

Local Area Investigations: Outline of Scope

1. Purpose and objectives:

- 1.1. Local Area Investigations will examine group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse by grooming gangs within a defined local area. The focus is on the adequacy of institutional responses, the extent of systemic or leadership failures and whether children were effectively safeguarded from grooming gangs.
- 1.2. The Investigation will identify causes and consequences of any failures, including structural deficiencies, cultural factors, failures in information-sharing and errors of professional judgement in the identification, prevention and response to group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse by grooming gangs.
- 1.3. It will produce findings and recommendations aimed at both immediate local improvement and wider national learning and reform. Each Local Area Investigation is expected to inform a local report, while also contributing to the Inquiry's overall final report and national recommendations.
- 1.4. Where the evidence supports it, the Inquiry will identify failures in practice and hold institutions and individuals to account within its statutory remit. The Inquiry does not have the power to determine civil or criminal liability but will seek to contribute to justice for victims and survivors by establishing what happened, identifying failings and recommending change. The Inquiry will also develop an appropriate referral process in respect of criminal allegations and evidence in line with its Terms of Reference.
- 1.5. A central purpose of the Investigation is to examine not only whether harm occurred but why it was not prevented, including where institutions were aware or should reasonably have been aware and failed to take appropriate action.

- 1.6. Victims and survivors will be at the centre of the Inquiry's approach. The Investigation will be informed by their experiences, and it will consider the treatment and support they received before, during and after abuse by grooming gangs. It will seek to ensure that any findings and recommendations respond to the needs of victims and survivors.

2. Scope and parameters:

- 2.1. The Investigation will focus on a defined local area. A local area may include a local authority area, city, metropolitan area, group of neighbouring areas, or another defined geographical area where the Chair and Panel consider that approach is necessary to discharge the Inquiry's Terms of Reference. The Inquiry recognises that offending behaviour by grooming gangs may operate across local, regional and national boundaries. Where the evidence shows that relevant exploitation, safeguarding responses or institutional decision-making crossed boundaries, the Inquiry may follow that evidence so far as necessary to understand the local area under investigation.
- 2.2. The Chair and Panel will determine the temporal scope based on available evidence, including periods of heightened risk or known institutional concern. The Inquiry's Terms of Reference cover the period from 1 January 1996 - 31 March 2029. A Local Area Investigation may therefore consider that full period where necessary but is likely to focus in greater detail on the periods most relevant to the evidence.
- 2.3. The Investigation may adopt a range of methodologies and evidence-gathering routes, including:
 - 2.3.1. witness evidence;
 - 2.3.2. documentary analysis;
 - 2.3.3. data requests;
 - 2.3.4. previous inquiries, reviews and inspections;
 - 2.3.5. information and evidence provided by victims and survivors;

- 2.3.6. expert evidence;
 - 2.3.7. thematic research; and
 - 2.3.8. hearings, where appropriate.
- 2.4. Victims and survivors may provide information to assist the Inquiry's Investigation and shape its lines of inquiry without being required to give formal evidence. The Inquiry will protect victims and survivors' anonymity and confidentiality in accordance with its published protocols and procedures and the Victims and Survivors Charter. Victims and survivors will not have to give formal written evidence or oral evidence unless they wish to do so and the Chair and Panel considers that such evidence is necessary. The Inquiry will consider appropriate arrangements for doing so safely and fairly. Further details will be set out in the Inquiry's published protocols and procedures and the Victims and Survivors Charter.

3. Core lines of inquiry:

- 3.1. The Investigation will examine evidence through structured lines of inquiry aligned to the Terms of Reference. These lines of inquiry will guide the collection and analysis of evidence and inform the Inquiry's findings and recommendations about institutional and individual failures in responding to grooming gangs. They are not exhaustive and may be refined as evidence develops.
- 3.2. Knowledge, intelligence and recognition of risk
- 3.2.1. The Inquiry will examine what was known, or should reasonably have been known, about the nature and extent of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse by grooming gangs, including how intelligence was gathered, recorded, assessed and shared across agencies. This will include the quality and completeness of data, the existence and effectiveness of problem profiles and other risk assessments, the identification of patterns or repeat locations and whether gaps or deficiencies in intelligence contributed to a failure to act.

3.3. Institutional response and decision-making

3.3.1. The Inquiry will assess the adequacy, timeliness and consistency of institutional responses to suspected or confirmed exploitation by grooming gangs, including safeguarding thresholds, operational decisions, escalation processes and resource allocation and whether responses were proportionate, sustained over time and consistently applied across cases or cohorts of victims. This may include examining decisions not to investigate, decisions to take no further action, decisions about disruption activity and the extent to which professional judgement was properly exercised and challenged.

3.4. Victims and survivors: identification, treatment and support

3.4.1. The Inquiry will consider whether victims and survivors of grooming gangs were identified at the earliest opportunity, recognised as victims, and appropriately supported. This includes safeguarding interventions, access to support services, treatment within the criminal justice system, long-term outcomes and the experiences of those who raised concerns, including victims and survivors, professionals and whistleblowers. The Inquiry will also consider whether victims and survivors were blamed, disbelieved, criminalised, adultified, or otherwise treated in ways that affected their protection or engagement with services.

3.5. Missed opportunities for prevention and disruption

3.5.1. The Inquiry will identify critical points at which intervention could have prevented harm or reduced risk, including missed opportunities to remove children from harm, disrupt offender activity by grooming gangs, pursue investigations or share intelligence effectively, and it will consider the use and effectiveness of disruption and preventative measures.

