

Terms of Reference

1. Overview

1.1. The Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs (the Inquiry) is established in recognition of the great harm experienced by victims and survivors of grooming gangs and the failures of statutory services that were supposed to protect them.

1.2. This Inquiry responds to Recommendation 2 of Baroness Casey's National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (June 2025) (the "National Audit"), which called for a time limited, targeted and proportionate inquiry into cases of failures or obstruction by statutory services in relevant local areas. It will identify failures in practice and hold to account the individuals and institutions responsible for those failures. It must drive real and lasting change in safeguarding systems and the criminal justice system at both local and national levels, making sure that lessons are learned and that victims and survivors are placed at the centre of any future change.

1.3. The Inquiry will take a strong approach to right the wrongs of the past and must ensure that institutions and individuals will be held to account for past failings. Under the terms of the Inquiries Act 2005, the Inquiry is unable to determine criminal or civil liability. For all criminal allegations or evidence from 1996 to the end of the Inquiry a referral will be made to Operation Beaconport – an operation that was recommended in Baroness Casey's National Audit and which is overseen by the National Crime Agency (NCA).

1.4. Together the Inquiry and Operation Beaconport will bring more perpetrators to justice, hold statutory services to account, act upon misconduct in public office, ensure that institutions are not allowed to mark their own homework and deliver justice for victims and survivors.

1.5. The formal setting-up date of the Inquiry, as per section 5(1)(a) of the Inquiries Act 2005, is 13 April 2026.

2. Victim and survivor focus

2.1. Victims and survivors must be at the centre of the Inquiry's approach, with trauma-informed engagement and support appropriately provided, alongside a focus on achieving outcomes that respond to victims and survivors' needs

within the set timescales. The Inquiry must consider where there has been long-term negative treatment of victims and survivors and its ongoing impact upon them, their children and families.

2.2. The Inquiry must be clear and open. To ensure that victim and survivor voices are heard and at the centre of the Inquiry, a Victim and Survivor Charter must be developed. The Inquiry must work with victims and survivors to develop this Charter which will set out the Inquiry's commitment to victims and survivors on how they will be engaged throughout the Inquiry. The Victim and Survivor Charter must include the ways in which all victims and survivors can share their experience and evidence with the Inquiry to inform its work regardless of whether they are in a local investigation area or not.

2.3. Engagement must be inclusive and representative. It must be recognised that victims and survivors are not all the same, that they may have different experiences and characteristics, and will have become involved in abuse and exploitation through different routes. This must include (but should not be limited to) the Inquiry acknowledging grooming, abuse and exploitation which happens in person, online, via child trafficking, and through criminal exploitation. The Inquiry must also recognise that victims and survivors will have a range of characteristics, different risk factors and vulnerabilities that may have played into the abuse or the response to that abuse. The vulnerabilities of children in care and residential care will be carefully considered by the Inquiry as they relate to group based child sexual exploitation and abuse. Engagement must include victims and survivors across England and Wales.

3. Grooming Gangs

3.1. The Chair and Panel must ensure that the Inquiry's work focuses specifically on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse committed by 'grooming gangs', as described in the National Audit.

3.2. Group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse is a kind of child sexual abuse, involving two or more perpetrators who are connected through formal or informal associations who are involved in or facilitate the sexual exploitation and abuse of children. This involvement may take many forms, including introducing children to others for the purpose of exploitation, trafficking a child for sexual exploitation, taking payment for sexual activity with a child, or allowing premises to be used for such activities.

4. Purpose and Objectives

4.1. Building on the work of the National Audit, this Inquiry will identify and shine a light on failings in previous and current responses to tackling grooming gangs locally and nationally. It will look at evidence of the response in local areas across England and Wales, as well as at the role of national government and systems in that response. Any investigations by the Inquiry must include where things have gone wrong in relation to victims and survivors who do not live in the investigation area, for example where they had been trafficked.

