

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs, HC 37

Tuesday 19 May 2026

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Dame Karen Bradley (Chair); Lewis Atkinson; Mr Paul Kohler; Ben Maguire; Robbie Moore; Margaret Mullane; Chris Murray; Peter Prinsley; Jo White.

Questions 1-78

Witnesses

[I](#): Zoë Billingham CBE, Panellist at Statutory Independent inquiry into Grooming Gangs, Eleanor Kelly CB, Panellist at Statutory Independent inquiry into Grooming Gangs, and Baroness Longfield CBE, Chair at Statutory Independent inquiry into Grooming Gangs.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Zoë Billingham, Eleanor Kelly and Baroness Longfield.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this one-off session that we are holding to explore the work of the grooming gangs inquiry. We are very grateful to have the chair and two panel members of the inquiry with us today. We have a number of questions, but could you introduce yourselves first?

Baroness Longfield: I am Anne Longfield, the chair of the inquiry. I was a peer, but I am on a leave of absence for the period of the inquiry. For many decades, I have been looking at children's issues and advocating. I spent six years as Children's Commissioner, the last year of which was the covid inquiry. I am delighted to be doing this. It is a job that I think we all agree absolutely needs doing, and needs doing very well. That is the task we set ourselves.

Eleanor Kelly: Good afternoon, everyone. I am Eleanor Kelly. I spent 50 years in and around local government before retiring in 2022, following 10 years as the chief executive of the London borough of Southwark. Like Anne and Zoë, I feel really passionately that the lessons need to be learned and things need to change in relation to all the institutions and organisations that have failed to listen, act and change over the whole of the 30-year period that we will be examining.

Zoë Billingham: I am Zoë Billingham, formerly Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary, where I led on violence against women and girls. I think that is why I have been asked to join this panel. I see many challenges, which I am sure you will talk to us about, but also huge opportunities for this to be a very different inquiry that really gets things done and changes the lives of victims and survivors in terms of their receiving the justice that is long overdue. Importantly, it could change lives and stop this ever happening to future children and grandchildren. We are really passionate and delighted to be here today.

Chair: I just want to start by commenting on your outreach to stakeholders. I had not seen that kind of thing happen before the start of an inquiry, so I am grateful that you have consulted as widely as you have. We have a number of questions, and I am going to start with Jo White.

Q2 Jo White: Thank you so much for coming to see us today. I am going to ask a question about the very beginning of the process. At the time, there was a lot of controversy, particularly with the survivors, about who should chair and run the panel. Two people had been appointed and then they resigned. So how did you come forward? Did you put your names forward or were you head-hunted to take on these roles?

Baroness Longfield: At that point, Baroness Casey got involved again and brought some stability and purpose and also trust back into the process. Louise also spent quite a bit of time talking to victims and



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survivors to reaffirm that this was a serious endeavour and she would be working alongside Government to ensure it was landed as such. We did not know each other before. We met when we had been appointed. My understanding is that Baroness Casey put forward recommendations for individuals. I worked with Baroness Casey in my professional life through the time she was the troubled families lead and the like. We were interviewed and then put forward. From that slightly chaotic or difficult point, there was stability and it came through in that way.

Q3 Jo White: Do you feel that you have the right mix of experience to take on this huge task? Is there anything missing?

Baroness Longfield: I do not want to speak for Baroness Casey, but I think what she was after and what she wanted—I saw the session she had with you when she presented her report—was people who could get to the truth of the systemic failures, who would not be misled by the level of data or explanations that are given, and had a track record of holding institutions to account. I think you get that here in all of us. Also, we understand completely not only the scale of this, but the heinous nature of the crimes. We understand the extent of those injustices and have the commitment to not only righting the wrongs, but, as Zoë said, ensuring it does not happen in future.

I think all of us agree that the recruitment was a success. The mix of backgrounds that you have heard a tiny amount about brings together a deep knowledge of violence against women and girls, and also knowledge of the police force, although Zoë has never been a serving police officer, and every aspect of local government from the bottom, from the up, from the inside and the out, and everything there is to know about children's wellbeing and social care and the like over many years. We totted up—forgive me for saying this—and we reckon we have about 130 years of experience together in this area. So we know what we are doing, we know what to look for, and we know we are pretty fearless at this stage in the game.

We are very clear about the intention, which you talked about at length at the beginning, that victims/survivors need to be at the centre of this. We have all, in different ways, worked with victims/survivors. We are humbled by their experience, but we also know the responsibility we take on. As Zoë just said, it is a responsibility, but we think it is a huge opportunity. It is a statutory inquiry, and hopefully it can deliver things that have not been possible before, but we know there is much to build on and there is a way to go, even though we have a relatively short period of time for the inquiry.

Q4 Jo White: As the chair of the inquiry, what do you perceive to be your greatest challenge?

Baroness Longfield: There are many challenges. First of all, we have seen so many reports, reviews and inquiries put forward recommendations that have not been delivered. I was taken by this: here is the list of 400 recommendations from different inquiries. Some were delivered in part,



and some were not delivered, but we are still at the point where, as a country, we have understood and got that reset that Baroness Casey talked about when she came before you back in June last year. We have not got that reset in how we treat children and treat very vulnerable children within that as well. We need to have an understanding that children under the age of 16 cannot make choices around consent, and that the law needs to follow that.

Among the challenges is the timescale. We have a set budget, which we are content to work with, but I am sure that at some stage it will bring challenges. It is a complex issue. It concerns individuals who have suffered the most appalling experiences. There is, justifiably, a deficit of trust. We have acknowledged that. Who would not have that? We want to bring about not only change but meaningful change. We do not think there should be another inquiry after this one. We should get to the point where the inquiry can have the momentum and the evidence to deliver the results that everyone needs. When we speak to victims/survivors—I am really pleased that you mentioned reaching out to them because we were determined to do that, as well as reaching out across parliamentarians—they tell us that what they have wanted is to be listened to, to be believed, to have people on their side and to get results.

We know that we are going to be tested on results, and rightly so; we understand that completely. There will be a mix of national issues—we will get on to that—and of course local area investigations. We have already got the timeline for the three years; there are no minutes to lose in that. There is a lot to deliver, but we are looking to work differently. We are going to be agile. Our legal team is in place. Our secretariat team is in place and growing. We have said throughout—and we have complete buy-in to the fact—that we want to work differently. It is not a blank sheet of paper; there is a lot to work on, and we need to be focused and work in a very agile way. We know that there are challenges, but we have set out to find solutions to those challenges.

Q5 Jo White: The most controversial and sensitive issues are those relating to ethnicity, culture and religion in terms of both the perpetrators and the victims. There is also the absence of data. How do you think you will be tackling those issues? That is what a lot of people will be focusing on.

Baroness Longfield: Completely. Again, in these 400 recommendations, those things are said many times, including on data. I will ask the others whether they want to come in as well, but our starting point is trying to understand and demonstrate what caused this, what allowed it to happen and what allowed it to continue to happen. In the terms of reference, we recognise the important issue of ethnicity, culture and religion in that. In the terms of reference, we strengthened what was said about that.

In Baroness Casey's audit, she sets out the pitiful state of data. At best, her audit was 34% of data, in some cases; 10 years ago, that would have been 3%. There is a complete lack of data. The prevalence and the disproportionality within that are clear to see. The lived experience of victims/survivors, which we are told about, reinforces that. Then there is



denial, which we keep coming back to, where people felt nervous, squeamish even, about tackling some of the issues of ethnicity. For us, I would say that we are not squeamish—we want those results and, obviously, we want data to be collected and mandated. We recognise that there is no single type of survivor or perpetrator, but we also know that answers can be sought there and delivered. That is what we set out to do. We are also working alongside the Home Office-commissioned research into the drivers of grooming.

Zoë Billingham: We just have to take the evidence to the conclusions it will draw us to. We are not going to be an inquiry that complains that we do not have data; we have a huge amount of testimony, and a huge number of prosecutions have taken place. In some instances, we have seen the type of *modus operandi*, and we have heard directly the testimony of victims and survivors. From prosecutions in some parts of the country, we know that the perpetrators are from Asian/Pakistani heritage. We are not going to shy away from or find excuses for that, but in fact quite the reverse; we are going to look forensically at how religion, culture, heritage and background could or could not have been drivers, not only for the appalling behaviours that we have seen, which men have been locked up for, but for the way in which the victims were viewed and, most importantly for us, for the way that agencies responded to what was evidently a clear and present danger and yet turned the other cheek. We are not going to do that in this inquiry.

We are going to be sensitive, thoughtful and careful, because the one thing that victims and survivors have said to us—they have said this behind closed doors, but I think I can share it openly, because they have said it themselves in the media—is that this cannot become a political football. Our inquiry has to get us to the truth, and we will get to that truth irrespective of what it takes, but we will do so in a way that is sensible, appropriate and proportionate.

Eleanor Kelly: We will also not be squeamish about the broad range of experience that we will almost certainly see. We already think that there will be different experiences in different geographic areas. We know that some victims and survivors feel excluded from the conversation if their perpetrators do not fit a particular *modus operandi* or a particular ethnicity. We want to make sure that everyone is covered. If it is a grooming gang, our laser focus on grooming gangs is the grooming gang irrespective of how they came together or how they are made up. We are not going to go down a rabbit hole of a particular group or a particular experience, because that would be completely unfair to the really broad range of victims and survivors with whom we are already in contact.

Chair: Recommendations of previous inquiries is something that we keep coming across in our work. An awful lot of stuff has been done, and we are not completely convinced that it has been acted on.

Q6 **Robbie Moore:** Thank you all for your time this afternoon. Baroness Longfield, I want to pick up on the appointment process, as a supplementary. You said at the start that you are on a leave of absence

from the House of Lords. Is your intention to go back in as a Labour peer after this inquiry?

Baroness Longfield: To gain my leave of absence, technically I am required to declare that I will go back in. I do not have to declare whether I will go back in as a Labour peer.

Q7 **Robbie Moore:** The reason I ask is that some concern has been expressed about the fact that you were sitting in the House of Lords as a Labour peer. Therefore, I ask how we as a Committee, and others, can seek reassurance that the appointment is completely independent, not aligned with political appointments, or anything like that, so that we are fully reassured that there will be no fear or favour associated with this inquiry.

