

**STRICTLY EMBARGOED UNTIL 09:00AM TUESDAY 31
MARCH 2026**

The Statutory Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs Chair and Panel

Today the Statutory Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs has its formal mandate. We are publishing our Terms of Reference. When these are laid before the House of Commons on the 13th of April we will start our full investigative work.

And I want to be clear, from the outset, about what that means, and what we intend to do with it.

I am joined today by my fellow Panel members, Zoë Billingham CBE and Eleanor Kelly CBE.

Together, we bring decades of experience in protecting and promoting the interests of children, holding police forces and institutions to account, safeguarding vulnerable women and girls from violence and abuse, and providing strong local leadership in times of crisis.

Across our careers, we have worked to ensure victims and survivors are put first, and that their personal experiences are recognised, respected and handled with care.

We have spent our working lives dedicated to improving the systems that failed these vulnerable children.

So, let me start with the victims and survivors. With the children.

Children across England and Wales were - and still are - sexually abused and exploited by grooming gangs. Raped. Trafficked. Threatened into silence.

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That is not disputed. What has been disputed, what has been minimised, explained away, or buried for far too long, is why the institutions that exist to protect them so often chose not to act.

During the consultation that informed our Terms of Reference, we heard directly from many victims and survivors.

We want to say something to every victim, survivor and family member who may be watching or reading about this today. You are not a case file. You are not a statistic. You are the reason this Inquiry exists. Your voices will shape everything we do.

We also want to be open about what we heard during that consultation. There is deep scepticism -justified scepticism -about whether this Inquiry will make a difference. Reviews have been held before and reports have been written. Recommendations have gathered dust. I understand why victims, survivors and others will ask: *why will this be any different?*

What I will say is this. We will not wait years to tell the public what we have found. Where we can, we will publish our findings as we go, so that every institution we are investigating knows what the evidence shows about them.

We will finish the Inquiry by March 2029. But there will be no opportunity for anyone to wait for a final report and then quietly manage the response.

I will also say: the survivors and victims of these crimes, and the public, will be watching every move we make. So will Parliament. We will set out our recommendations publicly and plainly. We cannot compel the government to act. But we can – and we will – make it impossible to pretend any findings don't exist.

So, what will the Inquiry examine?

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We will look at how grooming gangs operated, and how they were able to continue operating for so long.

We will examine what police forces knew, and what they did, or did not do, with that knowledge.

We will look at local authorities, health, social care services and schools.

And we will look at the cultural and institutional factors that led to children being disbelieved, dismissed, or in too many cases, blamed for their own abuse.

We have heard a wide range of views through our consultation – through the responses we had to our survey, directly from victims and survivors, from the organisations that support them and from the institutions that have worked with them.

What came through most clearly from that engagement was that we needed to look back further if we were to understand the patterns of abuse – so we will now look back at a full 30 years – beginning in 1996.

It was also clear that we needed to look at ethnicity, culture, and religion - not just through the lens of the how the state responds – but also at the role they might play as a driver of abuse.

We heard that the need for accountability of both institutions and of individuals was necessary - as was the need to ensure that all criminal evidence could be passed to Operation Beaconport – ensuring that institutions will not be left to investigate themselves. We have made changes to the Terms of Reference to address those points.

I want to address one of those factors directly.

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In many cases, previous reports have found, perpetrators were men from specific ethnic and religious backgrounds. We will not shy away from investigating any factor that led to the abuse and exploitation of victims and survivors by grooming gangs.

Let me be absolutely clear: this includes culture, ethnicity and religion.

We have heard that in some cases, police officers and officials were reluctant to act, reluctant to investigate or prosecute, because of concerns about how it may look.

If this is were the case - those decisions have had devastating consequences.

Children paid the price for it.

We will investigate any factor that contributed to patterns of abuse or to how and why authorities have failed victims and survivors. We will be led by the evidence.

We will examine this directly, not to stigmatise any community, but where the evidence demands it, and because victims and survivors deserve the truth.

We will conduct local investigations across England and Wales. We have already agreed to investigate Oldham. We are working swiftly to identify the criteria for choosing other areas, and we will publish the framework for how we make those choices within the next three months.

This Inquiry is fully independent of government and of every institution we will examine.

We want to acknowledge the cross-party support for the establishment of this Inquiry. That matters. As victims and survivors have told us repeatedly over the last three months, the protection of children from sexual abuse and exploitation must be beyond point scoring. They have said to us very clearly that they want answers, not arguments.

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We have met politicians from across the political spectrum over recent weeks, and we have been encouraged by the constructive conversations and the shared determination among everyone we have met that this Inquiry succeeds.

Independence is not a formality for us — it is the foundation for everything we do.

Because victims and survivors have every right to be sceptical, I want to be precise about what we are committing to.

We will be transparent.

We will publish our work as we go.

We will hold public hearings - open, and live-streamed.

We will not wait three years to tell people what we have found.

We will take the time this work requires, but we will not waste a day of it.

The children who were abused deserved better. The victims and survivors who came forward, often at enormous personal cost, deserved better.

This Inquiry is our response to that failure.

We will follow the evidence.

We will hold people to account, if necessary.

And we will make recommendations that are serious, built to last, and if implemented, would ensure that we do everything possible to prevent these heinous crimes in the future and importantly – deliver long overdue answers for victims and survivors.

Thank you

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