools to fight back against child sexual exploitation themselves. The report also raised a number of concerns and recommendations about the criminal justice system.

18. In February 2015, the Oxfordshire Serious Case Review (SCR) was published following the events highlighted by the Operation Bullfinch trial, in which 20 young people were identified as potential victims of child sexual exploitation.⁸³⁴ The SCR once again identified that assessing the scale of child sexual exploitation was a very difficult task but that there had been some improvements in Oxfordshire over the previous three to four years.

19. In March 2015, Ms (now Baroness) Louise Casey produced a report for the Department for Communities and Local Government, *Reflections on child sexual exploitation*. In this report, she concluded that a dual approach was needed in which support for victims of child sexual exploitation ran alongside a vigilant and zero-tolerance policy.⁸³⁵ Further efforts needed to be directed towards the perpetrators, both in order to detect, prevent and disrupt abuse at the earliest stages and to ensure their successful prosecution. The report emphasised the availability of civil remedies which specifically related to sexual offences or grooming and other wider nuisance and anti-social behaviour injunctive and closure powers. The report concluded that key warning signs of child sexual exploitation were still being missed and commented on a lack of professional curiosity as to what was happening to the children concerned.

20. In July 2015, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary published a report into the role of the police in keeping children safe. It noted that there was no specific offence of child sexual exploitation and found that the quality of investigation of cases of child sexual exploitation was very mixed – practice tended to be better in those areas where there had been a big case and where, previously, mistakes had been made and lessons learnt.

⁸³¹ [NAP000053_097](#)

⁸³² [NAP000053_097](#)

⁸³³ *Real Voices: Child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester*, An independent report by Ann Coffey, MP, October 2014, [INQ006486](#)

⁸³⁴ *Serious Case Review into Child Sexual Exploitation in Oxfordshire: from the experiences of Children A, B, C, D, E, and F*, Alan Bedford for Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board, 26 February 2016, [INQ006097](#)

⁸³⁵ *Reflections on child sexual exploitation*, Louise Casey CB for the Department for Communities and Local Government, March 2015, [INQ006500](#)

2016–20: renewed focus on re-defining and tackling child sexual exploitation

21. In February 2017, the Department for Education published non-statutory guidance, *Child sexual exploitation: Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation*.⁸³⁶ This updated the definition of child sexual exploitation in light of concern that the previous definition had given rise to inconsistencies in risk assessment and data collection. It also gave guidance on how to spot children who may be particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

22. In 2017, local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) were replaced by local safeguarding children partnerships (under the Children and Social Work Act 2017). The partnership model placed an equal duty on the chief of police, the head of the clinical commissioning group and the chief executive of the local authority to work together to make arrangements to safeguard and protect the welfare of children in their area. These changes were required to have been implemented by 30 September 2019.

23. The year 2018 saw the culmination of the Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) Prevention Programme, which was delivered in partnership between various agencies and charities with the aim of scoping needs and trends in child sexual exploitation across the 10 policing regions in England and Wales.⁸³⁷ This Programme produced numerous resources, including on appropriate language, the night-time economy, parents and carers, people from an ethnic minority and LGBTQ+ young people. The CSAE Strategy for England focussed on education, multi-agency working, return home interviews (RHIs), perpetrators, and children aged 16–18, among other themes.

24. In April 2019, the Home Office published its *Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit* with the purpose of providing frontline professionals with information about the legislative opportunities at their disposal, ranging from warning notices to offence charges and care orders, to target specific risks.⁸³⁸

25. At the same time, Public Health England published guidance on how public health can support prevention and intervention in child sexual exploitation.⁸³⁹ It explained that contraception and sexual health (CASH) services have a significant role to play in child sexual exploitation. Public Health England found that most services had screening and risk assessment processes in place but many needed to improve in order to be effective.

26. The effectiveness of RHIs for missing children was considered in a report from the Children's Society and the NSPCC, published in 2019.⁸⁴⁰ Its key findings included that an RHI should be seen as part of a continuum of responses when a young person is reported as missing and that RHI provision for children in out-of-area placements was a particular challenge – including a lack of detailed data and issues with information-sharing. A similar analysis was conducted by the charity Missing People in June 2019.⁸⁴¹ Its report noted that

⁸³⁶ *Child sexual exploitation: Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation*, Department for Education, February 2017, [ADC000012](#)

⁸³⁷ *National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Prevention Strategy: England*, The Children's Society, Victim Support and the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) 2018, [INQ006234](#)

⁸³⁸ *Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit*, Home Office, 15 April 2019, [HOM003365](#)

⁸³⁹ *Child sexual exploitation: How public health can support prevention and intervention*, Public Health England, April 2019, [HOM003325](#)

⁸⁴⁰ *The First Step: How return home interviews can improve support and safeguarding for missing young people*, Iryna Pona, Phil Raws and Hannah Chetwynd for the Children's Society, [NCA000409](#)

⁸⁴¹ *A Safer Return: An analysis of the value of return home interviews in identifying risk and ensuring returning missing children are supported*, Missing People, [NCA000410](#)

serious harm and ongoing risks were not confined to the minority identified as high risk but were regularly disclosed by young people assessed to be at medium or low risk by the police while missing. It stressed the importance of also providing RHIs to this latter group.

27. In September 2019, the Children's Commissioner for England called for the use of unregulated accommodation to be banned for all under 18s in care. Her report noted that one in eight children in care spent some time in unregulated placements in 2018/19 and that this number was increasing due to the lack of capacity in children's homes and a belief that children aged just 16 should be ready to become independent. Additionally, it referred to children who became victims of exploitation and abuse whilst living in unregulated accommodation.⁸⁴²

28. December 2019 saw the publication of part one of the *Independent assurance review of the effectiveness of multi-agency responses to child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester*. This examined local agencies' responses to the systematic sexual exploitation of young girls in the Rochdale area in 2004–5 (Operation Augusta). It found, in summary, that:

*"although there was significant information held by both Manchester City Council and Greater Manchester Police on some individuals who potentially posed a risk to children, we can offer no assurance that appropriate action was taken to address this risk. We found very little evidence of professionals considering the risk these perpetrators presented to their own children and the children they met throughout their daily activities."*⁸⁴³

29. In a 2020 triennial review of Serious Case Reviews carried out between 2014 and 2017, it was noted that child sexual exploitation was a persistent theme, being recorded as an issue in 9 percent of reports. The review noted that:

"Despite many public documents related to the issue and previous SCRs, there was evidence that practitioners were still slow to recognise vulnerabilities to child sexual exploitation and respond to risks, particularly if the child was male".⁸⁴⁴

Wales

30. In 2005, Barnardo's published a report, *Out of sight out of mind: Child sexual exploitation*, which noted that there was, at that stage, no service provision for child sexual exploitation in Wales. The report identified at least 184 separate cases of children being sexually exploited, or with concerns of sexual exploitation, across 20 of the 21 Welsh local authorities. Only eight of these local authorities were identified as having protocols on children abused through prostitution – something that the guidance in force at the time required them to have.⁸⁴⁵ The report concluded that *"the development of systems to safeguard sexually exploited children and young people in Wales has to date been insufficient"*.⁸⁴⁶

⁸⁴² *Unregulated: Children in care living in semi-independent accommodation*, Children's Commissioner, September 2020, [INQ006274](#).