Baroness Longfield: The starting point is that I have worked for 40 years on children's advocacy, children's issues—that sounds quite a long time, as I heard it in my own ear—mainly for a charity and as the chief executive of a charity, which requires you to be apolitical, and then as Children's Commissioner, which requires you to be very apolitical. You cannot be a member of a party or anything at that point. When I stopped doing that, I carried on as a charity leader—again, apolitically.

Out of those 40 years, for nine months, I was a Labour peer. I think I was asked to be a Labour peer because of the work that I had done, especially over covid, when I had a slightly higher profile. In accepting that, I wanted to be able to take children's issues into the Lords, on to the Floor and into debates, which is what I did. If you look at the records, virtually everything I said publicly in those nine months, including the maiden speech, was around children's issues.

To return to being apolitical is a very comfortable place for me. It is a place I have spent all my working life, apart from those nine months. I hope you can see that over the period since then—I stood down on 9 December—I have worked across parties. I think that has worked well. We have all worked very closely across parties and seek to do so in a very determined way. Having an independent inquiry is an immense responsibility. It is something you have to live up to. I would not have accepted that or asked to take the appointment forward if I did not respect that completely.

Q8 **Robbie Moore:** Is there a risk that that could be used against any of the outcomes of the inquiry in three years' time? Is there any perception of political association that others may wish to use as a narrative further down the line?

Baroness Longfield: There may always be risks with that, but they are risks that we have sought to overcome right from the get-go. As the Chair said, we reached out across all political parties in Westminster for meetings. We had a group meeting, and we will be meeting with that cross-party group of MPs four times a year throughout the whole inquiry. We have been very pleased by the response from all political parties in backing the inquiry and the direction we are taking it in. We have sought



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to make sure, in the initial stages, that that is the case, but we now have a legal team who will be working very clearly on a legal basis to ensure that that has all the guardrails around it that you would expect, so “no” is the answer.

Eleanor Kelly: And there are three of us—three strong, independent women. I do not think either Zoë or I are capable of sitting back and watching Anne or anyone else act in a completely political way that we would not then call out. There is always risk—there is risk in everything—but I do not think there is any inherent political risk in this at all. I have always been apolitical through my entire career, with no connection whatsoever to any political party. I think that this issue is far and away above politics. As Zoë said earlier, we hear from victims and survivors all the time that one thing that they really abhor is this issue being made a political football. They say that it is not politics or a story; it is their lives. We all take that really seriously. We work as a threesome. We work as a panel. It is not Anne in the chair, and Zoë and I saying, “Yes, ma’am.” We are working very closely together and taking this incredibly seriously.

Baroness Longfield: We are not politicians—never have been, actually. Our starting point is not that we are looking for the political place to take this. It is absolutely the opposite, to be honest.

Zoë Billingham: I hope what you take away from today, from hearing from all three of us, is our determination to get this inquiry absolutely right, but we cannot do that on our own. We do this with humility. We are humble in the approach that we are taking, but we absolutely need to make sure that the cross-party support, which we are incredibly grateful for at the moment, continues. We will do absolutely everything we can to continue to earn the respect that you have already shown us as a panel. When it comes to the recommendations, which will not be at the end of three years, we are absolutely determined to make them as we go, because that then gives us the opportunity in three years’ time to come back to those organisations and institutions that we have made recommendations to and to hold them to account during the life of the inquiry.

Absolutely, those recommendations will not be politically driven, but if they are going to be acted on, we will need political support for legislative changes and how agencies work together. You can begin to imagine the sort of changes we would want to see that would mean we never have to be in this place again—I do not mean here, but having to have another inquiry like this.

Q9 **Mr Kohler:** I want to pursue that point. I do not doubt the good faith in all your answers, and while this is above politics, it is also intensely political. Ms Billingham, I want to pick up on something you said earlier. You talked about various actors and agencies that will be subject to scrutiny, but I did not hear much about politicians, local government, regional government or national Government. Will they be subject to that scrutiny as well?



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Zoë Billingham: I will answer because you addressed the question to me, but Anne and Eleanor may want to come in on the local government point.

As an inquiry, the very first hearing we will have will be a national one. Anne has already talked about the 400 recommendations from all the inquiries related to grooming gangs that have made recommendations in the past. Our very first act will be to call local government and national politicians to the inquiry to account for the recommendations that have been given to them on their watch, what they have delivered, what they have not, and why.

The list of agencies and organisations—local government, national Government, police, CPS, health service—is as long as your arm; we could go through them all now that we have them here. All of them, right from the get-go of our inquiry, will be asked to account to us, as a statutory inquiry, for what has happened in the past and to explain why the changes we all want to see have not been made.

We will then move into our local inquiries, where we can test what is happening on the ground right now, because this cannot be just a backward-looking inquiry. We must look to the future to ensure that this abhorrent crime—which I am afraid is still being meted out on children today, as we sit here—stops for good.

Baroness Longfield: We can talk through where we are on our plans; Zoë started to talk about that. Think of this as a stocktake of all the national organisations that we would have expected to deliver those 400 recommendations—asking them publicly, in hearings, where have they got to, what needs doing, who is leading on this, what level of priority does it have in their organisation, is it being delivered, how do they know it is being delivered, what would they expect to have been delivered, and what would they do if it is not? It is proper bottoming-out stuff on all the organisations you would expect, which includes all the agencies. Then we will also look at the areas where there have been inquiries or serious scrutiny and get them back to ask them exactly the same questions.

So all of these things will happen. The way we see that going is that we will have a benchmark at the beginning. That will be towards the end of this year, and that will be the benchmark. Then when we move into our local areas—I know I am morphing along a bit—that is the starting point we will interrogate in each one. The answer is, of course, that local authorities will be very much part of that. One of the areas everyone knows we are focusing on is Oldham and the legal rule 9s; the letters asking for evidence have already gone to Oldham this week to start that process.

Eleanor Kelly: If I can give an example of a Government Department rather than local authorities, because local authorities will all be under scrutiny, the Department for Transport has actually started some work in relation both to bringing in national minimum standards on taxi licensing and to consulting on a change to where taxis are licensed—there has not been a change in that since 1847. There are 263 licensing authorities—all



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of the local authorities—that have responsibility. The suggestion is to move that down to 70 regional transport authorities to give that responsibility to a much wider evidence base and area base. But that does not answer one of the fundamental questions about out-of-area working.

Respecting and recognising that the Department for Transport has done a lot of work and has responded to Baroness Casey's recommendations, we want to press further into that in relation to actually helping with enforcement and those national standards. But unless you take action specifically to disallow out-of-area working—if you work in that area, you have to be licensed in that area—then the problem will persist because people who want to do harm will find the loopholes. In that example, we will be looking for those loopholes and pressing for additional work, regulations and changes that need to be made to strengthen what has already been put in place.

Q10 Mr Kohler: To be clear, will local authorities, local politicians and failure in the political process be part of your inquiry?

Eleanor Kelly: If you take the example where it has been suggested that certain actions were not taken because of concerns over community cohesion, we will be looking for evidence and examples of that. Those are not the sorts of decision that are taken in a social care context; they are taken in the context of another part of the local authority, often in political circles. They are not so much about informal decision making, but more about how things are passed into another part of the council. We will be able to evidence that, look at it and ask questions in our formal hearings. We will ask questions under our statutory powers as to why that was the case and why people were squeamish or concerned.

Baroness Longfield: One of the themes we will be looking at in some detail is around children's care. We know that such a proportion of children who were targeted by grooming gangs were care experienced. Obviously, we have all seen the serious case reviews and the inquiries and heard from victims themselves about how they were let down. That is an example of a national theme, and when we look locally, we will look at all of those issues in some detail. The whole issue about dereliction of duty in public office will be something that we will be keen to explore.

Q11 Chair: When you are looking at children's care, will you be able to go into county lines and the missing? Missing children are one of the most abused parts of our society.

Baroness Longfield: One thing that relates to Baroness Casey's recommendation, and which this inquiry is already part of, is collecting data. We intend to do a data request very shortly, which will look at all those indicators of risk and vulnerability, including time missing, periods of time not in school over several terms, children in care who have been moved, and a whole range of different factors. That was a data request that I did regularly as the Children's Commissioner, so I know how to do those.



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Again, we will do those to set a benchmark. We will do them now and towards the end as well. By doing so, we are making it clear that we are watching and looking. There is obviously a question of, "Are you going to wait until the end and then put recommendations out and wait and see what happens?" Well, no, because we are going not only to report as we go along, as Eleanor said, but to set in train several pieces of evidence that we can monitor as we go along.

The hearings of the national organisations will also include tech companies, because we know that around 40% of grooming now involves online aspects. All the victims/survivors have said to us that what used to be the park is now the screen. We intend to hold some public hearings in the new year with tech companies. Again, those will be public hearings that are televised. According to the NSPCC, about 48% is on the Snapchat platform, so there is an account to be had there. That is just an example of how this will cut many ways, but we all go into it knowing that we do all those victims/survivors' cases for justice a disservice unless we join it all up. That is where that intelligence needs to happen, and that is where there has so often been a massive gap locally—and nationally, to be honest. We will be joining all those dots and looking for ways that they link, so that we can then make some intelligent analysis from that. That is the plan.

Zoë Billingham: To confirm the question, we are going to be asking those who knew that something awful was happening—based on the evidence of other inquiries and the findings in serious case reviews—why action was not taken. That is the crux of it, isn't it? That is not about this inquiry learning from it; it is about actually bringing accountability for the victims and survivors, because they are as puzzled as all of us in this room probably are. It has happened in plain sight for 30 years, and it is still happening. Why was it institutionally not recognised, and how can we stop it happening again?

Baroness Longfield: One of the most awful things in some of the discussions with victims/survivors—I am sure everyone around the room has heard this—is when they say, "Everyone knew." We can all sit and be shocked by that. Even just saying the words, I could feel myself taking in a breath. However, we know that it is true, and there has been that acceptance, complacency, denial and hiding, or thinking that it is someone else's responsibility. We are very clear that if anyone thinks it is okay not to be proactive in protecting children and stepping in, we disagree.

Q12 **Margaret Mullane:** My questions are about the framework. What was the rationale for adding four years to the scope of the inquiry?

Baroness Longfield: As you can imagine, we had quite a bit of discussion about that. When we went around the country and talked to victims/survivors and victims/survivors' groups—we were very grateful that some organisations helped us do that—many victims/survivors came forward with understandable levels of distrust, but they still wanted to be part of this and make it work. We were immensely grateful about that.



