



Home Office

Government Response to the Child Sexual Exploitation by Organised Networks Report by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

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Introduction

1. Over the last decade, there has been growing awareness of cases of child sexual exploitation perpetrated by groups of offenders within local communities. High-profile investigations have highlighted complex situations where child sexual offending has proliferated over years or even decades.
2. The Government is determined to deliver justice for victims and has pursued work to understand the scale and nature of group-based child sexual exploitation to promote and support more effective prevention, disruption, prosecution and safeguarding work by local agencies.
3. Delivering our commitments in the Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy will strengthen our response to all forms of child sexual abuse, including by organised networks. This includes funding the Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme, and child sexual exploitation analysts in every policing region, to ensure that police can uncover and respond more effectively to these horrific crimes. We are also developing a better understanding of perpetrators, including through supporting the police to collect higher quality data on the characteristics of offenders.
4. Following this report into child sexual exploitation by organised networks and other reviews in local areas such as the Bradford district, we have commissioned Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to undertake an inspection into the police response to child sexual exploitation. This national inspection will assess current policing practice across England and Wales, to ensure all police forces are employing the most effective approaches in protecting victims from child sexual exploitation and relentlessly pursuing offenders.
5. The Government is also fully committed to ensuring offenders serve sentences commensurate with the gravity of their offending. Through the Police, Courts, Sentencing and Crime Act 2022 (PCSC Act 2022), we have expanded Section 14 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, to ensure that the courts have sufficient powers to appropriately sentence those who arrange or facilitate the abuse of children under the age of 13, reflecting the high harm intended and vulnerability of the intended victims. This ensures the maximum penalty is in line with the base offence, up to a maximum of life imprisonment.

6. The PCSC Act 2022 also introduces measures to ensure that serious sexual and violent offenders serve longer in prison. On 28th June 2022, the Act enshrined in primary legislation the Release of Prisoners (Alteration of Relevant Proportion of Sentence) Order 2020. Since April 2020, serious sexual offenders who receive a standard determinate sentence of 7 years or more for a violent or sexual offence, for which the maximum penalty is life, are required to serve two-thirds of their sentence in custody instead of half. The PCSC Act 2022 will also extend this provision to certain violent and sexual offenders serving sentences of 4 years or more.
7. The PCSC Act 2022 will also alter the release arrangements for those serving a Sentence for Offenders of Particular Concern (SOPC). This is a sentence which may be imposed following a conviction of the two most serious child sex offences (rape of a child under 13 and sexual assault of a child under 13). These offenders can only be released, at the earliest, at the two-thirds point of the custodial sentence, ensuring offenders face a punishment that properly reflects the gravity of their offending.
8. The Government welcomes the Inquiry's report on child sexual exploitation by organised networks and the insight it provides. The Home Office, Department for Education and Ministry of Justice have worked closely together to carefully consider the Inquiry's recommendations. The Government's response is set out below.

Recommendations and Responses

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.

Government Response to Recommendation 1

9. Crimes involving the sexual exploitation of children are totally abhorrent and offenders should face the full force of the law. The UK has some of the toughest powers in the world to deal with those convicted of child sexual offences, and the Government is committed to ensuring that the penalties available to the courts are robust in order to deter and punish abusers.
10. The Government has carefully considered this recommendation and appreciates the need to ensure sentences reflect the seriousness of such offending behaviour. We would be interested to see any evidence that the IICSA has collected that suggests that current practice is inadequate and why legislation may be necessary.
11. The Sentencing Council considered this issue in its 2012 consultation on the guidelines for sex offences¹, and felt that cases "where a child has been groomed into acquiescence should be treated equally by sentencers as cases where there is forced non-consensual sexual activity". This principle is reflected in the current sentencing guidelines for child sexual offences, which make clear that commercial exploitation/motivation, abuse of trust, grooming behaviour, or where offenders act with others to commit the offence, are all factors which increase the seriousness of the offending and merit tougher sentences.
12. Our view is that the factors set out in the recommendation are already adequately covered by the criminal law and sentencing guidelines. However, we would welcome further information from the IICSA to understand the rationale for the recommendation.