⁸⁴³ *Part One: An assurance review of Operation Augusta*, Malcolm Newsam CBE and Gary Ridgway, December 2019, [INQ004899](#).

⁸⁴⁴ *Complexity and challenge: a triennial analysis of SCRs 2014–2017*, Marian Brandon et al., March 2020, [INQ006183](#).

⁸⁴⁵ *Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution*, Department of Health, May 2000, [INQ006262](#).

⁸⁴⁶ *Out of sight, out of mind: Child sexual exploitation. A scoping study into service provision for sexually exploited children in Wales*, Barnardo's, November 2005, [BRD000283](#).

31. In 2007, Barnardo's conducted a pilot study into the use of the Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (SERAF) in Newport.⁸⁴⁷ Out of a total 367 children, 186 were found to be not at risk, 60 at mild risk, 54 at moderate risk and 67 at significant risk. Of the total sample, 54 percent were male but the analysis suggested that females were more at risk than males (60 percent of those at significant risk were females).

32. In 2008, a follow-up report extended the SERAF trial into two additional local authority areas. Overall, the report recognised "*considerable progress*" in Wales over the past three years in increasing professional awareness of child sexual exploitation.⁸⁴⁸

33. In 2010, the Welsh Government produced guidance to help:

"police, teachers, social workers and health workers amongst others to rise to the challenge of identifying children at risk of sexual exploitation and taking steps to protect them and in ensuring that action is taken against perpetrators".⁸⁴⁹

All LCSBs were told to take account of the guidance and local authorities were required to comply with it unless there were exceptional reasons for not doing so.

34. In June 2011, the *All Wales Protocol for Missing Children* was produced.⁸⁵⁰ This explained that incidents of children going missing should be taken seriously and set out how agencies should work together to deal with such incidents. When a child returned, the protocol set out that an interview/debrief should take place as soon as possible but at least within three working days.

35. In November 2013, the All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group, which had a mandate and representation from all the LCSBs and partner agencies in Wales, published the *All Wales Protocol on Children at Risk of Abuse Through Sexual Exploitation*.⁸⁵¹ This Protocol was designed to be used in conjunction with SERAF and to offer operational support for field practitioners and managers in child sexual exploitation work. It set out the formal procedures to be used "*where there are concerns that a child is at risk of, or is abused through, sexual exploitation*". Among other things, the Protocol sought to define sexual exploitation and provide frameworks for the handling of cases and exchange of information between agencies. LCSBs were also told to ensure that they had adequate monitoring systems in place.

36. The next significant development was the publication of the 2015/16 *National Action Plan to Tackle Child Sexual Exploitation (Wales)*.⁸⁵² This exhorted LCSBs to 'prepare', 'prevent', 'protect' and 'pursue'. It set out a number of actions which were to be completed in 2016, including: an evaluation of the effectiveness of the SERAF tool; the development of a national dataset to capture the profile, prevalence and response to child sexual exploitation in Wales; and the development by LCSBs and partners of mechanisms to assess risk, develop best practice approaches to placements, and monitor and ensure consistency of practice.

⁸⁴⁷ *Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework: A pilot study*, Barnardo's, October 2007, BRD000284

⁸⁴⁸ *Child Sexual exploitation in Wales: 3 years on*, Dr Sam Clutton and Jo Coles for Barnardo's, 2008, BRD000285

⁸⁴⁹ *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation: Supplementary guidance to Safeguarding Children: Working Together Under The Children Act 2004*, Welsh Assembly Government, 2010, INQ005268

⁸⁵⁰ *All Wales Protocol: Missing Children: Children who run away or go missing from home or care*, All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review, 20 June 2011, INQ006501

⁸⁵¹ *Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Children who are at Risk of Abuse through Sexual Exploitation: All Wales Protocol*, All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group, November 2013, INQ005418

⁸⁵² *National Action Plan to Tackle Child Sexual Exploitation (Wales)*, Welsh Government, 2016, INQ005422

37. A review of child sexual exploitation statutory guidance was commissioned in 2017. This established that there was still variance in the way in which child sexual exploitation was defined. It also found confusion over the function of SERAF and concern that it was being relied on at the expense of professional judgement. The overarching recommendation of the review was that the statutory guidance should be updated, although it made 26 separate recommendations, including replacing the definition of child sexual exploitation with a broader, bullet-point approach listing various factors and the establishment of a national child sexual exploitation group led by the Welsh Government.⁸⁵³ Subsequently, the Welsh Government removed references to SERAF from its safeguarding procedures. The Welsh Government no longer prescribes a risk assessment template (such as SERAF) but allows local authorities or safeguarding boards to use SERAF or other assessments.⁸⁵⁴

38. The CSAE Prevention Programme also produced a *National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Prevention Strategy: Wales*.⁸⁵⁵ It identified a need for more age-appropriate and consistent education of children on issues such as consent and boundaries and how to prevent child sexual exploitation. It suggested that education and support should also be provided to perpetrators and potential perpetrators to prevent further offending. It further recommended that RHIs and debriefs be placed on a statutory basis and made consistent across Wales.

39. In 2019, researchers at Cardiff University published *Keeping Safe? An analysis of the outcomes of work with sexually exploited young people in Wales*. This tracked the outcomes for young people identified as being at risk of child sexual exploitation over a 10-year period. It aimed to explore how best to support young people when responding to child sexual exploitation and the challenges involved in doing so. One of the key findings from this research was that there are problems with the current risk-based approach to tackling child sexual exploitation, which focusses on managing young people's so-called risky behaviours. Additionally, it found that a larger proportion of those who were at high risk of or who were being sexually exploited had negative outcomes at and after case closure.⁸⁵⁶

40. In July 2019, the Welsh Government published its *National Action Plan: Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse: Working Together to Safeguard People*. Child sexual exploitation was defined as a form of sexual abuse, involving a child, which “involves some form of exchange”. It was noted that:

“The exchange can include the giving or withdrawal of something; such as the withdrawal of violence or threats to abuse another person. There may be a facilitator who receives something in addition to or instead of the child who is exploited. Children may not recognise the exploitative nature of the relationship or exchange. Children may feel that they have given consent.”⁸⁵⁷