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There were a number of things that were not up for discussion as regards the terms of reference, but the period of time was. Right from the start, people said, “We think it needs to go back further,” and some people said, “We think it needs to go back to the implementation of the Children Act,” which was 1992. Everyone felt that it needed to have a longer lead-in to better understand, in some ways, how we had got to this place. Lots of people talked about the ‘80s and ‘90s—certainly the ‘90s—as being the time when this exploded and almost got baked in. We felt that we needed to go back further, and that was a clear message from everyone.

We were then left with a decision: given that we have a set amount of time and resources, what can we meaningfully do? We have tried to find a way that we can bring all of that together by extending the period by four years, so that it is 30 years. You could have expected that the Children Act should have been in full implementation by then. That allows us to go back to a period of time that victims and survivors told us was really important. As we will say throughout, victims and survivors are obviously at the heart of this, so we felt it imperative to see how we could make that work.

Q13 Margaret Mullane: That is in regard to your evidence gathering, and you added four years to the scope of the inquiry so that you can go back as far as you need. With those terms expanding, you said earlier that three years is not long enough, and that it is already challenging.

Baroness Longfield: We know how long some inquiries last—that is the whole thing about this. It needs to be focused, punchy and timely.

Q14 Margaret Mullane: You are saying it is tight already, aren’t you?

Baroness Longfield: Yes, which is part of the reason why we did not go back to 1990 or 1992. We thought that it was important, and we thought that there were very valid reasons for that to be the case. When we looked to check within ourselves and the team over whether it was possible, we again came away with the issues that we have already brought up. We are seeking to do things differently. There is a vast amount of work to build on.

We are setting out to be agile in our way forward. We are not going to be an inquiry that sits quietly for three years and then pops up at the end. There are going to be concurrent things going on; we are going to have national and local. We are going to really flex every lever that we have to make this work. We thought, and we believe, that it is possible. Yes, of course, we are all going to have to work on full cylinders constantly. Everyone around us and the legal team know that as well, but we do think it is possible. We thought it was important to be able to respond to the points that they raised as the instant, first things they brought up.

Eleanor Kelly: Every challenge comes with an opportunity. The opportunity that comes from looking at the 30-year period is that it gives you access to victims and survivors who have had time as adults to work through some of the trauma of what happened to them—to have the life experiences that they have had, including the fact that they continue to be victimised by the systems into adulthood because of what they



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experienced as children. They are in a much better position now to be able to work with us and help us. That includes people who advocate for younger people who have experienced this much more recently.

The opportunity that it brings to us is to be able to access a really knowledgeable and able cohort who have got themselves into a position of being able to work with us on this in a much more trauma-informed and able way, compared with people who are still working their way through the impacts that these awful crimes had on them. It gives us a good opportunity in that respect.

Zoë Billingham: To come in on the back of that, if you look at some of the previous statutory inquiries that have taken place, they have taken such a long time that people have almost forgotten that they have started by the time that they report. It is really important that we embrace pace as our friend, because it will enable us, as the panel, to be really clear about the scope of what we are going to look at in a particular area and the forensic nature of the questions we are going to ask, and to really boil the questions down to the basic, simple things that we still do not have answers to, so that we can get that clarity in the deliberations and from the witnesses we hear and the evidence that comes to us.

We have got to use it to our advantage so that we can get this work done effectively but forensically and within reasonable parameters. We do not know what our recommendations are going to be, but I suspect that lots of people in this room already have ideas as to the types of recommendations we should be making. I know for certain that victims and survivors we have spoken to have also intimated things they would like to see change. The fact that we have to get this done and delivered in three years is very much to our advantage.

Q15 **Margaret Mullane:** For me, this is one of the biggest things in this country in regard to trust—that is true of the public, as well as the victims, with everything that has happened. That aside, is the budget of £65 million enough for what you are trying to do? I hear very loudly and clearly from you that it is a victims/survivor approach that you are doing, so perhaps you need more money?

Baroness Longfield: We think it is doable, and we have signed up for that. I suppose the first thing is that that was the deal. We think it is probably going to be tight, but we will also work to deliver it on that basis. Obviously, if there is a moment where that is not possible, there will be opportunities to say so. But we are not starting off saying, "There is no way we can do that. We cannot do anything until we have got more agreed." We are absolutely working on that basis. Again, there is so much to build on. Everything leads us to that forensic focus that we need. In system terms, we know the organisations inside out. We believe it is possible with the budget and the timing.



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Eleanor Kelly: And there are other budgets attached, for example, to Operation Beaconport, and budget requests from the IOPC and others, so they have their own money. We are not funding any work that we need them to do for us.

Baroness Longfield: I am really pleased with the announcement about the budget they have been given.

- Q16 **Robbie Moore:** To really push you on “We believe it is possible” with an envelope of £65 million: the inquiry, as I understand it, has not even announced which local areas it is going to be focusing on, or what the criteria are for which local areas there will be. Surely, therefore, the funding allocation is not known, when we do not know how many local areas are going to be focused on? How can we confidently say that the funding envelope of £65 million is appropriate?

Baroness Longfield: We have not announced the criteria or the local areas, but there is not long to go on that. We have to announce those by 13 July. We are working hard to bring that back, and all of our plans work to allow us to do that sooner. I am not going to say an exact date because it is bound to change a little bit, but we are seeking to do that before 13 July. When we announce the criteria, we intend to announce our first tranche of areas.

- Q17 **Robbie Moore:** Coming back to my question, how can we be confident about the funding? As a follow up, I hope the funding envelope would not restrict how many local areas can be explored, and which ones are explored. I want to push on the £65 million.

Baroness Longfield: Of course. As Zoë just said, the pace is our friend. The last thing I think survivors and victims want is for this to take 10 years plus. Pace is something that we have to work with. Clearly, if we had 10 years and £200 million we could do lots more, but we think we can be focused, effective, make good judgments and deliver the aim of the inquiry within the budget and time we have. Clearly that means working with fewer areas than you might do were you doing it over a very long time period, but we are looking in different ways. We are looking at stocktaking the inquiries that have already happened, and monitoring those as we go along. There are clearly questions we want to ask, interrogate and follow up. We will be having our local area inquiries which we announced, in a first and a second tranche. We will then have the ability to add areas or aspects that we wish to investigate as well. So we are working on that basis, which is why we say at the moment that, with those assumptions, we believe it is doable. We are only in month 3 at the moment, so there are lots of unknowns, but within the planning we have done with the legal team, that is the doability of it. We will know more in two to three months, and we will be back with the criteria.

- Q18 **Robbie Moore:** Have you calculated how many local areas you will be looking at?

Baroness Longfield: We are looking at all the local areas that have had an inquiry already in the national round, or serious case reviews. I cannot



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remember the exact number, but it is a significant number. We will then have two main tranches of areas. I want to give us a bit of flexibility, because we have not quite got it settled yet, before we nail the numbers to the mast, but there will be two distinct tranches, and then we will leave some for further ability to investigate if we need to.

Eleanor Kelly: If we think there are gaps in the national picture.

Baroness Longfield: Exactly. Data will be coming to us all the time and we will be collecting evidence as we go along. To give you a little more idea of the timescale, the first tranche of areas will be on, around or before 13 July, and the second will only be about September this year, so quite soon. That is necessary to allow our legal team to start the investigative processes. The local area investigations are of course going to be investigations and hearings. The hearings will only be part of that wider investigation.

Zoë Billingham: That is a really important point. I completely understand where you are coming from, but it is really important to continue to stress that we are not starting from a blank sheet of paper. We have all of those local inquiries, inspections, safeguarding reviews, serious case reviews, criminal investigations and so on. We have all of that information already available to us.

Let's look at what it is we are seeking to achieve in this inquiry. It is fundamentally, as in Baroness Casey's audit, that we need to know why lessons identified repeatedly, in so many different parts of England, have not consistently been translated into sustained institutional action and operational change. That is absolutely our starting point. That is why we do have confidence that the three years, going into some but not every single local area, and actually having a really clear mandate for our national review, will bring us to the answers that we need to get to. That is why we have the confidence that we have.

Q19 **Peter Prinsley:** I am Peter Prinsley, the MP for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket. To a member of the public, £65 million seems like an enormous sum of money. Would you give us an idea of how that money is to be used exactly? Is this £65 million for legal fees? Is it £65 million for salaries? Just tell "a voter on the doorstep" what you are going to use this £65 million for.

Baroness Longfield: It does sound like a huge amount, doesn't it? When you look at inquiries that have spent hundreds of millions, you do wonder quite how you could spend that amount. I do not have the exact breakdown, obviously, but legal fees will be a large part of it. This is a legal statutory inquiry that needs that legal basis, so the legal fees will be a significant part of that. There is also a secretariat, which will be working with and guiding the team. There are also the support costs that will come around, not only for the victims/survivors, but for the core participants. Again, we are trying to be agile, so we will be publishing our core participant strategy towards the summer and, again, looking at finding ways to enable individual victims/survivors to tell their stories without



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going through some of those slightly more formal hoops. It is a mix of those things.

Q20 Peter Prinsley: I do understand that that is the case. Would there be, for instance, a process of competitive tendering for the legal services?

Baroness Longfield: It was competitively tendered, and we appointed about two months ago.

Eleanor Kelly: We would also say that, with our backgrounds in local government and the charitable sector, we are very used to getting a quart out of a pint pot.

Baroness Longfield: She says that all the time; I knew she'd say that.

Eleanor Kelly: And, as a former section 151 local government person, I know how to do it. For example, many inquiries that have gone before us have been very legal-heavy—"We have to follow the legal processes because we are a statutory inquiry"—but we do not need to have all of our investigations or all of our research done by expensive lawyers or very expensive lawyers' teams. Our secretariat will be staffed with people who can also do that sort of research, at civil service salary levels rather than at expensive private sector lawyer fee levels. We will spend that £65 million very wisely.

Peter Prinsley: I am sure you will. Thank you.

Q21 Chris Murray: I want to keep pressing, if you don't mind, about the £65 million and the three years. Can you explain what the process was like with the Home Office or the Cabinet Office when you set this up? Did they say to you, "What can you deliver for £65 million?" or, "What can you get done in three years?" Or did you say, "We think this will cost about this amount of money and take this amount of time"? What was the variability? Given that we do not know how many local inquiries there are, I just cannot see how you have arrived at those two numbers.

Baroness Longfield: We were not party to the discussions around either the timescale or the amount of money. When it came to the first task we had, which was to consult on the terms of reference, those were two items that were not up for discussion, so we are probably not able to give you too much background on that.

