

Research Briefing

31 March 2026

By Alice Baxter

The Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs



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Summary

- 1 Background
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Summary

The government has announced that it is establishing a [statutory public inquiry into grooming gangs](#). The inquiry begins work on 13 April 2026.

Why have there been calls for an inquiry?

By the early 2010s, [multiple child sexual abuse scandals had prompted public concern](#) about the state response to organised and systematic child sexual abuse. These included revelations about media personalities such as Jimmy Savile and Rolf Harris as well as about organised child sexual abuse in towns such as Rotherham, Oldham and Rochdale.

In 2014 Theresa May, then Home Secretary, established a non-statutory inquiry panel into the issue. The inquiry panel was replaced by a statutory public inquiry ([the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, or IICSA](#)) in 2015, after [the Home Secretary told the House of Commons that the panel had lost the trust of victims and survivors](#). IICSA took seven years to complete, making 20 recommendations in its final report in 2022.

In July 2024, Oldham Council wrote to the Home Secretary requesting a public inquiry into child sexual exploitation in the local area. In October 2024, the Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls, [Jess Phillips, refused Oldham Council's request](#) (PDF). The minister wrote that it should be for Oldham Council itself to decide to commission a local inquiry, rather than for the government to intervene.

This decision became the focus of considerable parliamentary and press attention in January 2025, [in part driven by comments made by the US tech CEO Elon Musk on social media](#). Also in January 2025, the then Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, told the House of Commons that [none of IICSA's recommendations had been implemented](#).

[The government asked Baroness Casey of Blackstock to run a "rapid audit"](#) on gang-based exploitation and report to the government on what further work was needed. [Baroness Casey reported in June 2025](#), recommending that the government establish both a national police operation and a national inquiry into group-based child sexual exploitation, commonly referred to as 'grooming gangs'. [The government accepted all of Baroness Casey's recommendations](#) and committed to establishing a national inquiry.

What has happened with the inquiry so far?

On 9 December 2025, [the Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood published draft terms of reference](#) and announced that the inquiry would be chaired by Baroness Anne Longfield, who served as Children’s Commissioner from 2015 to 2021. She would sit alongside two panellists: Zoë Billingham CBE, a former Inspector at His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and current Chair of Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust, and Eleanor Kelly CBE, the former Chief Executive of Southwark Council.

[The chair and panel consulted with victims](#) and other stakeholders on the draft terms of reference. Final terms of reference were agreed with the Home Secretary and published on 31 March 2026, with the formal start date of the inquiry set as 13 April 2026.

What will the inquiry cover?

According to the terms of reference, the inquiry will examine failures in tackling grooming gangs across England and Wales. A separate [inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse in Scotland](#) will be established by the Scottish Government.

The inquiry will co-ordinate investigations in certain local areas, though it will not investigate every area where grooming gangs have operated.

The inquiry will consider the factors that allowed exploitation to happen and go unaddressed, including the ethnicity, religion and culture of both perpetrators and victims. This follows a finding in Baroness Casey’s national audit that [the ethnicity of perpetrators had historically been “shied away from”](#) by authorities.

The inquiry is due to last for no more than three years, within a budget of £65 million.

1 Background

A previous statutory inquiry into child sexual abuse ran between 2014 and 2022. However, in 2024 the government reported that none of its recommendations had been fully implemented.

1.1 The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

An initial non-statutory inquiry

On 7 July 2014, the then Home Secretary, Theresa May, announced that she would be establishing a non-statutory “independent inquiry panel of experts” to investigate the state response to child sexual abuse. In her statement announcing the inquiry, the Home Secretary said:

In recent years, we have seen appalling cases of organised and persistent child sex abuse, including abuse by celebrities such as Jimmy Savile and Rolf Harris, as well as the systematic abuse of vulnerable girls in Derby, Rochdale, Oxford and other towns and cities. Some of those cases have exposed a failure by public bodies to take their duty of care seriously, and some have shown that the organisations responsible for protecting children from abuse—including the police, social services and schools—have failed to work together properly.¹

On 4 February 2015, the Home Secretary announced that she would be replacing the independent panel with a new statutory inquiry, with the power under the [Inquiries Act 2005](#) to compel witnesses to give evidence. The decision followed victims and survivors raising concerns about the panel. The Home Secretary told the House of Commons that “in appointing two chairmen who had failed to win the trust of survivors, we had got things wrong”.²

A statutory inquiry

On 12 March 2014, the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#) (IICSA) was established as a statutory inquiry covering England and Wales.³

¹ [HC Deb 7 July 2014, c24](#)

² [HC Deb 3 February 2015, c275](#)

³ WS 371 [on [Statutory Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#)], 12 March 2015

IICSA published its final report in October 2022, making 20 recommendations.⁴ These included:

- creating a single core data set on child sexual abuse and exploitation, and introducing a code of practice for retaining records relating to child sexual abuse
- establishing a Child Protection Authority for England and a Child Protection Authority for Wales, to inspect institutions and improve practice in child protection
- improving regulation and vetting of staff working with children
- introducing mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse for staff in certain roles
- inspecting compliance with the Victims' Code
- removing the three-year limit on personal injury claims brought by victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, and placing the burden of proof on defendants (so they must prove that they cannot receive a fair trial, rather than the claimants having to prove that the trial would be fair)
- introducing a national guarantee of specialist therapeutic support for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse
- amending the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme and introducing a redress scheme for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse

In May 2023, the UK Government published its [response to IICSA's final report](#), in which it accepted many of IICSA's recommendations.⁵ The Welsh Government published a separate response to six IICSA recommendations relating to Wales.⁶

In January 2024, the then Home Secretary, James Cleverly, issued a [written ministerial statement providing an update](#) on the delivery of commitments made by the UK Government in response to IICSA.⁷ None of IICSA's recommendations had been fully implemented by the time of the 2024 general election.