41. Dr Sophie Hallett described this as not amounting to a definition of child sexual exploitation but rather as an observation about child sexual exploitation being a form of child sexual abuse, occurring to those under 18 years old, involving a form of exchange.⁸⁵⁸

⁸⁵³ *Review of the Wales Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Statutory Guidance*, Welsh Government, November 2017, [INQ006088](#)

⁸⁵⁴ [WGT000464_009](#)

⁸⁵⁵ *National Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Prevention Strategy: Wales*, Children's Society, 2018, [INQ006235](#)

⁸⁵⁶ *‘Keeping Safe?’ An analysis of the outcomes of work with sexually exploited young people in Wales*, Dr Sophie Hallett et al., 2019, [INQ006085](#); [INQ006087_002-003](#)

⁸⁵⁷ *National Action Plan: Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse: Working Together to Safeguard People*, Welsh Government, [CIW000042_005](#)

⁸⁵⁸ [INQ006087_004-005](#) para 11

42. In February 2020, the Welsh Government confirmed that each of the six safeguarding children's boards had submitted evidence that they had put in place measures to ensure that partners were aware of the actions contained in the National Action Plan and had agreed arrangements for evidencing their implementation.⁸⁵⁹

⁸⁵⁹ *National Action Plan on Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse – Arrangements for implementation by Safeguarding Children's Boards*, Welsh Government, February 2020, [WGT000471](#)

Annex 4

The case study areas

Introduction

1. As explained in Part A, in order to facilitate the detailed investigation and assessment of the themes for this investigation, the Inquiry selected six local authority areas as case study areas:

- Durham County Council (Durham) in North East England;
- The City and County of Swansea Council (Swansea) in Wales;
- Warwickshire County Council (Warwickshire) in the West of England;
- St Helens Council (St Helens), a metropolitan borough within Merseyside;
- The London Borough of Tower Hamlets (Tower Hamlets) in East London; and
- Bristol City Council (Bristol) in South West England.

In addition, the Inquiry also reviewed a sample of children's cases from each of the six areas for closer analysis.

2. A detailed thematic analysis of the evidence is set out in Parts D to L of this report. This annex sets out the Inquiry's conclusions about the key statutory agencies in each case study area with respect to the eight themes in this investigation:

- problem profiling (ie the collation of data and intelligence to provide a picture of the nature and extent of child sexual exploitation in a given area) and the disruption of suspects and perpetrators of child sexual exploitation (see Parts H and I);
- empathy and concern for child victims (see Part E);
- risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children (see Part F);
- missing children, return home interviews and children in care (see Parts D and G);
- male victims (see Part D);
- children with disabilities (see Part D);
- partnership working between agencies responsible for tackling child sexual exploitation (see Part J); and
- audit, review and performance improvement (see Part K).

Durham

Problem profiling

3. Durham Constabulary's most recent problem profile for child sexual exploitation from 2019 did not provide an adequate assessment of the nature and scale of child sexual exploitation in the area or allow for analysis of the issue. Crimes "*were classed as CSA rather than E*" where there was no "*explicit mention of grooming or exploitative techniques was*

mentioned”.⁸⁶⁰ The profile also only considered data over a period of three months, which cannot be “comprehensive” as suggested.⁸⁶¹ As a result, as accepted by the police and local safeguarding partnership, the extent of child sexual exploitation in Durham was likely to be underestimated.⁸⁶²

4. No evidence was provided about the number of cases of child sexual exploitation by networks using the Inquiry’s definition, although such cases plainly existed.⁸⁶³ Other definitions were used, but these appeared to further limit the type of group of abusers being considered by Durham Constabulary.⁸⁶⁴

5. Ethnicity was not recorded for suspects in 35 percent of 1,900 cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation, and for 14 percent of 1,138 victims in Durham in 2018/19.⁸⁶⁵

Disruption

6. There were several examples of insufficient efforts to use disruption tactics to protect children. Child Abduction Warning Notices (CAWNs) were used proactively in Durham but were not visible on police systems. In 2020, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) identified limited evidence of disruption activity at hotspot locations or in relation to known perpetrators.⁸⁶⁶

Empathy and concern for child victims

7. Durham Constabulary’s child sexual exploitation profile and the Council’s sexual exploitation strategy used inappropriate language suggesting that children had consented to sexual acts. There were also examples of victim-blaming language but limited evidence of it being challenged.⁸⁶⁷

Risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children

8. Although there was a large increase in the number of recent assessments in which child sexual exploitation was identified as a factor, the out-dated checklist approach taken by Durham County Council to assessing the risk of child sexual exploitation was concerning.⁸⁶⁸ Indicators of risk were conflated with indicators of actual harm, and the Inquiry was told that children would not be classified as high risk where there was no identified perpetrator.⁸⁶⁹ While the Inquiry saw no evidence of this approach being put into practice, such an approach is wholly unacceptable.

9. Risk assessments relating to several of the case study children in Durham were of poor quality.⁸⁷⁰ Only cases considered high risk were monitored via the Child Exploitation Vulnerability Tracker (CEVT), leading to a reduction in the number of cases being monitored.⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁰ DHP000379_013; Banks 23 September 2020 93/3-94/7

⁸⁶¹ DHP000440_010 para 34

⁸⁶² DHP000379_013; Michael Banks 23 September 2020 93/3-94/7

⁸⁶³ DHP000379_014; DHP000456_013 para 34

⁸⁶⁴ DHP000379_002; DHP000456_012 para 31; DHP000492_006

⁸⁶⁵ DHP000440_016 para 54; David Orford 23 September 2020 122/2-16

⁸⁶⁶ INQ005331_025

⁸⁶⁷ Pearce 23 September 2020 11/8-14, 12/2-13; DUC000685_004 para 17; DUC000817_001 para 3

⁸⁶⁸ DUC000783

⁸⁶⁹ Pearce 23 September 2020 48/19-49/11; DUC000796

⁸⁷⁰ CS-A50 29 October 2020 3/3-7/7; CS-A29 29 October 2020 7/9-13/18; CS-A114 29 October 2020 13/21-16/4; CS-A118 29 October 2020 16/6-18/9

⁸⁷¹ DHP000467_001

10. The level of intervention, protection given and the outcomes for some children were very poor. There was evidence that children were prematurely removed from the list of those discussed at multi-agency meetings when they were experiencing harm.⁸⁷²

11. There are clear areas for improvement in both the assessment forms and processes for monitoring risk in County Durham.