¹ [Sexual Offences Guideline \(sentencingcouncil.org.uk\)](https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/guidelines/sexual-offences/)

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.

Government Response to Recommendation 2

13. The Government committed to issuing a renewed version of the Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit in the *Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy*.
14. The Government accepts the Inquiry's recommendation that an enhanced Toolkit should be published at the earliest practicable time, and we have now delivered on this recommendation, having published an enhanced Toolkit on 19th July 2022².
15. The Toolkit highlights the key signs of child sexual exploitation that frontline professionals should be alert to, including coercion, manipulation, and deception.
16. We recognised the importance of effective problem profiling and have included information to support better problem profiling as well as work by frontline professionals to understand the threat in their local area. The Toolkit supports professionals by indicating sources of information that they should use when building a problem profile, including less well-known sources which may be currently underutilised.
17. We carefully considered the Inquiry's recommendation to create distinct guidance for creating problem profiles for child sexual exploitation by organised networks. Given the interconnectivity between forms of exploitation, the Toolkit remains a guide for disrupting all child exploitation, although it also emphasises the need for

² [Child exploitation disruption toolkit - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-exploitation-disruption-toolkit)

local services to assess the particular type(s) of exploitation taking place in their area so that they can tackle it appropriately.

18. We worked closely with policing leaders, frontline practitioners such as social workers and experts from a range of third sector organisations to ensure the Toolkit is useful and accessible to a broad range of partners with a role in protecting children and disrupting offenders.

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 sexual exploitation; and
- 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.

Government Response to Recommendations 3 and 4

19. We recognise that local and national understanding of child sexual exploitation, including where perpetrated by organised networks, has progressed since the guide for practitioners was published in 2017. We therefore propose accepting these recommendations in principle, noting that we do not propose making changes

immediately as we will need to consider and respond to systemic recommendations for safeguarding partners emerging from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Review and other national child protection reviews.

20. In addition, as referenced in the introduction on page three, the Home Secretary recently commissioned Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to conduct a national thematic inspection into the policing response to group-based child sexual exploitation. This will assess how the police are working with partners to better understand and tackle this offending, as well as how frontline officers are interacting with victims. The outcome of this inspection, and of the upcoming Ofsted thematic Joint Targeted Area Inspections on child criminal exploitation, including the local area response to child sexual exploitation, will be important to consider in updating guidance on child sexual exploitation.
21. In any future update to the child sexual exploitation guidance, the Government will take on board findings from these reviews and inspections, as well as considering the Inquiry's recommendations on adding detail around the role of the internet, exploitation perpetrated by networks of offenders, and clarity on the language used in risk assessments.
22. Government is committed to supporting local safeguarding partners to tackle all forms of abuse and harm, including child sexual exploitation. We are already working collaboratively across Government to support strategic leaders and practitioners to address harms and improve outcomes for children and young people at risk.
23. We have taken specific steps to strengthen the local strategic approach to tackling exploitation. Between 2019-22, the Government funded the Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme (TCESP) to deliver support to almost half of local authorities across England. Drawing on key themes identified from direct work with local areas, the TCESP has made more than 300 resources available to local strategic leaders and frontline practitioners, which includes learning around child sexual exploitation risk assessments.
24. This year, we are providing further funding for the programme to work with the sector, and Government, to develop and embed practice principles which bring together the best evidence – including from young people's lived experience – to support safeguarding partners identify and tackle child exploitation and harm that occurs outside of the home. While the Principles will cover all extra-familial harms, we anticipate them including, where necessary, the need for a nuanced response to specific harm types, including child sexual exploitation. This will help support effective multi-agency working and embed greater consistency in practice. We will ensure this project considers and draws upon key findings within the Inquiry's report into child sexual exploitation by organised networks, and plan to use this

programme, alongside our response to other national reports, to agree how best to consolidate, review and update guidance.