4.2. The Inquiry must look at systemic, institutional and individual failures, and make recommendations for improvements at both national and local levels as appropriate. This must include looking at the treatment of victims and survivors before, during and after their abuse, including any lack of support offered to them by statutory services and any ongoing negative treatment across generations. The Inquiry must also assess whether the views of professionals working within statutory services and any culture within those services negatively affected how victims and survivors were viewed by professionals, and the treatment of the victims and survivors, their children and their families. The Inquiry must identify failures in behaviours and practice which may have amounted to intentional or unintentional inaction or cover-ups. The Inquiry must hold to account individuals, institutions and statutory services responsible for those failures. It will not be part of the Inquiry's function to determine civil or criminal liability of named individuals or statutory services. For all criminal allegations and evidence from the Inquiry between 1996 and the end of the Inquiry a referral will be made to Operation Beaconport, overseen by the NCA. Where appropriate the Chair and Panel may ask national inspectorates to support the work of the Inquiry.

4.3. The Inquiry must examine the factors that allowed or caused exploitation and abuse to happen and go unaddressed at a local and national level – including the role of ethnicity, religion and culture of perpetrators and victims. This must include examining the response of statutory bodies and any issues of denial, as discussed in the National Audit.

4.4. The Inquiry should take account of findings from new research commissioned by the Home Office in response to Recommendation 10 of the National Audit, which will explicitly examine the role of ethnicity, religion and

culture, when considering the factors that drive and enable group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse.

4.5. To fulfil its purpose, the Inquiry will deliver the following focused objectives through local investigations and a national review. Local investigations may take several forms including local hearings, written research and collation of evidence, data collection and analysis.

4.6. Local investigations

4.6.1. The objective of the local investigations is to identify failures in organisations, systems and procedures, and failures by individual leaders, in protecting children from grooming gangs within local areas, and make recommendations for immediate and longer-term change and improvement where required. For each local inquiry, the Chair and Panel must set out the historic time period which that local inquiry will focus on, in line with the evidence they have received. The nature of the local investigations means that any area may be required by the Inquiry to undertake alternative forms of review and data collection and analysis alongside more formal local investigations in specific areas.

4.6.2. Specifically, the Inquiry must consider (as decided by the Chair and Panel for each local inquiry):

- The nature, adequacy, and timeliness of statutory service responses (both immediate and long-term) to suspected or confirmed cases of grooming gangs;
 - Missed opportunities for intervention, protection, and effective collaboration;
 - The response to, and impact on, individuals who reported grooming gang crimes, including victims, survivors, and professionals;
 - How different risk factors and vulnerabilities played into the abuse or the response to that abuse;
 - Whether ethnicity, religion or culture played a role in the causes and response; and
 - The extent to which identified failures have led to changes in practice, policy, or legislation, and whether those changes have been effective

4.6.3. In any local area, this may include examination of the actions of the following statutory services and related organisations (as determined by the Chair and Panel; the Chair and Panel may at any time determine

that additional statutory services or related organisations should be examined on the basis of new evidence):

- Education settings
- Youth and community services, including Youth Offending Teams
- Religious institutions and organisations
- Voluntary or third sector organisations, such as victim support organisations
- Multi-agency partnerships, including Community Safety and Local Safeguarding Partnerships (and their predecessors)
- National and regional safeguarding boards in Wales
- Local authorities (including children's social care, children's homes, family services, housing services, taxi and private hire vehicle licensing, parks and community cohesion services)
- Health services (hospitals, community hospitals, GPs)
- Mental health services (including CAMHS)
- Sexual health and pregnancy advice services
- Police forces
- The wider Criminal Justice System (including the Crown Prosecution Service)
- Educational, health, social care and criminal justice inspectorates
- Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman
- Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

4.6.4. The Inquiry must make referrals to relevant professional bodies, as appropriate, where failures to carry out duties and responsibilities are suspected. For all criminal allegations or evidence, a referral will be made to Operation Beaconport, which is overseen by the NCA.

4.7. National Review

4.7.1. To identify national-level recommendations for change in England and Wales. These recommendations must be based on information from local investigations, local hearings, reviews and data collection and analysis. They must also be informed by those issues already addressed

by the National Audit, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, or other government commitments.

4.7.2. Where local investigations find instances of the failure of political or institutional accountability mechanisms, consider where those instances have relevance across all of England and Wales and propose actionable recommendations to address and rectify those failures.

5. Scope

5.1. The Inquiry will cover England and Wales. Should the Inquiry find any material relating to the other devolved administrations, it will pass them to the relevant authorities wherever possible. The Inquiry will liaise with the public inquiry announced by the Scottish Government in February 2026, into Scotland's response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation, to ensure appropriate ways of working where cross-border issues arise.