Obviously, as seasoned professionals coming into these roles, we made a judgment about whether it was possible to deliver the high-quality outcome that we all want to see over that period of time and with that amount of money. Without having six months to sit down with lawyers and work it out, clearly our professional judgment was that we could. From the get-go, we always set out—Baroness Casey was very much part of the discussion in the beginning—that this would be done differently. That changes a lot, because it means that you are looking in a very agile way at how you can gather the evidence you need, get the information you need, and find the lines of inquiry, for instance.



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Some of this will be about understanding what we are being told and using that to inform, with intelligence, those lines of inquiry. We are seeking to do that in a way that does not always bring us the huge legal costs that it could. Plus, we will be publishing our findings as we go along, which means there will be a period at the end that can be brought forward a little. Sometimes the report can take a year to write, but we only have three years, so let's not do that. Let's do it as we go along, then when we get to it, we can pull it together. Those are things that immediately come to mind, but from our professional judgment point of view, we have confidence in it. If we get to the point in a year or six months, then there is a route to be able to have that discussion.

Zoë Billingham: Speaking personally, I would not have signed up to do this work if I did not think we could do it in the timeframe that we have been set. On any account, £65 million is an enormous amount of money, and we are going to find ways to make sure that we can do this within that budget and that timeframe. As Anne said, we are pushing the boundaries of legal possibility—I suppose that is the way I can describe it—because we really want to do things differently in this inquiry. I hope it will set a model for public inquiries in the future, which will mean that we are not daunted in having this conversation and debate, rightly, in public because of the sheer cost to the public purse. Let's face it: £65 million is an awful lot of money.

Q22 **Chris Murray:** That is really helpful. Given that there are the limiting factors of £65 million and three years, which you accept and think are reasonable, going into this process, what is your attitude to the way the different local inquiries will be structured? You have already mentioned Oldham, and you sent letters out there. Will it be a rolling process? You said that you have a lot of evidence. Do you have a typology of different types of local inquiry?

Baroness Longfield: We will publish the criteria we are looking at. That criteria will also need to hold up legally in terms of those that might wish to challenge it.

Q23 **Chris Murray:** Could you explain what you mean by that? Do you think that you could be challenged if you use the wrong criteria?

Baroness Longfield: If you set criteria that are too broad, you will not be able to meet them. If they are too narrow, people might think that it is not fair that you did not go into some areas. That is all it is. It needs to be transparent, fair and all those things. What we are looking at with areas—again, you had this conversation with Baroness Casey—is building data around them; looking at what that data tells us and what the evidence on prevalence and prosecutions tells us; and listening to lived experience from victims and survivors. That takes us to a certain place. We will probably not have the typology as, “We will go to one seaside rural area.” It is such a precious resource, so we are going to go to where all those things are the case.



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The inquiry will have a standard methodology, which can obviously change and may take longer in areas where the situation is more complex. A core standard methodology would have the evidence gathering. For core participants there will be a legal process involving legal letters—rule 9s for evidence—and for each of them there will be a period of televised hearings. Then, there will be the report, which again is in our terms of reference and is what we signed up for, at the end of the local inquiry.

At the same time, the national streams will continue, as will the national issues—for instance, taxis, children's social care and the like. That will feed into the scrutiny locally, and what we find locally will feed in nationally as well. I hope you can see that we are trying to be creative with this, and that we see that not only pace but join-up is our friend. The lack of join-up has left the terrible experience of so many survivors and victims without justice, and it has come up time and again in the recommendations.

Eleanor Kelly: This will not be a rigid blueprint. Within local area investigations and hearings, we will need to examine issues that happened locally and how both national and local themes apply. For example, you could have an area where community cohesion issues did not apply, and an area where they very much applied. Although we will have a standard process, and the national themes will be recognised in the way we conduct the local inquiries and hearings, we will tailor that approach to the knowledge, information and evidence that we have gathered in each local area as we turn our attention to working through the programme for local areas, which, as Anne says, runs parallel to the national investigations.

Zoë Billingham: At the risk of repeating myself, we are not going back to scratch. We are going into local areas where the question, I am sure, is not so much, "Did it happen here?" but, "Why didn't somebody stop it?" That is really important. We are starting from a position where there have been prosecutions, investigations or inquiries that were led by reputable individuals and properly constructed, so we can reasonably adopt those as starting points.

The question is then, "Why was it not stopped? Why was it not acknowledged? Why were these girls described as "streetwise" in police records"—that is just by way of example; there is no one single incident—"and why did it not stop?" That is an advantage to us in our inquiry, as we do not have to go back and establish it as a matter of fact. We are starting from the point of the victims and survivors having endured something that most of us cannot even imagine happening.

Q24 Chris Murray: I want to drill down a little into what you are saying about running the national and local inquiries concurrently. There will be a rolling programme of local inquiries and an ongoing national set of broader themes. How will that work in practice? What is your methodology for ensuring that you are not halfway down the national themes but still finding new evidence or making new discoveries? The fear I have is that the local inquiries will get used as a delaying mechanism for the national inquiry—so, "We can't get to that, because in two years' time, we will be

looking at this town in England, and that is where we will be looking at that.” How will it work, methodologically?

Baroness Longfield: You are worried that we will delay the local ones because of the national one?

Chris Murray: That the local ones will delay the national themes.

Baroness Longfield: Oh, either way. The timeline we are working on is already incredibly full and will be very tightly managed by the secretariat, with the legal team. The national inquiries kick off very soon, and our national themes and hearings will come in this year. Again, those will be seen as a stocktake or benchmark, if you like, so those particular hearings will be very useful. Some themes are slightly more around policy, such as systems around children in care.

The local inquiries will have to run concurrently. It will not be one, and then we end, and then another one; we will have to do them concurrently at some stage within that. It will need to be highly orchestrated, very tightly timed and very clear in the outcomes for each part of it at each time, but we think that that orchestration has the ability to bring the answers, because it is answers and the truth we are looking for here. That is how we see that coming together. We would be very alert to any risk of delay, be it national or local. It has to happen in the timescale that we will set out.

Eleanor Kelly: We are confident that we can deal with both the concurrency and the iteration between the national and the local, because, in our view, the national issues feed into the local issues, and the local issues feed into the national issues, not in a way that becomes stop-start, but in a way that builds incrementally on your knowledge.

Q25 **Chair:** With any project, there are three constraints: cost, time and quality. What is going to give in this?

Baroness Longfield: We are going to overcome that bad triangle.

Eleanor Kelly: With our good triangle!

Baroness Longfield: I know that those are the constraints, but we have the focus, knowledge and intel that we set out with, and a clear focus on what we are trying to achieve, so we will not get dragged over here and into the rabbit holes that Eleanor talked about. We are absolutely alert on all sides to the risks of all those things happening. They are constraints, but every programme has to be delivered within some of those constraints, so we do not see that any one of those has to have a detrimental impact.

Q26 **Chair:** It just worries me that, when time and money have been set out already, quality is the constraint that—

Baroness Longfield: We are saying at this point that we are highly confident that we can do this. Quality will be our guide; we would never



compromise on quality. Remember that we have already said that we do not want there to have to be another inquiry like this, so quality is the absolute star in that. If it means that any of those two things need to change to let the quality happen, which we do not think it will mean, we will talk about it. But we are very clear that this is three years, and we do not think that we will have to come back for any money at this stage.

Zoë Billingham: If I may build on that, there is an advantage to us doing this inquiry in a phased way. Maybe after phase 1—the national phase—we issue a series of proposals for change and recommendations, and that will be in the public domain as the inquiry continues, subject to debate and discussion: “Is that actually going to change anything?”; “Is this just more of the same old, same old?” We will be working really hard to get those proposals for change right from the get-go. If we learn more as we go through the local inquiries that can then inform us to make an even stronger proposition for change, we can do that within that three-year frame. I am not saying that we will get lots of bites of the cherry, but we are building time in for ourselves to make sure that we absolutely get this spot on.

Eleanor Kelly: It was all our starting points when we were each separately approached to be on the panel with an inherited three years and £65 million. We all separately said, “Well, it couldn’t be done like an old-fashioned inquiry then. It will have to be done in a new way.” We all came to it knowing that we were being offered the opportunity—it is a fantastic opportunity—to be on the panel and make this difference within three years and with £65 million, so we all put our heads together about how to do that within the constraints of the time, cost and quality.

Baroness Longfield: You asked whether there was a tender process for the legal team, which there was. They were obviously grilled about their ability to respond during those interviews—I was on the interview panel for the recruitment—but they were also chosen in part because they are highly experienced in inquiries. They have run lots of inquiries and been in lots of inquiries like this, so none of this has to be made from scratch, and they bring that experience with them.

Eleanor Kelly: The challenge for them is that we say that we don’t want to do it the way that they always did it in the past.

Mr Kohler: Exactly.

Eleanor Kelly: It is challenging for them.

Baroness Longfield: Honestly, we are not resting on our laurels. We are saying there is no conversation that ends, “This is how it has to be done in our world.”

Q27 **Robbie Moore:** I want to stay on the theme of local inquiries, if that’s okay. Zoë, you mentioned and you repeated this point that you have all the information available and you are going back into areas to be able to ascertain those key themes. “Themes” has come up quite a few times, but



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what worries me—my saying this will not surprise you—is that the Bradford district has never had an inquiry and never had an investigation. There has been no independent oversight of anything that has gone on across Keighley or the wider Bradford district area. I have a huge concern that I want to go into. On this first tranche that is about to be announced, are we expecting you just to go back as an inquiry into areas where there has been some level of investigation?

Zoë Billingham: No.

Q28 **Robbie Moore:** So will we be looking at new areas being explored?

Baroness Longfield: I know it is complicated. We do not even have a bit of paper to show you. There is a first tranche of local area investigations that have not had investigations yet. We are seeking to look at the areas that have already had investigations under what I call the stocktake. It looks at the organisations that can have a huge impact in terms of delivering the recommendations and forensically scrutinising where they are in that and what needs to be done. As a next phase, we are looking at those areas that have already had serious case reviews and inquiries, looking at the recommendations and again saying, “What level of impact has that had?” With all that part—we will come back to that at the end—what we are saying is, “We expect you all to implement the recommendations that have got your name on them, whether you are a national organisation or local.” We are setting out now that we expect that at the beginning. It informs us completely of what the context is. Then, as we work through, we revisit it towards the end of the three years. We expect improvements during that period.