Missing children, return home interviews and children in care

12. Durham's performance in relation to missing children was mixed. Durham Constabulary's Philomena Protocol, aimed at coordinating responses to young people in children's homes going missing, was commended by the National Police Chiefs' Council as an example of good practice and is being adopted by other forces.⁸⁷³ However, in 2020, HMICFRS recommended that Durham Constabulary "*immediately improves practice in cases of children who go missing from home*".⁸⁷⁴

13. Durham County Council had a lower than average percentage of children in care placed out of area. However, it was not able to provide the Inquiry with the number of sexually exploited children placed outside the area, and seven children at risk of sexual exploitation were placed in unregulated placements outside Durham in the two years to March 2019.⁸⁷⁵

Male victims

14. A number of boys were discussed at an operational child exploitation group. No specific child sexual exploitation services were available for boys and young men, but there was timely support for one of the male case study children in line with his and his parents' wishes.⁸⁷⁶

Children with disabilities

15. It is "*fairly early days*" in terms of the approach to children with disabilities in Durham, with its assessment form only recently including "*specific recognition around any disability or additional vulnerability*".⁸⁷⁷ The Council has also only relatively recently included disability as a specific factor on its CEVT.⁸⁷⁸

Partnership working

16. There was evidence of strong partnership working on child sexual exploitation in Durham, particularly following the formation of the police-led ERASE (Educate and Raise Awareness of Sexual Exploitation) team. While there was variability, there was also positive involvement of schools, health services and other agencies with some case study children in Durham.

⁸⁷² Pearce 23 September 2020 40/9-41/13

⁸⁷³ NAP000016_025-026; DHP000440_046 para 166; WSP000232_010 para 44

⁸⁷⁴ INQ005331_020-021

⁸⁷⁵ DUC000658_009 para 43

⁸⁷⁶ 29 October 2020 19/25-21/15; DUC000739_005

⁸⁷⁷ Pearce 23 September 2020 20/15-17; DUC000685_011 para 57

⁸⁷⁸ Pearce 23 September 2020 21/14-22/21; DUC000813_005; DHP000528; DHP000456_004 paras 10-11

Audit, review and performance improvement

17. There has been a significant amount of internal service audit activity on child sexual exploitation and missing children within Durham but this has not so far led to significant practice improvement by Durham Constabulary, as shown by the 2020 HMICFRS report.⁸⁷⁹

Swansea

Problem profiling

18. In the South Wales Police area, if the ‘exchange’ between the victim and perpetrator was not “*abundantly clear from the outset*”, cases were logged as child sexual abuse rather than exploitation.⁸⁸⁰ This is not consistent with the intention of the Welsh guidance that exchange denotes the exploitation of a need.⁸⁸¹

19. Neither South Wales Police nor the City and County of Swansea Council (Swansea Council) knew accurately how many children were being or were at risk of being harmed through sexual exploitation. Due to inconsistencies in reporting and use of the flag system, South Wales Police’s 2019 problem profile recognised that there may have been “*significantly more occurrences that involve sexually exploiting a child than the profile reflected*”.⁸⁸² While Swansea Council accepted that there was a “*sharp reduction*” in child sexual exploitation cases between 2018 and 2019, it was also “*unable to give a clear explanation of this figure*”.⁸⁸³

20. Using the Inquiry’s definition, there were examples of child sexual exploitation by networks over this period.⁸⁸⁴ Such instances of exploitation by networks or groups should have been identified by the police and the local authority. South Wales Police incorrectly told us that there were no data to suggest sexual exploitation by organised networks, whether according to the Inquiry’s definition or at all.⁸⁸⁵

21. Across the South Wales Police area, including Swansea, less than half of the 56 incidents of child sexual exploitation in 2018/19 recorded the victim’s ethnicity.⁸⁸⁶

Disruption

22. There were examples of successful disruption in Swansea. South Wales Police placed a child in police protection, disrupted a specific address on the premise of antisocial behaviour, and encouraged inspections of another location about which concerns were raised.⁸⁸⁷ Swansea Council requested a number of CAWNs, used passport markers, engaged with the National Referral Mechanism, and communicated with housing services where there were properties of concern.⁸⁸⁸

23. Among the case study children, however, disruption opportunities were missed on several occasions. For example, one perpetrator was the subject of similar allegations in the past but the case was closed with no rationale given; no child sexual exploitation ‘flag’ placed

⁸⁷⁹ INQ005331_020-21

⁸⁸⁰ SWP000151_004 para 1.9

⁸⁸¹ Richards 24 September 108/16-109/22

⁸⁸² SWP000079_007,014; SWP000151_013-014 paras 1.40–1.41

⁸⁸³ SCC000550_014 para 78

⁸⁸⁴ SWP000085_011-012. See also 24 September 2020 37/6-38/12; SCC000550_028 paras 148–152

⁸⁸⁵ SWP000151_008 para 1.27; SWP000163_002-003 para 6; SWP000151_016 para 1.49; SWP000151_040 para 3.21

⁸⁸⁶ SWP000151_003 para 1.4

⁸⁸⁷ SWP000151_017-019 paras 1.48–1.55

⁸⁸⁸ INQ006444

on his record; and no application for a sexual risk order (SRO) was made even though “*the frequency and similarities of the allegations would have made him a likely candidate*” for such an order.⁸⁸⁹

Empathy and concern for child victims

24. Victim-blaming language and attitudes were evident in some of the Swansea case studies, despite the guidance on language provided to staff. For example, CS-A24 was described as having had “*sexual partners from the age of 11*”, even though anyone under the age of 13 can never legally give consent.⁸⁹⁰

Risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children

25. From November 2019, the Welsh Government moved away from risk assessment forms to encourage a more holistic approach. Its revised guidance included prompts for physical signs, emotional signs, material signs and behavioural signs.⁸⁹¹ Despite this, Swansea Council continued to use the outdated Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (SERAF), which they misinterpreted as a “*national requirement*”.⁸⁹² The practitioner prompts should be included in all risk assessments in Swansea as a matter of urgency.

26. Swansea Council also “*identified a theme about premature removal*”, with two case study children (CS-A24 and CS-A25) removed from its child sexual exploitation protocol while still at significant risk.⁸⁹³

27. There were specialist services available for sexually exploited young people in Swansea, through Barnardo’s and the South Wales National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) Protect and Respect project.⁸⁹⁴

Missing children, return home interviews and children in care

28. During an almost three-year period, 10 children went missing in excess of 50 times each; one went missing 115 times.⁸⁹⁵ The local safeguarding children board identified that missing children and young people were only offered return home interviews (RHIs) if they were “*perceived as medium to high risk*” and that information from RHIs was not routinely shared.⁸⁹⁶

29. It was not possible to determine the numbers of sexually exploited children from Swansea placed outside their home area from the data provided.⁸⁹⁷ When a child is placed out of area, there should be a cross-border meeting between police forces (and sometimes a social worker), but such meetings do not always take place.⁸⁹⁸

30. Positive practice in the Swansea area included the fact that suitable accommodation and specialist care was given to two of the case study children beyond their 18th birthday, when they left care.⁸⁹⁹

⁸⁸⁹ SWP000162; SWP000162_009

⁸⁹⁰ Thomas 24 September 2020 42/13-17, 51/21-52/8, 56/1-6

⁸⁹¹ Heaney 1 October 2020 72/13-73/24; INQ006455_017; INQ006466

⁸⁹² Thomas 24 September 2020 73/8-18; SCC000550_014-016 paras 80–88; SCC000550_017 paras 95–97; SCC000550_046 paras 268–270

⁸⁹³ Thomas 24 September 2020 95/16-96/11, 98/2-13

⁸⁹⁴ NSP000168_001-003; INQ005103; INQ005080

⁸⁹⁵ SWP000172

⁸⁹⁶ INQ006560_014

⁸⁹⁷ SCC000550_027 paras 143–147

⁸⁹⁸ SWP000151_043-046 para 4.9, 4.15–4.18.