5.2. The Inquiry will not address allegations relating to events in the Overseas Territories or Crown Dependencies. However, any such allegations received by the Inquiry will be referred to the relevant law enforcement bodies in those jurisdictions.

5.3. Exploitation does not necessarily occur in a single location. Any allegations of exploitation and abuse that crosses jurisdictional bounds will be passed on to relevant authorities wherever possible.

5.4. For the purposes of this Inquiry "child" means anyone under the age of 18. However, the Inquiry will consider issues in relation to the exploitation of individuals over the age of 18, if that abuse started when the individual was a child.

5.5. The Inquiry must examine issues arising between 1 January 1996 and 31 March 2029. Information the Inquiry receives outside of these dates may still be considered as part of the wider evidence base and final reporting.

5.6. The Inquiry will consider which local areas to review. The criteria used to select local areas will be published by the Inquiry within three months of the formal setting-up date and will be informed by a combination of factors including the experiences of victims and survivors, and evidence of

prevalence, harm and risk. The Inquiry must not consider that the absence of identified cases in a local area means that there is no harm being done there – a variety of factors should be considered when selecting local areas. The Chair and Panel may decide for any local area that public hearings are required, but in other areas they may not be required. In all cases the Inquiry must be sensitive to the impact on victims and survivors.

6. Governance

6.1. The Inquiry will be led by a Chair and two Panellists, appointed by the Secretary of State for the Home Department, under the Inquiries Act 2005.

6.2. The Chair may also appoint assessors or advisors to assist the work of the Inquiry.

6.3. In addition to their roles and responsibilities under the Inquiries Act 2005, the Chair and Panel should in particular:

- Oversee the Inquiry's relationship with the National Police Operation (Operation Beaconport);
- Work with law enforcement partners to draw up a mechanism to allow proactive information sharing between law enforcement partners, including Operation Beaconport, and the Inquiry;
- Consider how victim and survivor testimony will inform the work of the Inquiry, through meaningful engagement and trauma-informed practice; and
- Seek to achieve the most efficient use of both time and resources, keeping cost to the minimum possible, and leading to conclusions within the shortest possible time

6.4. In undertaking its work, the Inquiry may, where necessary and appropriate, engage with matters that intersect with ongoing criminal investigations. The Inquiry must take all necessary steps to avoid prejudicing such investigations, including liaising with relevant law enforcement bodies. The Inquiry's work is conducted under the authority of its Terms of Reference and is not intended to interfere with or substitute for criminal proceedings. Where there are lines of inquiry the Inquiry is unable to pursue within the timescales established by these Terms of Reference due to ongoing criminal proceedings, this should be noted in the relevant report but must not delay the timely delivery of that report.

6.5. Within six months of the formal setting-up date of the Inquiry, Operation Beaconport and the Inquiry should jointly publish a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This document must set out the principles, protocols, and mechanisms for collaboration between the Inquiry and policing colleagues.

6.6. The Inquiry will operate for no more than three years, within a budget of £65 million. Within three months of the formal setting up date, the Chair and Panel must determine what must be delivered within this timeframe and budget (and dates for those deliverables) and agree that assessment with the Home Secretary.

6.7. These Terms of Reference must be reviewed on an annual basis between the Home Secretary and the Chair and Panel, with consultation with Welsh Ministers as appropriate, including to review progress and ensure the Inquiry can deliver within budget and to time. If timescales or budget are at risk the Chair and Panel have a duty to provide the Home Secretary with proposals to remedy that.

7. Recommendations and reporting

7.1. The Inquiry will publish findings and recommendations for each local investigation (as set out in section 4.6) in accordance with the agreed timetable and aligned with the objectives set out above. These local investigation reports must be made publicly available.

7.2. The Inquiry must proceed with sufficient pace to ensure that its recommendations can be implemented swiftly and effectively.

7.3. The Inquiry may publish interim reports and emerging findings during its three-year duration in relation to both local investigations (as set out in section 4.6), and national findings as the Chair and Panel deem appropriate. The final report must be submitted to the Home Secretary by 31 March 2029.

7.4. Local and national recommendations must be informed by consultation with the authorities most likely to be charged with their implementation.

7.5. Any reports of the Inquiry or necessary updates must also be shared with the First Minister for Wales as appropriate.