Q29 **Robbie Moore:** I am struggling to understand. The only reason you are looking at Oldham, as far as I understand it, is because the previous Home Secretary announced over 18 months ago, in January '25, that Oldham would have a local inquiry.

Baroness Longfield: Or we might have chosen Oldham—

Q30 **Robbie Moore:** You may have done. But you have to do that because the Home Secretary instructed the inquiry to do that.

We are now 18 months after the original announcement was made on local inquiries. Why are you not able to right now, on day one, announce that the Bradford district will be included and looked at? I ask because the Bradford district gets referenced a lot. If you look at all the inquiries that have previously taken place, those young girls and some young lads have been trafficked through the Bradford district. I have consistently raised the Bradford district and commented that I suspect it will dwarf other local areas. You have professionals such as David Greenwood who acted on behalf of many of those who have gone through Rotherham. What are you waiting for to be able to announce the inclusion of Bradford and Keighley as part of your local inquiries?

Eleanor Kelly: We can answer that question really clearly. What we have been tasked with doing in the first three months since we were established is to revise the draft terms of reference and create the terms of reference.



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We were then charged in the next three months to do the criteria by which we would select the local areas, to do the victims and survivors charter, and then three months after that to do the MOU with Operation Beaconport.

If we announced Bradford and Keighley today, we would be able to be judicially reviewed by Bradford on the grounds that that we had selected them on the basis of criteria that we had not yet established. So we have to establish the criteria, which, as Anne said earlier, are based on four or five different sets of information data, lived experience and all those sorts of things. This will give us a much longer list than the areas that we will be able to look at, but we would not be able to be challenged on why we had selected certain areas out of the list that we have. That is the answer on why we can't do it today. We have got to do the selection criteria first, and then have the argument over—

- Q31 **Robbie Moore:** I personally do not think that is good enough. You are saying “if you are judicially reviewed”. Why is it not a good case to show some real leadership and independence with this inquiry?

Eleanor Kelly: Because it will delay us. Any judicial review will take precious time out of our three years.

- Q32 **Robbie Moore:** Let me just finish my point. Would it not show some leadership to single out an area that has been referenced by many a person, not just politicians, where there needs to be a spotlight shown, to reinstall that trust quite quickly, that this is a truly independent inquiry?

I suppose the question that I want to ask is what more it takes to speed up this process. It sounds as though you are running around with timeframes that have been set by the Government, in terms of the steps that you need to go through. I suspect that 13 July is a date that has been chosen simply because it is just before recess.

Eleanor Kelly: It is three months from the date at which we were constituted.

- Q33 **Robbie Moore:** It just happens to be the week before we all go off on recess.

Baroness Longfield: We don't know that, because we are not politicians.

- Q34 **Robbie Moore:** Having sat in the House of Lords, I am sure you will know that.

The point is that we also need to scrutinise the process.

Would it not be a good thing to have announced that? If the local authority today turned around and said, as I have been asking Bradford to do for a long time, “We now demand that we have that inquiry across our area,” would that change what your announcement would be beyond today?

Baroness Longfield: I am a constituent of Mr Moore's. I live in the Bradford and Keighley area as well. This is not only close to my heart, but also obviously close to my life at home.



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We have been a statutory body for about five weeks. In the next six weeks, you will know what the criteria are. It is only right and proper that we set the criteria. This is not the legal teams running away with themselves. We have to know what we are judging it against.

This is not a paper exercise that we are doing. I want to allay any fears that you have on that.

In the next five to six weeks, we will announce the first tranche of local areas. It is not long before we get that. Obviously, we would all want to announce things and get running with it as soon as, because we are determined people who have a low tolerance of slowness, but it is the right thing to do.

We have obviously read, seen and been very aware of Bradford. In six weeks' time, we will be able to continue the discussion.

Zoë Billingham: What we are trying to do is tread that tightrope of process versus pace.

Eleanor Kelly: And we can't be seen to just choose Bradford because the chair lives there. We have got to evidence the areas that we are choosing.

Baroness Longfield: I think some might say we might not choose it because the chair lives there.

Zoë Billingham: It would be really disappointing to leave the impression that we are dragging our feet on this. We are absolutely not.

Baroness Longfield: We are not. We are pushing and pushing. The Bradford case is obviously strongly made by many people, victims and survivors, over time, in the Casey audit, in IICSA, in Operation Dalesway—we are well aware of the case that has been made, and it is a strong case.

Q35 **Mr Kohler:** I have huge sympathy for your argument there. You could waste that £65 million very easily by defending judicial review cases, so it is really important that you get that process correct.

Can I examine your relationship with the Home Office? Generally, what is that relationship like at this stage?

Baroness Longfield: They are obviously the sponsor Department. Other Departments put funds into the inquiry, but they are the lead Department that put most in.

There is a sponsorship team. That is the route. That is the docking point for the inquiry. I have worked with a sponsorship team before over at DFE, so I understand that relationship.

The Home Office are very clear that they want it to succeed. They respond to our requests when we ask them, especially when they might be around the pace and timescale—probably we are working on a different level. There is clear reporting and clear communication that is set as part of the terms of reference, both to the Home Secretary but also to the First



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Minister in Wales, because this is England and Wales. It is as I would expect at this stage, but we are independent.

Q36 Mr Kohler: Let me push you a bit more on that. Jess Phillips was the political sponsor of the inquiry. Jess Phillips had a fraught relationship with victims' groups and we had those difficulties early on. In her resignation letter, Jess Phillips talked about safeguarding generally, and said that progress "usually came from threats made by me in light of catastrophic mistakes." She also said that, "The desire not to have an argument means we rarely make an argument". What was your relationship with Jess Phillips like?

Baroness Longfield: I was interviewed by the Home Secretary and appointed by the Home Secretary. Clearly, she was the person who presented the inquiry on 9 December in Parliament. We had a meeting with Jess Phillips while she was Minister, which was around the terms of reference, and that is what you would expect with someone who had ministerial line management for this. We have been in touch with new Minister Fleet to say, "Welcome to the post, this what we are doing and we look forward to working with you." Again, that is very standard.

Q37 Mr Kohler: Has the institutional continuity between Jess Phillips and Natalie Fleet worked seamlessly?

Baroness Longfield: Minister Fleet has only been in post for a few days, but the Home Secretary is the person who is very committed on the record to this, so that is the continuity that I would see as being important.

Q38 Mr Kohler: You have annual reviews with the Home Secretary on the terms of reference. Will those be transparent or in private?

Baroness Longfield: I actually do not know at this stage. Apart from the initial discussion, we have had no further discussions about that. I would imagine there would be some acknowledged outcomes from them, but also some privacy within that. It is part of the terms of reference, and there is also a requirement in the terms of reference to inform the First Minister in Wales, but you would expect that in a sponsor inquiry.

Q39 Mr Kohler: Do you see any danger in those reviews of pressure being put on you as inquiry chair to take certain routes?

Baroness Longfield: I honestly do not. The discussion I had with the Home Secretary at appointment was very much recognising my independence and also the independence of the panel. Clearly, she was very concerned about how we would work and support and put victims and survivors at the centre of this. That was a large concern as part of the conversation to understand how that would happen, but in my experience so far, everything that I have heard, seen or read very much supports the fact that it is very clear to the Home Office, at all levels, that we are independent.

Q40 Mr Kohler: I am sure that is right, but what would be your reaction—what would you do—if such pressure was placed on you?



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Baroness Longfield: We have already started to map out exactly the range of things that needs to happen and the focus. We are independent for a reason. We have been chosen for a reason, which is about independence. We will follow the focused path we have in terms of getting to the truth without fear or favour. We are not concerned about political pressure; we know that our responsibility is to victims and survivors, and we hold that very close in our minds.

Zoë Billingham: I think that is really important to stress. It is a really good question to probe, because it seems slightly odd. We are set up by Government, but we are independent of Government. It is almost about how we prove a negative. I can say for one that no politician—no Home Secretary, Minister for Policing or any other Minister—says to us, “We think this should be your recommendation. You must put this into your report.”

This is our statutory inquiry. It is led by Anne and us as the panel members, and these will be our conclusions and recommendations. We are not accountable to the Home Office for what we find and conclude. We need to keep stressing that, because it is part of building trust with victims and survivors in particular.

If I may say so, there is huge mistrust of politicians and the political process. We relish the opportunity to come here today to explain what we are doing, but we never want to give the victims and survivors—we are here so they can speak through us—the sense that we are, in some way, guided by or accountable to you. The more we talk about that, the better, because it is really important for establishing that kind of trust.

Baroness Longfield: That is national and local, because we will find things that are, in every aspect, uncomfortable truths. We are just going to have to face up to those. That feeling of responsibility to victims/survivors is what drives us.

When I was the Children’s Commissioner, it was one of those roles where the Government paid for someone. The OCC was sponsored by the Department for Education. The role was then independent, and the independence was to scrutinise, among other things, the Government. That was always a difficult relationship, but it was very clear in that role that the responsibility was to children. Here, it is to victims/survivors and those children who we hope to prevent from having to go through this appalling abuse.

Q41 **Mr Kohler:** That is reassuring. How will you liaise with the Scottish inquiry? How do you envisage that working?

Baroness Longfield: We have not set that up with the chair yet, although there has been an informal discussion. They are just getting going, so it is pretty early days with them. We will want to share their findings and work alongside them. We will have regular meetings in place. The secretariat teams have a meeting in the diary, but we will want to be in touch to learn from them and hopefully share some of our findings.

Eleanor Kelly: Across the borders between England and Wales, England and Scotland, and Scotland and England, there are almost certainly going to be lessons learned in relation to trafficking.

- Q42 **Ben Maguire:** I quickly want to take you back to Robbie Moore's question about Bradford. Using Bradford as an example, you mentioned the risk of judicial review if you announce local areas before the criteria have been established. Oldham was also mentioned and, as I understand it, Oldham wrote to the Home Secretary, and that is why she agreed to have it as one of the local areas. Does that suggest that Oldham is therefore at little to no risk of judicial review because the Home Secretary, in effect, agreed with Oldham that it would be one of those areas?

Leaving aside any criteria that you might come up with, are you saying that Bradford does have a risk of judicial review if it were chosen as a local area? If that is the case, does that suggest that there may potentially be a lack of co-operation from Bradford?