⁸⁹⁹ Thomas 24 September 2020 99/17-100/8

Male victims

31. The often hidden nature of child sexual exploitation against boys and young men is recognised in Wales.⁹⁰⁰ Swansea Council anticipated that its contextual safeguarding pilot with a wider brief on criminal exploitation would enable it to identify more males at risk of sexual exploitation. A January 2020 systems review found that Swansea Council was “*identifying extra familial harm within current practice better than the other sites that they looked at across the UK, and responding to this in a coordinated manner*”.⁹⁰¹

Children with disabilities

32. While Swansea Council’s risk assessment identified whether a child at risk of sexual exploitation has a disability, it did not prompt the assessor to consider the impact of disability on the child and any vulnerability to sexual abuse.⁹⁰²

Partnership working

33. At the time of our hearings, there was no multi-agency child sexual exploitation team or meeting to monitor threats to children in Swansea. Instead there were stated to be close informal working relationships between the key professionals.⁹⁰³

Audit, review and performance improvement

34. Systems for audit and improvement were not generally well used in Swansea.⁹⁰⁴

Warwickshire

Problem profiling

35. The 2019 Warwickshire problem profile looked at perpetrators and victims but did not record any groups or networks involved in or perpetrating child sexual exploitation in the county.⁹⁰⁵ Organised criminal gangs exploiting young people were said to be “*relatively rare*”, although it was recognised that exploitation was more often by ‘disorganised’ groups with loose associations.⁹⁰⁶

36. It appears that Warwickshire Police conducted little, if any, analysis of the extent to which child sexual exploitation was being committed by groups or networks.⁹⁰⁷ As the extent of perpetrator networks and the threat of child sexual exploitation was not properly understood, exploitation – for example that reported by CS-A2 in April 2017 – could not be properly addressed.⁹⁰⁸

37. In the Warwickshire 2019 profile, the ethnicity of over 40 percent of 137 perpetrators and over 50 percent of 162 victims of child sexual exploitation was unknown.⁹⁰⁹

⁹⁰⁰ WGT000464_013

⁹⁰¹ INQ005274_004

⁹⁰² SCC000550_033-034 paras 185–187

⁹⁰³ Thomas 24 September 2020 81/11-17; Richards 24 September 2020 128/12-15

⁹⁰⁴ SCC000550_040 para 231; Thomas 24 September 2020 98/15-20, 42/13-15, 52/3-8

⁹⁰⁵ WSP000208

⁹⁰⁶ Peter Hill 25 September 2020 161/21-162/8

⁹⁰⁷ WSP000206_008 paras 33–34

⁹⁰⁸ CS-A2 25 September 2020 17/23-19/23, 53/18-54/5; WSP000206_007-010 paras 30–37

⁹⁰⁹ WSP000208_022; Peter Hill 25 September 2020 129/15-21

Disruption

38. Disruption tactics were not all formally recorded, as a result of which Warwickshire Police could not assess their effectiveness and revise them as required. It issued a number of CAWNs in 2018/19 but accepted that it had been too slow to implement other approved disruption tactics against perpetrators in some cases.⁹¹⁰

Empathy and concern for child victims

39. Training aimed at eradicating victim-blaming language and attitudes had been given to frontline teams in Warwickshire County Council and Warwickshire Police. Victim-blaming language was seen in respect of two of the case study children but generally, where victim-blaming language was used, it was challenged and managed.⁹¹¹

Risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children

40. There was a more progressive approach to risk assessment in Warwickshire, which uses chronologies in all assessments and has adopted the National Working Group (NWG) Child Sexual Exploitation Assessment Tool. The use of this assessment was shown to have improved professional judgement, and promoted greater involvement of children and parents/carers in assessment and planning.⁹¹²

41. There were concerns about the operation of the risk assessment process in Warwickshire in the case of CS-A1. Despite earlier concerns from her family, CS-A1 was only later identified as at high risk of sexual exploitation. Warwickshire County Council accepted the delay and stressed subsequent changes in the risk assessment process.⁹¹³

42. There was evidence of difficulties for children in accessing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in Warwickshire.⁹¹⁴ However, there were examples of positive support, including in prevention with a Barnardo's CSE Training and Outreach project worker, targeted support from youth workers for children deemed to be at low risk of sexual exploitation, and specialist provision by Barnardo's for sexually exploited young people.⁹¹⁵

Missing children, return home interviews and children in care

43. There were poor outcomes for CS-A1, who was cared for in a succession of unsuitable placements in Warwickshire and the risks of placing her in proximity to offenders were ignored.⁹¹⁶ This highlighted major and relatively recent failings in the systems of both Warwickshire County Council and Warwickshire Police for identifying sexually exploited children in care and taking effective action to protect them.

44. Warwickshire County Council appeared to have good procedures in place for communicating with relevant agencies before placing a looked after child out of the area. Children from other areas placed in Warwickshire were also monitored.⁹¹⁷

⁹¹⁰ WSP000176_014-019 paras 51 and 64; WSP000206_010 para 37; CS-A2 25 September 2020 57/1-59/16

⁹¹¹ BRD000276_004 paras 13-14; NSP000169_014 para 71

⁹¹² INQ005149_014-015 paras 4.5-4.7; WCC000363_010 paras 51, 54 and 56

⁹¹³ CS-A2 25 September 2020 44/13-24; Minns 25 September 2020 95/1-97/25

⁹¹⁴ INQ005148_003; INQ005462_040

⁹¹⁵ WCC000207; WCC000163_006,020

⁹¹⁶ WCC000177_004

⁹¹⁷ WCC000236_013-014 paras 78 and 81-82; WCC000420 paras 84-86; WCC000421_001-003; WCC000422_002-003 paras 8 and 12; Minns 25 September 2020 105/10-106/15