25. Learning from the challenges in protecting young people during the pandemic has also been important in our work to support local authorities tackle exploitation. Through our Covid Regional Recovery Fund, we provided £1.5m in 2021-22 to 20 local authorities across England to develop and strengthen multi-agency approaches to safeguarding adolescents at risk of extra-familial harm, including child sexual exploitation. These projects will report in the coming months, providing insight into effective practice in harnessing the potential of protective families, maximising protective education provision, and utilising reachable moments to protect and safeguard young people from harms outside the home. Other Government funded programmes of work, such as the Home Office Trusted Relationships Fund, are also providing us with greater understanding of risk assessment tools and their application.

26. Alongside the work outlined, the Government has published an updated version of the Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit, as detailed in response to recommendation 2. The Toolkit is broadly focused on child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation and is intended to be easily accessible by multi-agency partners.

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.

Government Response to Recommendation 5

27. The Home Office recognises the importance of robust data collection on suspects and offenders to inform problem profiling and activities to disrupt and investigate offenders. That is why we are working with police to drive improvement in the collection, analysis and use of data on child sexual exploitation.

28. This includes funding dedicated child sexual abuse and exploitation analysts in every policing region. As well as informing local tasking to support forces in tackling child sexual exploitation, the analysts form a network which is improving understanding of this offending nationally as well as driving up data quality.
29. The Government also funds the Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme which supports the police to uncover and prosecute more offending. This programme provides specialist analytical resources to forces, and brings together local, regional, and national data to support enforcement against organised exploitation of vulnerable people.
30. The Government has also introduced a mandatory requirement for police forces to record the ethnicity of those arrested and held in custody because of their suspected involvement in grooming gangs. Since March 2022 police forces have had a mandatory duty through the Annual Data Requirement to collect this data, with the first publications of this data expected in late 2023.
31. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) will provide their own response.

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.

Government Response to Recommendation 6

32. The Government believes that every child in the care system should be placed in a setting that meets their needs and most importantly, keeps them safe. We must do all that we can to protect children who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation.
33. We believe that local authorities are best placed to make individual placement decisions based on the child's best interests and their stated wishes, including where this concerns children who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation. We do not believe that a blanket ban would aid local authorities in making these decisions.
34. Local authorities already have statutory duties to ensure that children they look after are safe and have their needs met. This includes ensuring that care placements for children are suitable and provide them with the level of care and support they need. Anything less is simply unacceptable. When local authorities make care placements

for children they look after, they must consider the needs and experiences of children, including their risk of being subjected to sexual exploitation, and assemble a care placement that can meet all of their needs while managing the individual risk to each child. Ofsted holds local authorities to account on this.

35. The vast majority of children aged 16 or 17 are placed in children's homes or foster care. However, a placement in semi-independent provision can be the right option for some older children, where it is of high quality and the young person is ready for the level of independence that it promotes. As more older children are entering the care system, it is important that we ensure that there is a high-quality option available to facilitate the development of their independence as they prepare for adult life and leaving care. It is vital that local authorities have the flexibility to make decisions about care placements based on the individual needs of the child. While semi-independent provision can be right for some older children, we would not expect this to include vulnerable children suffering the trauma of abuse who are at heightened risk of exploitation.
36. While semi-independent provision plays an important role in the care system, we know that reform is needed to improve the quality of this provision and ensure that placement practice is appropriate. We have already banned the placement of under-16s in this type of provision from September 2021 – children of this age are too young to live semi-independently and should be placed in children's homes or foster care. We are introducing mandatory national standards and Ofsted registration and inspection for providers of currently unregulated provision for 16- and 17-year-olds. These vital measures will stamp out poor quality and bad practice in these settings and will ensure that children and young people accommodated in these settings can always expect suitable, safe, and secure accommodation which meets their needs and keeps them safe.