Baroness Longfield: No. Oldham was clearly going to be one of the five inquiries. It was the only one that came forward. The planning for that was under way, and then the national inquiry with statutory powers was announced, so the agreement was made that it would be part of that. At that point, Oldham needed reassurance that it did not need to go ahead with its own review. That is historical and circumstantial.

Taking Bradford out of the equation of judicial review, clearly, we are setting the criteria for a reason, not just to help us decide but to be fair and transparent. If we chose any area before we had decided what were fair and transparent criteria, we would potentially open ourselves up to criticism that we were not following a process and were treating somewhere in an unfair way. It was not about any response from Bradford at all. In fact, it might be that an area that is not going to get anywhere would say, "Why did someone get it and we didn't?" It was really about transparency, fairness and the process of setting the criteria. Those are the things that mean we are asking you to wait for six weeks.

- Q43 **Robbie Moore:** You said that Oldham was the only council that came forward. If Bradford council wrote to you today, asking and demanding to be part of the local inquiry, would you say no?

Baroness Longfield: Bradford did not come forward to be one of the five.

- Q44 **Robbie Moore:** What if it did today?

Baroness Longfield: Well, I think the offer to be part of the five inquiries finished when the national inquiry was agreed.

- Q45 **Robbie Moore:** But if Bradford council sent you a letter today demanding to be part of that local inquiry, what would you say?

Baroness Longfield: We would say, "In six weeks' time, we will announce on the criteria."

Robbie Moore: Crikey. That worries me, I have to say.



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Baroness Longfield: I don't think it should worry you, because everyone could send a letter. We are trying to work to six weeks, which is not that long. We are working in a very clear and transparent way. I would hope that many areas around the country that have had these kinds of horrendous experiences would want to be part of an inquiry. I would be worried if they did not.

Eleanor Kelly: We want them to participate.

Baroness Longfield: The message to everyone who may be in an area that is chosen is, "Get ready. We want you to want this. We want you to use it as an opportunity."

Q46 **Robbie Moore:** All I am hearing, loud and clear, is that if Bradford council wrote to you today demanding to be part of the local inquiry, you could not say yes. Your response is, "Wait six weeks, and wait for our criteria." That is worrying to me.

Baroness Longfield: I don't think you should worry about it at all. Have faith. In six weeks' time, we will have set it out transparently; it will not even be six weeks, because we are working at pace. I am saying it will be up to six weeks. We will have gone through the processes that we need for the whole country and Wales, and we will announce our first tranche of areas.

Eleanor Kelly: If 99 other authorities, along with Bradford, wrote to us tomorrow and said, "We demand it," we would still have to go through our process to decide how to select the number that we think we can do across the three years, out of all those authorities that demand it. That is why we need the process: for fairness and transparency.

Baroness Longfield: Just have faith. It is not long now until we get to that point, and we are very aware, as I said before, of the strength of the case. When you had Minister Phillips here, she supported the strength of that case, as did Baroness Casey when she was here. The case is well made.

Eleanor Kelly: And we hope, in relation to local authorities, that we would not face a challenge about either being included or being seen not to be included—because you are included in the national investigation even if you do not have a local investigation. It would be extremely disappointing to see any local authority challenge being included or not included, rather than understanding and engaging with us on what we are trying to do. There is always the threat of judicial review, and as we have said, we do not want to waste time and money on that. It would be extremely disappointing if anyone said, "Don't look here."

Q47 **Chris Murray:** Can I push a little further on that? Put Bradford aside for a second, but let's keep Oldham on the table. It was already made clear that Oldham was going to be included because the Home Secretary said so, the council came forward, and you accepted that. After that was all agreed, collectively, you have come in to start to write criteria for everywhere else.



Eleanor Kelly: We were not part of that original discussion. The five local investigations were announced, and Oldham came forward and volunteered to be one of them, prior to the selection process that went ahead in relation to the national inquiry. That all predated us. We inherited Oldham as a done deal.

Q48 **Chris Murray:** I accept that. Oldham was already included before you came into your posts and decided to write the criteria. What is to stop Anywhere Town—another town in England and Wales that is not selected under your criteria where there have been instances of group-based abuse—coming forward and launching a judicial review against you, saying, “They knew they were going to have to do Oldham. They then wrote the criteria such that Oldham was included. That has meant that we are not included in their criteria. We want that judicially reviewed.”

Baroness Longfield: Well, they could do that, but we have obviously been very transparent and fair, haven’t we?

Eleanor Kelly: We did not write the criteria to include Oldham. That would be highly—

Chris Murray: By definition, Oldham will be included.

Eleanor Kelly: Oldham is one of the local areas—done and dusted, regardless of the criteria. It would be highly unusual, given how we are trying to set the criteria as being valid and relevant areas that need to be examined, if Oldham did not fit the criteria once we had established them. On the issue of organisations and local authorities coming forward and saying, “You should do us”, that is a conversation we have to have with all local authorities, through the LGA and others, to say, “Everyone is included. Nobody is excluded from this.”

The deep dives into local areas are about learning from areas that fit the criteria and that show, across the range of experiences, data, information and lived experience, in a fair and transparent way that they have information and experience that we need to learn from nationally to apply to everyone else. In relation to information and data, the national call for evidence applies to everyone. There is no part of England and Wales that can say, “We are having nothing to do with you”, because when we report about the information that we have received, I am sure local people in local areas—the local electorate—will be saying to their councils, “Why didn’t you provide any information? Why is none of our data there? Why do our children not count?” That is part of the defence around the process that we are putting together, which is a national process with deep dives in local areas selected on the basis of fair and transparent criteria. It should be able to withstand any challenge from people who do or do not want to be included.

Baroness Longfield: May I just say that legally—well, as part of the terms of reference—we have to say this by 13 July? I would be very happy for us to do a briefing session—that day, if you wish—to talk about the criteria. Remember, we will have done only the first tranche by then. We



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will come back and do a briefing session. We can do it however you want to do it. We can do it in writing if you like, but I think having a conversation would be good, given that we have had this conversation. We can talk about not only the criteria but where the criteria have led us in the first tranche of decisions. Hopefully, that will give you some confidence that we are not dragging our feet and that we are absolutely doing this at pace and in a way that is fair and transparent and that brings the results we need, because clearly we need to deliver on the areas that are the highest priority.

Chair: I appreciate the offer. Thank you.

- Q49 **Margaret Mullane:** I want to come back on Eleanor's point with regard to what Robbie said. You said that you would be very disappointed if local authorities did not provide the information. If something goes wrong with something like this, people tend not to blame local authorities; they tend to blame the politicians. You are hoping that local councils, without being on the list, will comply. You have said that they are all part of the inquiry. I would argue that all eyes are on this. It is one of the most important things that is going to happen. If you live in Robbie's area—

Baroness Longfield: I do.

Margaret Mullane: Yes, you do. If I were a resident there and the council did not provide evidence, I would think, "I'm not really happy with that." If the council has not got it about itself to provide that evidence, I would be really concerned that that would be the response at the other end.

Eleanor Kelly: They have a statutory duty to respond to us, because we have statutory powers. It will be very clear that there is something wrong in that organisation—not the politicians, the organisation—if they do not respond under their statutory duty.

- Q50 **Margaret Mullane:** You say that a resident might be disappointed. Where will that disappointment come in? If they have a statutory duty, and you do not—

Baroness Longfield: If they don't provide the evidence?

Margaret Mullane: Yes.

Baroness Longfield: They do have a statutory duty. They have to comply. We will be looking forensically at any gaps in evidence, and any gaps will be a red flag for us. We will take that forward. If there are areas that are not coming forward with the information, they have to do it.

- Q51 **Margaret Mullane:** If that behaviour comes out, the £65 million will not be enough, will it? And you will need more time.

Baroness Longfield: What, if everyone drags their feet?

Margaret Mullane: If some local authorities—I am not saying whether for or against—do not do what you would expect and hope, you are going to need more money and more powers, legal and everything, are you not? You are going to need more time.



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Baroness Longfield: First of all, we have the law on our side. They have a duty to comply within timescales. I agree that all eyes are on this. This is one of the biggest scandals of our time in our country, and it has gone on for three decades. We all want the end of it, and I think anyone who can help that process has not only a legal but a moral duty to do that. I would say that we are looking to local areas to stand up, to look at what was going on in their area and go with the inquiry to get to a better place.

Q52 **Margaret Mullane:** There would not be disappointment then, would there? If we follow what you are now saying.

Baroness Longfield: No. We are aiming for no disappointment.

Eleanor Kelly: We are aiming for no disappointment.

Q53 **Chair:** Are you confident that records are being retained?

Baroness Longfield: Clearly, this has been raised, and we are doing everything we can. Some of that was before we came into post. We would be disappointed if anyone had destroyed their records. They should not have done that either.

Q54 **Chair:** And will you be able to highlight where you think that has happened?

Baroness Longfield: That is the red flag. We can see that. I sent out a letter on the first day, on 9 December, and other letters went out on the day we got our statutory powers in April. We are following all those up to check, because we asked people to confirm. They have gone out through the LGA—they have gone out that way. We are following them all up. If there are any that do not confirm, they will get another letter. We will be belt and braces on this, so we will do a personal letter from us to the leaders of the council or the health board, whatever it is, if we are not getting sufficient back in the usual way.

Chair: We will be very happy to highlight them, too, if you want to give us that information. We can make it public.

Baroness Longfield: Very good.

Q55 **Lewis Atkinson:** I have a set of questions about your interactions with both previous inquiries and existing programmes. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse had a report specifically on organised networks. First, can I ask about your reflections on that report and any conversations you have had with Professor Jay around that?

Baroness Longfield: The IICSA report was a huge report, and rightly so. It was brave and took us to a place with a clear way forward. I have had a conversation with Professor Jay over the years since the report was published—before I was in this role and, briefly, when I was in this role. There are recommendations there that need to be taken forward in full, and we will be looking at the recommendations. We are aware that a judicial review has been brought forward on non-delivery of the recommendations. That forms our body of evidence and the starting point



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on which we will wish to build. On the recommendations, data obviously comes up throughout all of those, and the addition of aggravation in sentencing is also there. They focus on organisations working together and the issue of consent. There is an awful lot to build on, and Baroness Casey's report draws from that as well.