3.6. Leadership, governance and organisational culture

3.6.1. The Inquiry will assess leadership oversight, governance arrangements and accountability mechanisms. It will examine

whether organisational and cultural factors influenced decision-making, including attitudes toward victims, reluctance to act or institutional defensiveness and whether identified failures reflect isolated decision-making or systemic weaknesses. The Inquiry will examine the role of individuals in responsibility, including senior leaders, and will consider whether they acted appropriately and exercised proper oversight. The Inquiry will hold individuals to account for failures within their organisations.

3.7. Ethnicity, religion, culture and institutional response

3.7.1. The Inquiry will examine whether ethnicity, religion and/or culture of perpetrators or victims played a role in the causes of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse by grooming gangs, or in the response of statutory services and other institutions.

3.8. Multi-agency working and information sharing

3.8.1. The Inquiry will evaluate the effectiveness of multi-agency working, including safeguarding partnerships and community safety arrangements and whether agencies shared information effectively, coordinated responses appropriately and resolved differences in professional judgement in a timely and effective manner.

3.9. Locations, premises and sectoral risks

3.9.1. The Inquiry will examine whether particular locations, premises or sectors were associated with exploitation by grooming gangs and how those risks were identified and managed, including whether relevant regulatory and enforcement powers, such as licensing and inspection regimes, were effectively utilised. This may include taxis and private hire vehicles, hotels and accommodation, takeaways and other night-time economy premises, parks and public spaces, children's homes, schools, places of worship and other settings identified by the evidence.

3.10. Risk factors and vulnerabilities

3.10.1. The Inquiry will analyse how individual and contextual risk factors contributed to exploitation, including factors such as being in care, missing episodes or wider vulnerability and whether services appropriately identified, assessed and responded to those risks. This may include children missing from home or care, school absence or exclusion, homelessness, substance misuse, sexual health indicators, criminal exploitation, trafficking, online contact, children placed in unsuitable or unsafe accommodation, children placed out of their local area or living without adequate care, supervision or support, and other indicators of vulnerability or harm.

3.11. Previous reviews, learning and implementation

3.11.1. The Inquiry will review prior inspections, audits, serious case reviews and independent inquiries concerning grooming gangs or relevant safeguarding failures, assessing whether recommendations were implemented and sustained and examining why findings have not consistently translated into effective operational or institutional change, including issues of accountability for non-delivery.

3.12. Current arrangements and system capability

3.12.1. The Inquiry will assess current safeguarding, policing and partnership arrangements, including whether existing systems are capable of effectively identifying, preventing and responding to group-based exploitation and whether further improvement is required. This will include examining what is currently happening in relation to group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse by grooming gangs, , the form it now takes, the level or scale of current risk, and whether present systems are capable of detecting and responding to that risk. This will assist the Inquiry in making practical recommendations for both local improvement and national reform.

3.13. Contribution to national learning

3.13.1. The Inquiry will identify lessons with wider applicability, including systemic issues, recurring patterns of failure and examples of effective practice to inform national reform.

4. Relationship to the National Accountability Hearings

4.1. Local Area Investigations will operate alongside the Inquiry's National Accountability Hearings and wider national workstreams.

4.2. Findings from the National Accountability Hearings and wider workstreams will inform the analysis of local evidence, while evidence obtained through Local Area Investigations will contribute to the development of national findings and recommendations.

4.3. This integrated approach is intended to ensure a clear understanding of how national policy, systems and oversight arrangements are reflected in local practice and outcomes. It will also allow the Inquiry to test whether national guidance, inspection, regulation, funding, training and accountability arrangements have supported or hindered effective local responses to grooming gangs. In particular, the Local Area Investigations will help the Inquiry test, in local practice, issues examined through the National Accountability Hearings.

5. Relationship with Operation Beaconport and live criminal investigations:

5.1. The Inquiry will liaise with Operation Beaconport and other relevant law enforcement bodies where necessary to avoid prejudicing live criminal investigations or prosecutions. The Inquiry will also develop an appropriate referral process in respect of criminal allegations and evidence in line with its Terms of Reference.

5.2. The existence of live or potential criminal investigations will not automatically prevent a Local Area Investigation from proceeding, but it may affect sequencing, disclosure, hearings, publication, restriction orders or the scope of particular questions.

6. Organisations and systems in scope:

- 6.1. The Investigation may examine the actions of relevant organisations, including local authorities, police forces, education providers, health services, social care, youth services, voluntary organisations and safeguarding partnerships where their actions or omissions are relevant to the identification, prevention and response to group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse by grooming gangs.
- 6.2. It may also consider the role of regulatory and oversight bodies, including inspectorates and relevant elements of the criminal justice system, where this is necessary to understand the evidence.

7. Evidence and methodology:

- 7.1. The Investigation will adopt a range of methodologies and evidence-gathering routes and draw on a broad evidential base, including witness statements and oral evidence, victim and survivor accounts and information, documentary material, case files, intelligence records and prior reviews. Analytical work will combine detailed case analysis with thematic assessment to identify systemic patterns and inform the Inquiry's findings.
- 7.2. The Inquiry may examine individual cases or groups of cases where they help illuminate wider institutional, systemic or thematic issues.
- 7.3. Engagement with victims and survivors will be conducted in a trauma-informed manner, in line with the Inquiry's Victims and Survivors Charter.

8. Outputs and impact

- 8.1. The Inquiry will produce reports setting out its findings and recommendations to support local improvement and national reform in the identification, prevention and response to group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse by grooming gangs and to hold institutions and individuals, including those in senior leadership or other positions of responsibility, to account.