Male victims

45. A multi-agency campaign in Warwickshire – ‘Something’s Not Right’ – aimed to increase awareness of the sexual exploitation of boys and young men and encourage them to speak out about their experiences and seek support. Dedicated resources have been put in place for male victims, with a Barnardo’s team targeting boys and young men with services to prevent and disrupt sexual exploitation.⁹¹⁸

Children with disabilities

46. The processes used in Warwickshire form a foundation for effective identification of disabilities but the low rate of identification and recording of disabilities in sexually exploited children is a concern. The disability of one of the case study children (CS-A300) was not properly recognised or recorded by the Council.⁹¹⁹

Partnership working

47. A multi-agency, co-located child exploitation and missing team has brought together the statutory agencies, Barnardo’s and missing children practitioners in Warwickshire. Warwickshire County Council has engaged the Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme to help improve its service.⁹²⁰

Audit, review and performance improvement

48. Warwickshire had a well-established audit and review process.⁹²¹

St Helens

Problem profiling

49. Data collection about child sexual exploitation was problematic in St Helens. The child sexual exploitation problem profile had not been updated and appeared to be based on out-of-date analysis.⁹²² All of this inhibited the ability of Merseyside Police to identify perpetrators and protect victims.

50. St Helens’ 2018 problem profile considered organised criminality but did not identify any organised crime group (OCG) engaged in child sexual exploitation.⁹²³ However, as at September 2019, Merseyside Police had identified 11 OCGs for the Merseyside region with child sexual exploitation as a primary or secondary crime type.⁹²⁴ There were other instances of child sexual exploitation which involved a “group/gang”.⁹²⁵ As there was only “a limited amount of resource” to identify children who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation by a group not formally classed as an OCG, networks in St Helens not formally classed as OCGs did not appear to be a focus of the policing response to child sexual exploitation.⁹²⁶

⁹¹⁸ WCC000236_018 para 104

⁹¹⁹ Minns 25 September 2020 108/7-15; WSP000125_003

⁹²⁰ WSP000232_005-006 paras 24-26; WSP000226

⁹²¹ WSP000232_007-011 paras 35-40 and 43; WCC000236_025 para 151; WCC000363_024 para 139

⁹²² Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 123/13-124/2

⁹²³ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 124/15-125/5; MSP000322_001 para 3

⁹²⁴ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 128/13-17

⁹²⁵ MSP000172_001

⁹²⁶ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 124/15-125/5

51. Between April 2017 and March 2019, in St Helens, Merseyside Police noted that 41 percent of 435 victims and 28 percent of 217 alleged perpetrators of child sexual abuse and exploitation did not provide their ethnicity.⁹²⁷

Disruption

52. Merseyside Police accepted that the information on the extent to which it had used each of the disruption tactics from the toolkit “*was not easily available*”.⁹²⁸ In 2018, HMICFRS identified “*limited use*” of CAWNs as a tactic for disruption and prevention. Improvement has been slow; Merseyside Police accepted that there were “*a very limited number of CAWNs issued*” and that there had been “*missed opportunities*”, as highlighted by the experiences of several of the case study children.⁹²⁹ It also appeared to have made relatively little use of civil orders.⁹³⁰

Empathy and concern for child victims

53. Although training and guidance around victim-blaming had been given to frontline children’s social care and police staff in St Helens, victim-blaming attitudes continued to be evident for some time. By the time of an audit in September 2020, however, only one example of inappropriate language was found.⁹³¹

Risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children

54. Risk assessment failed to protect several of the case study children who had been sexually exploited in St Helens. Children in need of support to prevent sexual exploitation were not always classified as sufficiently high risk to merit intervention from Catch22 (which works alongside young people, their families and the police in St Helens to find out what has caused them to run away, and prevent them from running away again in the future).⁹³²

Missing children, return home interviews and children in care

55. There were examples of placements and assessments of case study children in care which failed to keep them safe. In 2018 and 2019, HMICFRS found that police work around missing children in St Helens was too-often desk-based.⁹³³

56. St Helens Council has greatly reduced the number of children placed at a distance of more than 30 miles from St Helens.⁹³⁴

Male victims

57. Boys and young men referred because of sexual exploitation concerns and discussed at multi-agency meetings in St Helens accounted for 14 percent in 2017/18 and 11 percent the following year of the total number of children considered.⁹³⁵ St Helens Borough Council made no specific child sexual exploitation services available for boys and young men.⁹³⁶

⁹²⁷ Ian Critchley 28 September 2020 127/2-14; MSP000218_005-006 paras 29–31; MSP000220_005. Separate figures for sexual exploitation were not provided.

⁹²⁸ MSP000218_014 paras 91–92; MSP000223_008 para 29

⁹²⁹ MSP000296_027; Critchley 28 September 2020 140/9-141/21; MSP000322_002 para 9; MSP000218_012 para 82

⁹³⁰ MSP000528_002 para 10

⁹³¹ Leivers 28 September 2020 47/5-24, 48/17-49/12; STH001203_003 para 5.1; INQ004944_002 para 2.3

⁹³² Leivers 28 September 2020 111/10-113/14

⁹³³ INQ005332_008; MSP000296_005_016

⁹³⁴ Leivers 28 September 2020 89/6-91/15

⁹³⁵ STH000818_030 paras 6.1–6.2

⁹³⁶ STH000818_030 para 6.5

Children with disabilities

58. St Helens Council accepted that there was limited scope to identify learning disabilities or needs, or for practitioners to record the effect of disabilities on the child, and no guidance for staff on how to assess and record disability. The disabilities of two children in the St Helens case study group (CS-A27 and CS-A71) were not sufficiently identified and taken into account.⁹³⁷

Partnership working

59. The quality of the partnership working in respect of the case study children in St Helens was mixed.⁹³⁸

Audit, review and performance improvement

60. In 2019, Ofsted found that children's social care in St Helens was "inadequate" overall (and had declined in quality since 2014).⁹³⁹ St Helens Council told us that it had started to develop audit and quality assurance systems for its work with respect to child sexual exploitation but these were at an early stage of development.⁹⁴⁰

Tower Hamlets

Problem profiling

61. The Metropolitan Police Service's pan-London profile in 2019, which included Tower Hamlets, identified gaps in intelligence in several areas, including due to inconsistent flagging.⁹⁴¹ 31 percent of reports in Tower Hamlets did not specify the type of child sexual exploitation suffered by a victim.⁹⁴² There was also little information about the level of risk to a child (which was missing in 39 percent of crime reports considered) and the vulnerabilities of the child.⁹⁴³

62. The Metropolitan Police Service told the Inquiry that there were no cases or issues with child sexual exploitation by networks in Tower Hamlets, using the Inquiry's definition.⁹⁴⁴ Given the breadth of the Inquiry's definition of a network, this cannot be right. The 2019 problem profile identified that 9 percent of child sexual exploitation reports for Tower Hamlets in 2018/19 showed links to gangs or organised groups; it also accepted that "young people affected by, or associated with, gangs are at high risk of sexual exploitation".⁹⁴⁵

63. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets also indicated that it had not identified any cases of sexual exploitation by networks applying the definition of an OCG, although four operations within the Borough would fall under the Inquiry's definition.⁹⁴⁶

⁹³⁷ [STH000649_001](#); [STH000631_007_014-015](#); Leivers 28 September 2020 [107/10-19](#)

⁹³⁸ [Leivers 28 September 2020 93/21-25 and 110/4-111/9](#); [INQ004294_037](#) para 4.14;

⁹³⁹ [OFS012534_001](#)

⁹⁴⁰ [MSP000322_007-008](#) paras 25–28

⁹⁴¹ [MPS004318_014-015](#) paras 60–61

⁹⁴² [MPS004576_040](#); Williams 29 September 2020 [124/20-125/6](#)

⁹⁴³ [MPS004300_003](#)

⁹⁴⁴ [MPS004584_005](#) paras 22–23

⁹⁴⁵ [MPS004300_002,007](#)

⁹⁴⁶ [Richard Baldwin 29 September 2020 21/9-24](#); [LBT004289_018](#) para 61

64. Ethnicity was not recorded in the 2019 profile for 86 percent of offenders involved in 147 reports of child sexual exploitation and 14 percent of 166 victims of child sexual exploitation in the Central East Area BCU.⁹⁴⁷

Disruption

65. The Children's Society (which provides a commissioned service to support missing and looked after children and children with disabilities in Tower Hamlets) was critical of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets' practice with respect to disruption.⁹⁴⁸ Although disruption tactics should be aimed at perpetrators and locations where exploitation is occurring, the Metropolitan Police Service used CAWNs in Tower Hamlets to disrupt groups of children who were victims of child sexual exploitation.

Empathy and concern for child victims

66. There was some evidence of victim-blaming in relation to CS-A22 and CS-A77.⁹⁴⁹

Risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children

67. There were failings by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in the assessment of the risk of child sexual exploitation prior to 2019, such as in its assessment of the risk of CS-A81.⁹⁵⁰ More recently it has developed a rounded assessment form that moved away from a tick box approach.⁹⁵¹ However, concerns remain as to how long risk assessments take to be completed and reviewed.⁹⁵²

Missing children, return home interviews and children in care

68. In 2016, external inspection found that the Metropolitan Police Service response to children who go missing was poor. By 2018, there were some signs of improvement. Among the case study children, CS-A77 and CS-A90 frequently went missing from home or care without any effective responses.⁹⁵³

69. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets accommodated 80 percent of its children in care within 20 miles of the town hall. By October 2020, there were no Tower Hamlets children in unregulated placements.⁹⁵⁴

Male victims

70. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets accepted that the number of males referred to its child sexual exploitation team was low, and stated that it had put in place several improvements for the identification of male survivors.⁹⁵⁵

⁹⁴⁷ MPS004300_010; MPS004318_005 para 15. The Metropolitan Police Service operates across London in 12 Basic Command Units (BCU) which cover the different London boroughs. The Central East Area BCU encompasses the boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets.

⁹⁴⁸ INQ005080_007-008_013 paras 42–45 and 77.3

⁹⁴⁹ Williams 29 September 2020 159/23-160/1; MPS004363_041; Williams 29 September 2020 160/2-4

⁹⁵⁰ See Part F, para 37; 29 September 2020 6/14-9/7; Baldwin 29 September 2020 83/2-86/17

⁹⁵¹ Baldwin 29 September 2020 13/4-14/20

⁹⁵² LBT004214_014 para 49

⁹⁵³ 29 September 2020 9/9-11/7

⁹⁵⁴ LBT004289_015 para 53; LBT004337_007 para 19

⁹⁵⁵ LBT004214_052-053 paras 200–201

Children with disabilities

71. In common with other areas, improvement is required to systems in Tower Hamlets to increase the identification of sexual exploitation risk for children with disabilities.⁹⁵⁶

Partnership working

72. The London Borough of Tower Hamlets considered that there are effective structures in place, although in the past there had been some disjointed working, in part as a result of changes to partnership meeting structures and a high turnover of staff.⁹⁵⁷

Audit, review and performance improvement

73. The Borough has undertaken substantial work to address Ofsted's 2017 finding that its children's social care department was "*inadequate*".⁹⁵⁸ Similarly, the 2019 HMICFRS post-inspection review of the Metropolitan Police Service area found that there had been structural change and improvements in the approach to child protection.⁹⁵⁹

74. In 2018, HMICFRS identified concerns about the extent to which children reporting sexual exploitation in Tower Hamlets were listened to by Metropolitan Police Service officers and staff.⁹⁶⁰

Bristol

Problem profiling

75. In Bristol, cases flagged as sexual exploitation could have included criminal exploitation cases, until the system was changed so that cases could be flagged for both criminal and sexual exploitation.⁹⁶¹

76. Despite a significant number of adults who posed a risk to children, there was less information about offender networks.⁹⁶² Avon and Somerset Police's 2019 problem profile noted that:

- the police had not identified significant OCG involvement in child sexual exploitation;⁹⁶³
- the majority of offenders offend alone "*or with small groups which are socially motivated*"; and
- any incidents that have involved groups "*have not been in a traditional organised groups structure but rather a loose collection of associates who may be involved in other criminal activity*".⁹⁶⁴

⁹⁵⁶ LBT004214_055 paras 210–211

⁹⁵⁷ LBT004318_025 para 75

⁹⁵⁸ LBT004216_001-002

⁹⁵⁹ INQ005334_010-012

⁹⁶⁰ INQ005333_050-060

⁹⁶¹ Ann James 30 September 2020 43/25-45/4, 89/4-8; BSC000186_007-008 paras 27–31; BSC000082_004; BSC000317_002; BSC000284_010 para 40; ASP000438_021

⁹⁶² ASP000438_015

⁹⁶³ ASP000438_015-017

⁹⁶⁴ ASP000438_015-016

The second and third groups would be regarded as an organised network according to the Inquiry's definition.⁹⁶⁵ Avon and Somerset Police explained that networks using the Inquiry's definition were difficult to "segment".⁹⁶⁶

77. In Bristol, there were a series of issues leading to inaccuracy in the flagging of criminal cases for child sexual exploitation.⁹⁶⁷