Q56 **Lewis Atkinson:** Professor Jay said that the Government's response to her report was "awful". She said, "I cannot tell you how it felt" to read the final printed version and that, "It was inconsequential, insubstantial, committed to nothing." IICSA was, I think, commissioned when Theresa May was Home Secretary in 2014, and it obviously reported quite a significant amount of time later—possibly in the Truss period—but I think the Government response was under the Sunak premiership. What are your reflections on that? I am checking that, as part of your stocktake, you are going to assess the implementation and pass some judgment about it.

Q57 **Baroness Longfield:** We are, yes—absolutely.

Q58 **Lewis Atkinson:** But what are your reflections on the learning, to make sure that you do not make new recommendations that are not actioned or are not seen to be relevant by whoever happens to be in government at the time?

Baroness Longfield: That's right. I think that huge report was published on the day of the Prime Minister's resignation, which took over the airwaves. That has driven us to the point where we want to announce incrementally as we go along, because we can see the dangers of not doing so.

There is a strong lesson there on the danger of leaving the holding to account till the end. That is something that we want to build on in response to the national organisational hearings that we are putting in at the beginning. We will ask all relevant Government Departments to come to those hearings, and we will ask them for their response to a whole range of recommendations. IICSA will be one of those.

Q59 **Lewis Atkinson:** Will that include, for example, Ministers who were in position at the time, in the same way that you said that you would potentially hold local politicians to account?

Chair: It is probably important to say that the Home Secretary was Suella Braverman at the time.

Baroness Longfield: We will have to see where that takes us, but we would certainly not rule that out because people with responsibilities need to be acting on these recommendations at every step of the way. That is the whole point of getting organisations and individuals back on to the stump early on and saying, "Why on earth did this not happen? Why have we got to the point that, three years-odd on, organisations such as the Maggie Oliver Foundation are having to go to the courts to ask about implementation?"

Q60 **Chair:** I should put on the record that I was the safeguarding Minister



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between May 2015 and July 2016. IICSA was in progress, but it was very independent of Government.

Zoë Billingham: I think your point is well made, and it illustrates the point that I made, probably not very well, earlier on: our starting point is that a series of very sensible—on the face of it—recommendations made by inquiries have not been acted on. Our starting point is to ask those responsible why not.

Q61 **Chair:** When we have gone through it as a Committee, it has been shocking to see what recommendations are outstanding.

Zoë Billingham: You have very much done all that work yourselves. In a sense, we will be doing it again, and doing it very publicly. We will be able to make further proposals, new proposals or different proposals, and to bring back the people who we see in our national hearings from the end of November onwards at the end of the three years. I must admit that, to us, that seems like a very long time away, but it is not.

Eleanor Kelly: We were shocked to be told about the more than 400 recommendations, some of which have been implemented but most of which have not. We are looking forward to seeing the analysis of how many of those recommendations, although in different geographical areas, were about exactly the same thing and how many were actually national recommendations.

Although the local implementation has happened, the national implementation was just not possible because the conversation was not there in order to have it done. That analysis of those more than 400 recommendations is really important and will be really important intelligence for us.

Baroness Longfield: Going back to the point, we do not think that there should have to be another one of these. When we are looking at what needs to be delivered, obviously there will be what we put forward, but all those 400 recommendations need to be accounted for.

Eleanor Kelly: For victims and survivors, the word “recommendation” is now pretty toxic, because they do not think that recommendations ever get actioned. They want action; they do not really want recommendations. A conversation has to be had about how actions come about, because they just do not want recommendations. They think they never happen.

Q62 **Lewis Atkinson:** Since the conclusion of the IICSA inquiry, clearly there have been a number a further developments and further actions or inspections. For example, we are aware of the Tackling Organised Exploitation programme set up by the police. We know the HMICFRS recently did an inspection report on the effectiveness of that. Could you say a little bit about how you will be reflecting that work in your work?

Zoë Billingham: In terms of TOEX, as it is called—I will read it out in full again: TOEX stands for the Tackling Organised Exploitation programme—obviously it is one of those programmes set up by the NPCC to put into reality something I had called for; I declare an interest as an HMI. The



police use the same tactics against serious organised criminality, which they have demonstrated is a successful approach. They use these tactics in pursuing serious sexual offences and grooming gangs. TOEX is an operation, if you like, charged with progressing on that basis.

I am sure that we would want to take further evidence from TOEX about how successful it has been, just as we want to know whether Operation Soteria, which is the new approach—the victim-informed and trauma-informed approach—to prosecuting serious sexual offences and in particular rape, is successful.

On HMIC, I declare an interest: I am a former HMI. We will be interested to know from all of the inspectorates: “Have you looked into these areas? Have you made recommendations in these areas?” That includes HMIC, Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission in respect of health. “Have local areas or bodies responded to you? If not, why not? What more powers, if any, do you need?” I think those will be the sorts of open questions that we would want to explore with inspectorates, to understand whether or not they have prioritised this, as they should have done, over the period of time as well.

Q63 Lewis Atkinson: Regarding the policing operation now—Operation Beaconport—can you say a little more about your experience of negotiating and agreeing the memorandum of understanding? In particular, what assurance can you give victims and survivors that your work will in no way impede the full force of criminal investigation to continue towards investigation and prosecutions?

Zoë Billingham: As we know, Beaconport has been set up to do a range of things. From the perspective of this inquiry, we wanted to have open channels of communication with Beaconport. In particular, we want to have a means for them to share their data with us, so that we can understand the profile of cases that they have on the record.

For Members who need some reminder, and I had to check this out myself earlier today: Beaconport is calling all police forces to provide to them information about all cases that look as if they might be cases related to grooming gangs, going back to 2010, where there was no further action on the part of the police, so that there can be a review of all those cases.

That is really important work. It is critically important that we, as an inquiry, do not cut across it, and we will not. However, we are not going to be prevented from looking at local areas where some of those cases might be re-investigated. That is one thing with Beaconport.

We have had preliminary meetings with the senior leaders that have set up Beaconport: the NPCC, the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the National Crime Agency. What is also really important to us is that if there are matters that look like criminal matters that come to our attention but they have not been signposted into Beaconport, there is a mechanism for individual cases against children—victims and survivors—to be pushed into Beaconport in a very clear way.



However, other potential criminality cases can also be signposted. Understanding the backdrop to, for example, misconduct in public office, which is a criminal offence, it may well be that instances of such misconduct are identified during the course of our inquiry. Again, there is a mechanism for such cases to be put into Beaconport and, through a triage system, for them to be properly picked up and dealt with through Beaconport.

What we have been really clear about as an inquiry, and we have heard this very much from victims and survivors, is that it is not a tolerable position for victims and survivors to have the criminality against them investigated by their home forces, as it often is. That is a contentious issue, but we must absolutely pay attention to it. We are having a conversation about it with Beaconport.

We talk about it in generic terms, which is understandable, but for the victims and survivors it is a real, visceral kind of articulation of how they feel. They have lost trust and confidence in the individual force where the crime allegedly happened and want assurance that it will be investigated elsewhere. It is outwith our ability and powers to determine that that will happen, but we have made it very clear that we do not expect forces to be investigating themselves. Whether we succeed in that, I do not know. We have not made a formal recommendation, as you can imagine, because we have not started sitting on that, but that is our position as a panel.

Baroness Longfield: But the two things will complement each other very much, as Baroness Casey imagined. The relationships are being established and discussions are going well; the “not marking your own homework” comes through loud and clear all the time and is not something we would want to compromise in any way. We will have data-sharing agreements as well.

Chair: I am conscious that we have you for about 15 minutes more and we have three more areas we want to look at. In terms of your time, you may want to bear that in mind.

We will start looking at the role of victims and survivors in the inquiry—we have touched on some of it already, but Paul Kohler has some specific questions.

Q64 **Mr Kohler:** The terms of reference are absolutely explicit: “The Inquiry will not attempt to be exhaustive, in that it will not investigate every local area where grooming gangs have operated”. If you want to be on time, on budget, and produce a high-quality report, that must be correct. What are you going to say to victims in areas that have not been selected? Beaconport is part of that answer—but what other avenues is your inquiry going to give them to be heard?

Baroness Longfield: We will have a victim engagement strategy, which will launch alongside our criteria, our first tranche of areas and our website. That will go live then. There will be routes for victims and



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survivors to be involved in many ways: some through local inquiries in their areas, but also through some of the national inquiries.

We will have some form of storytelling or sharing with victims and survivors, and a call for evidence as well, so there will be routes across. Our national pieces of work will gather evidence from across the piece. We are trying to find ways of ensuring that no one is left feeling without a route to be part of this, if they wish. Alongside that, we will have support for victims and survivors as part of that process, and obviously trauma-informed support as well.

The aim is that the various strands will offer different options for victims and survivors in different areas. Alongside the national and local, if there are particular things that look like distinct examples of things going very wrong—miscarriages of justice—we can look at those as well. We will still have the flexibility to do that.

That is a mixed range of things that I am giving you for our intentions at this stage, but we will be able to say more when we come back to talk to you, if we do so, in July.

Eleanor Kelly: It is very important that we give victims and survivors choice, control and an understanding of what happens to their information when they share it with us, and that they can control how we use it. We do not envisage victims and survivors being cross-examined in our hearings. We start from the position of “this happened.” Their information helps us understand the patterns and impacts of abuse; we do not need to investigate that abuse. That is not our role.

Mr Kohler: That has anticipated one of my next questions—thank you.

Baroness Longfield: We will have a victims and survivors charter, which we are working on with victim and survivor groups now, and which will launch alongside our criteria and first areas in a few weeks’ time.

Q65 **Mr Kohler:** That anticipates another of my questions. The pre-commencement survivors panel has now been formally disbanded and the replacement panel has not yet been announced. The charter has not yet been produced. How are victims and survivors actually helping to frame what you are aiming to do at this stage?

Baroness Longfield: The panel was the Home Office’s panel that they recruited to advise on establishing the inquiry. That was in its final stages when we were appointed. We are seeking to find ways for victims/survivors to find their best way of being part of this. The charter in development at the moment will set out how we do that. Some of it will be about our respectful relationships and commitments to keep people informed and the like, but it will also be about how victims and survivors can be part of it. There will be a number of routes.

This will go live very soon. As you can appreciate, we are in the set-up position where we are seeking to get a whole range of things ready to go as soon as we can. At the moment, either victims/survivors’ groups that

we have been talking to have come to us or we have made contact with established groups of survivors and victims.

We have been really grateful to those groups for facilitating a number of discussions around the country. We established some of those relationships during the consultation on the terms of reference. When we had those conversations, we said we would be back in touch next to talk about the development of the charter. That is what we are doing at the moment.

Q66 Mr Kohler: What is the timeframe for the charter?

Baroness Longfield: It will be launched when we launch our criteria and our first tranche of areas in five or six weeks.

Q67 Mr Kohler: Will there be a panel of survivors?

Baroness Longfield: We are not looking at a panel at the moment because we think that could be quite restrictive. We want to find ways to work in different ways with survivors as they please and for people to be able to find different routes in.

Some of the survivors and survivors' groups that we have already established relationships with, which are growing and significant, will have regular check-ins over time. We will have webinars for survivors and victims. We will have a whole range of different things where we will be able to have contact and maintain that contact. That is what we are developing at the moment.

Eleanor Kelly: That will be from individuals who have given us consent to contact them directly in small groups of survivor-led organisations up to bigger, more established groups so that everyone, whether an individual or part of a group, can feel engaged and involved and have choice and control as to how they engage with us, through either the website or correspondence.

Zoë Billingham: This is very unusual for an inquiry of this nature. We have determinedly said that we want to hear directly from victims and survivors right from the get-go. That does not mean just emailing or talking remotely; we have been to their home towns, sat in rooms and heard very clearly, directly from victims, survivors and relatives, about the experience that they have had and their expectations on us to deliver this. As Anne has said, part of that conversation is recognising that there are so many victims and survivors who have not come forward but may do so as part of this inquiry.

As panel members, we will continue that series of face-to-face, very private engagements with victims and survivors so that they hear directly from us—not the press or even, dare I say, their MPs—where we are in terms of our inquiry, what we are struggling with, what we are finding and what we are thinking, because that is really important. That is what putting victims and survivors at the heart of this inquiry means in reality.

Baroness Longfield: And what they think at each stage.

Zoë Billingham: Absolutely.

Q68 **Mr Kohler:** It is absolutely critical that the victims have agency. What are your views on the very contentious issue of victims of coercive relationships who want to address their perpetrator? Will you have any dealings with restorative justice processes?

Baroness Longfield: It is something that has raised itself in those initial discussions, in terms of the terms of reference. A number of people have been involved in similar exercises before. It is something that we will consider, but we have not yet got a view on it.

Q69 **Ben Maguire:** Baroness Casey found in the 2025 audit that two thirds of perpetrators did not have their ethnicity recorded. One of her recommendations, which was accepted by the Government, was for mandatory data collection, including the ethnicity and nationality of the perpetrators. As part of this inquiry, you will obviously be gathering lots of evidence from a wide range of sources, including victims and survivors, the police and local authorities. How confident are you that you will be able to access the documentation that you require to conduct the adequate local investigations? We have already talked about some of the challenges that may arise from local authorities.

Baroness Longfield: Do you mean in terms of ethnicity?

Ben Maguire: Broadly to start with, and then I will come back to the ethnicity point.

Zoë Billingham: One of the issues that I have learned about in my time as an inspector is that you can't let data defeat you. I have heard a number of times from police forces, "We don't collect that," or, "We collect it in a different way from the force next door." We have to get to a starting point where good enough is good enough, in terms of the data. Police records are often imperfect, so we will use sensible analysis. Our starting point will be, "Whatever you've got, give it to us. We will have a look at it."

As Eleanor and Anne were saying, quite often a lack of evidence flags a real gap. If people are not recording grooming gang activity in a local area, that absolutely does not mean that it is not happening there; it could well mean that the police are just not on it and are not prioritising it. We are quite well versed in dealing with incomplete data, and that is not going to stop us getting to a point where we can reasonably draw conclusions. At the end of the day, if an absence of data is raising a red flag for us, we will be calling the individuals responsible for it at the senior leadership level—not the poor data processor who has to input the numbers, but the senior people responsible for it—to give us an account.

Eleanor Kelly: It is the same in local government. They may not all be collecting the information in the same way, but they will be collecting the information. They cannot say that they don't have the information because

they have to run their own performance management systems. If they give us what they have, we will analyse it. So it is exactly the same in local government.

- Q70 Ben Maguire:** Excellent. To briefly follow up, His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services, in its 2025 inspection report into the police response to group-based child exploitation, mentioned that the failure by police to use the IICSA definition of grooming gangs inhibited a national understanding of the scale of child exploitation. You said that you will deal with the gaps as and when they occur, but can I drill a bit more into how you will deal with the gaps? The police are saying that they do not have that national picture. Obviously, you will be looking at a lot of historical cases. How are you going to address that huge, gaping gap in evidential data?

Zoë Billingham: What we are not going to be doing is an inspection report on the police. What we will be doing is understanding where grooming has happened historically and where it is still happening. We will have sufficient information from what little data there is and from what prosecutions have taken place. We are putting quite a lot of confidence in the information that is coming into Beaconport, and we are going to triangulate that information and then ask specific police forces very pertinent questions about what their intel is telling them, what their prioritisation around grooming gangs is and what their risk assessment is of grooming gangs in their area. They will all absolutely have to do one of those, and that is one of the core documents that we will go and have a look at. From memory, I think it is called the strategic risk assessment, although you are challenging me on my police process.

Eleanor Kelly: The lived experience of victims and survivors is also incredibly important testimony, in relation to what happened in different geographic areas.

Baroness Longfield: Remember that we are going to be gathering the data on the levels of risk in the areas that are live now and in the future. One of the things that Baroness Casey points out is that there is a much lower level of assessment of risk from children's services than from the police. She said that that needs to be looked at. One of our routes for doing that will be around the national, but then in its own theme and locally as well. We want to know the answers to all that too.

- Q71 Chair:** Will you be using AI to analyse any of the data?

Baroness Longfield: We will be embracing AI where it helps.

Chair: But you will make sure that you don't let it hallucinate. We have seen AI hallucinate in the past.

- Q72 Robbie Moore:** I am keen to understand how you will be able to receive information from whistleblowers, or from individuals who do not yet trust the system but are able to feed into you in the confidential way that you would expect.



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Zoë Billingham: Not everyone has access to the internet, but our starting point is that there will be a very clear single front door with lots of statements about the security of the information that comes to us. We will then have mechanisms that sit behind that to ensure that if that individual wants further contact, we will contact them on the terms they want to be contacted.

I suspect that we will get lots of anonymous information from people who have endured this awful, hideous crime and abuse, but we may well get victims coming forward who, after a period of time, want their individual cases to be taken forward. That is why it is so important that we have a clear and seamless mechanism for involving Beaconport right at that moment, so they can engage behind that victim straightaway and start building a case for them.

Q73 **Robbie Moore:** Will that process be outlined by 13 July as well?

Baroness Longfield: We would expect so. We cannot give you 1,000% on that because we have not checked. We know we are going to have it and that it is needed. We will check on that because it is quite distinct, but 13 July is the anticipation. You are bringing us forward.

Chair: We are trying to get it quicker all the time.

Eleanor Kelly: We are going as fast as we can.

Q74 **Margaret Mullane:** How confident are the three of you that when the final report is written, it will be implemented by the Home Office?

Baroness Longfield: We are going to do our damndest, as a starting point. That is one of the reasons why we are going to report and recommend as we go along, so that if there is any hint that someone is not responding, we will be able to see and respond to it as we go along.

We are also making the case that this is an answer to, as you said earlier, one of the biggest scandals that we have as a nation. This issue is very important for our wider society. They want answers and they will expect responses, so it is not just us who will be looking for answers; society will be too. We feel that everyone wants us to succeed, and we will do our damndest to not only make sure it succeeds but make sure that things change as part of that success.

Q75 **Margaret Mullane:** Do you agree that part of that success will be when people can see progress in your interim report? When do you think that will be? When will you get the interim reports out?

Baroness Longfield: We will publish reports after each section of activity. Our first section will be the national organisations that should be implementing it, and we will do a report after that. We are revisiting some areas that have already had some sort of review and investigation, and we will do a report after that. We are doing an online hearing and piece, and we will do one after that. Each time we do a local area, we will do that as well. There will be a rolling programme. Rather than not saying anything for 18 months and then doing an interim, we will have reports coming out.



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We might tie all those up in an interim as well, but you get the sense that there will be things coming through all the time.

- Q76 **Margaret Mullane:** We are not going to pre-empt, but as you go through, there could be shocking things that shake the nation. When you do the interim reports, what do you think the Government response is going to be?

Baroness Longfield: Obviously, we hope that they will value the intelligence, evidence and information that we are providing and respond in full. It might not just be the Government; the session we have with the tech companies will hold those companies to account. Some of them will not be the Government; some of them will be others. We would expect everyone, locally or nationally, to see this as a very high priority, because ultimately, this is around absolutely heinous crimes against children.

One thing that gets forgotten is that the average age of the children who have experienced this has been between 10 and 15 years old. Anyone who has a child, grandchild, nephew or niece, or looks around in the community, knows how young that is. We need to understand that this is the scale and level of abuse and abhorrent behaviour that has been allowed to persist, and all of us must ensure that it does not happen again, but clearly there are some people who have to ensure that more.

- Q77 **Margaret Mullane:** Do you think that you will do a follow-up report, say two years afterwards, to see what has been done?

Baroness Longfield: We have not put that in the terms of reference. There was a debate over whether it will go in the terms of reference—some do. It is an option as we go through that period. At the moment we have not outlined it, but it is part of our consideration.

- Q78 **Mr Kohler:** You have said a number of times that everyone wants this to succeed. The reality is that that is not true. You have to be utterly robust in this. That is something I would urge you to remember at every point.

Baroness Longfield: Yes, that was a slight generalisation. I have been heartened by the number of people who want this to succeed—let's put it that way—whether that is in their professional capacity or as someone you meet or live next to. Obviously, something we have been talking about is that people understand what we are doing. People are aghast at what has happened. As you say, the nation has been shocked by it, but I remember the nation being shocked in 2015 by the report from Oxfordshire. We were so shocked and no one ever thought this would happen again. We are not under any illusion that this will be straightforward, which is why we are going down the route of belt and braces relentlessness—because I think we all have some of those tendencies—and persistence. We will be very straight, focused and straightforward in what we expect. We will be vocal about that as well.

Chair: Thank you very much for your time. We have overrun, I'm afraid, but as you can see, there is an awful lot that the Committee want to cover. We have had a lot of questions that we have been asking Ministers



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and others, and you were the only ones who could actually answer the questions, so we really do appreciate it. We also appreciate your offer to come and brief us again once you have your criteria and the first tranche has been announced.