78. The agencies in Bristol used algorithmic mechanisms to help with assessing risk and problem profiling. Avon and Somerset Police's Topaz Risk Assessment Profile (TRAP) system identifies suspects based on a score indicative of their risk of carrying out child sexual exploitation offences, taking into account various factors.⁹⁶⁸ Officers then consider whether to flag an individual based on that score and other intelligence.⁹⁶⁹ From TRAP, a weekly 'offender' list is circulated between multi-agency partners, which includes the reason why each subject has been identified.⁹⁷⁰ Bristol City Council uses its Think Family Database to create a profile of children at risk of sexual exploitation, bringing together 35 different datasets about children and known risk factors (such as episodes of going missing).⁹⁷¹ The 'Insight' team, funded jointly with the police, use that data to create a predictive risk model to analyse the extent to which children are at risk of sexual exploitation.⁹⁷² It produces a weekly, automated list of children at heightened risk of sexual exploitation.⁹⁷³

79. The use of predictive analytics to identify children at risk in Bristol and elsewhere has been subject to press comment and academic review.⁹⁷⁴ Concerns have been raised about the quality of the data inputted into the model, the risk of reinforcing the errors and biases of those making the original records, and the potential to focus on factors linked to socio-economic and racial discrimination.⁹⁷⁵ Bristol City Council's statistical analysis of the model in September 2020 found it to have 'Very Strong' precision and 'Very Strong' recall. However, other research was more cautious about predictive models in other areas, finding that four of every five children at risk were missed (false negatives) and, of the children the models identified as being at risk, they were wrong six out of ten times (false positives). The improved collection and use of data is critical to the response to child sexual exploitation but it is important that agencies do not over-rely upon it. On its own, predictive analytics produces too many misleading assessments; it may be a helpful supplement but should not be used as a principal tool.⁹⁷⁶

80. The ethnicity of 28 percent of 137 suspects and 19 percent of 474 children at risk of child sexual exploitation in Bristol was unknown or unrecorded.⁹⁷⁷ Internal research by Avon and Somerset Police in 2020 highlighted that some of its systems did not make it easy to

⁹⁶⁵ ASP000438_017

⁹⁶⁶ William White 30 September 2020 113/11-114/21; ASP000199_021 (figure 5)

⁹⁶⁷ See Part H, para 7.4

⁹⁶⁸ ASP000321_014-015 paras 57-58; ASP000434_003-004 paras 10-15; William White 30 September 2020 103/19-104/7

⁹⁶⁹ ASP000484_004-005 paras 14-16; William White 30 September 2020 105/16-23

⁹⁷⁰ ASP000484_004-005 paras 14-16; William White 30 September 2020 105/16-23. See, for example,

ASP000473_001.003.

⁹⁷¹ BSC000290; ASP000218_002

⁹⁷² BSC000288; INQ005324_048

⁹⁷³ ASP000321_012-014 paras 51-55

⁹⁷⁴ INQ005323; INQ005325; INQ005328_001-005,028-036,075-083; INQ005324; INQ005322

⁹⁷⁵ For example, some datasets (such as arrest records) have a lot of errors INQ005328_034. An ethics review carried out in January 2020 identified that the major problem with using predictive analytics in children's social care is that "the features that are indicative of social disadvantage and deprivation, and that are simultaneously linked to socioeconomic and racial discrimination, are also highly predictive of the adverse outcomes used to measure child maltreatment and neglect"; INQ005322_035

⁹⁷⁶ See Part H, para 25

⁹⁷⁷ ASP000221

record ethnicity; it was sometimes not clear who is responsible for recording ethnicity; there was some lack of knowledge about how to record ethnicity and why it is important; and some officers were not confident in asking members of the public to define their ethnicity.⁹⁷⁸

Disruption

81. There were regular Operation Topaz meetings where the threats posed by perpetrators and risks to victims were shared. Operation Topaz had been involved in intelligence-led disruption activity against perpetrators and evidence-led prosecutions, in partnership with the Crown Prosecution Service. This had included the use of civil and criminal orders, arrests, and the investigation of associated offences of drugs and theft. Operation Topaz had successfully focussed partnership efforts on tracking and apprehending offenders.⁹⁷⁹

Empathy and concern for child victims

82. Some examples of victim-blaming language were identified in the Bristol evidence.⁹⁸⁰

Risk assessment, protection from harm and outcomes for children

83. Over the past three years, there has been a steady decline in the number of assessments in which child sexual exploitation was identified as a factor in Bristol. It is unlikely that this reflects a real decline in exploitation. It is more likely that this is related to issues with data capture.⁹⁸¹

84. The Barnardo's Against Sexual Exploitation (BASE) project has developed specific ways to support child victims. Examples included sexual health clinics for vulnerable children offered from BASE premises several times a week and a dedicated CAMHS nurse in the BASE project to provide quick and flexible mental health services.⁹⁸²

Missing children, return home interviews and children in care

85. Completion of RHIs in Bristol was at a very low level in April 2018, when only 29 percent of children who went missing accepted an RHI. By June 2020, as a result of improvement action by the Council, 92 percent of 114 eligible children had been offered an RHI and 52 percent of them had accepted an RHI.⁹⁸³

Male victims

86. One solution to the under-representation of male victims being adopted in Bristol has been for Barnardo's BASE (a specialist service that supports young adults aged 18 to 25 who are at risk of being sexually exploited or where there are known concerns around sexual exploitation) to lower the threshold for entry into sexual exploitation support services when boys and young men are referred.⁹⁸⁴

⁹⁷⁸ ASP000484_002-003 paras 6-11

⁹⁷⁹ ASP000438_015_024; ASP000321_025-029 paras 107-116 and 121-123; ASP000487;

⁹⁸⁰ BSC000132

⁹⁸¹ James 30 September 2020 43/13-45/4; BSC000284_009-010; BSC000082_004; BSC000317_003; ASP000438_021-022

⁹⁸² BRD000278; INQ005293_009-010 paras 44-49

⁹⁸³ Ann James 30 September 2020 62/10-63/2-8; BSC000316_012; BSC000118_005; BSC000139_006-007; BSC000186_016-017 paras 75-79; BSC000284_020 para 84; OFS012558_002

⁹⁸⁴ BRD000278 para 25

Children with disabilities

87. In 2019, Bristol City Council proactively audited 12 cases relating to children with a disability who were considered to be at risk of sexual exploitation. This work identified strengths and tangible areas for improvement, which have been implemented.⁹⁸⁵

Partnership working

88. There was evidence of good partnership working in Bristol.⁹⁸⁶

Audit, review and performance improvement

89. Bristol City Council and Avon and Somerset Police have undertaken extensive internal auditing of their practice in relation to child sexual exploitation, including working with the NWG.⁹⁸⁷

⁹⁸⁵ BSC000132

⁹⁸⁶ BRD000278; ASP000446_001-002; ASP000448; ASP000449; ASP000450

⁹⁸⁷ BSC000139; ASP000316_001_008; ASP000199; BSC000132