⁴ Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, [The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#), 20 October 2022

⁵ Home Office, [Response to the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#), May 2023

⁶ Welsh Government, [Welsh Government response to the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse](#), April 2023

⁷ [HCWS176 \[on Update on the delivery of commitments made in the government response to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse\]](#), 10 January 2024

1.2

Calls for a new national inquiry

Aside from IICSA, there have been several local inquiries into child sexual exploitation. One example is a four-part review commissioned by Greater Manchester Combined Authority, which examined various aspects of the multi-agency response to child sexual abuse in Greater Manchester.⁸ The second part of the review, published in June 2022, examined historic safeguarding practices in Oldham.⁹

Oldham Council’s request for an inquiry

Following the June 2022 report, in July 2024 Oldham Council unanimously approved a motion for the council’s chief executive to “write to the Home Secretary requesting a Home Office led Public Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in the borough of Oldham”.¹⁰

In October 2024, the Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls, Jess Phillips, refused Oldham Council’s request for a new national inquiry into child sexual exploitation in the area. The minister said it was a decision for Oldham Council whether to establish an inquiry locally.¹¹

In January 2025, this decision became the focus of considerable parliamentary and press attention, in part driven by comments made by Elon Musk on social media.¹²

On 6 January 2025, the then Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, told the House of Commons that none of IICSA’s recommendations had been implemented. She announced that the government had convened a dedicated cross-government group to “drive forward change” and would set up a victims and survivors panel to work with the ministerial group on an ongoing basis.¹³

Calls in the Commons to establish an inquiry

On 8 January 2025, the Conservatives put forward a reasoned amendment to second reading of the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which included a call for “a national statutory inquiry into historical child sexual exploitation, focused on grooming gangs”.¹⁴

Speaking to the reasoned amendment, Laura Trott, the Shadow Secretary of State for Education, argued: “Local inquiries, which the Labour Government

⁸ Greater Manchester Combined Authority, [Timeline for activity on child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester](#) (accessed 17 March 2026)

⁹ Greater Manchester Combined Authority, [The review into historic safeguarding practices in Oldham](#), June 2022

¹⁰ Oldham Council, [Minutes of a council meeting 10/07/2024 at 6.00 pm](#) (PDF)

¹¹ [Letter from Jess Phillips MP to Mr Harry Catherall](#) (PDF), 29 October 2024

¹² BBC News, [“Why some want a new Oldham grooming gang inquiry”](#), 14 January 2025

¹³ [HC Deb 6 January 2025, c631](#)

¹⁴ [HC Deb 8 January 2025, cc862-3](#)

say are the answer, do not have legal powers to summon witnesses, take evidence under oath, or requisition evidence.”¹⁵

The issue was raised at Prime Minister’s Questions on 8 January 2025 with the Prime Minister stating that “reasonable people can agree or disagree on whether a further inquiry is necessary”, noting that victims and survivors he had met wanted action rather than the delay of a further inquiry.¹⁶ Other MPs made similar arguments, with Sarah Champion arguing against the Conservatives’ reasoned amendment: “I say with the deepest respect to all those calling for a national inquiry to instead put all their energy into getting the recommendations [of IICSA] adopted. With the best will in the world [...] another inquiry will mean another 10 years of waiting.”¹⁷

Shadow ministers tabled similar amendments during committee stage of the [Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#) and the [Crime and Policing Bill](#).¹⁸ The then Reform UK MP Rupert Lowe tabled a parliamentary question asking if the government would commission a national inquiry into rape gangs.¹⁹ In the days that followed some Labour MPs called for a national inquiry, including Dan Carden, Paul Waugh and Sarah Champion, the MP for Rotherham, who had previously argued against another public inquiry.²⁰

1.3 National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

On 16 January 2025 the then Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, announced that the government would lay out a timetable for taking forward the 20 recommendations of IICSA. This timetable was published on 9 April 2025.²¹ She also announced that she had asked Baroness Casey of Blackstock to:

oversee a rapid audit of the current scale and nature of gang-based exploitation across the country, and to make recommendations on the further work that is needed.²²

Baroness Casey’s [final report](#), and the [government response](#), were published on 16 June 2025.

¹⁵ [HC Deb 8 January 2025, c866](#)

¹⁶ [HC Deb 8 January 2025, c836](#)

¹⁷ [HC Deb 8 January 2025, c895](#)

¹⁸ [Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024-26, Commons committee stage amendment NC15; Crime and Policing Bill 2024-26, Commons committee stage amendment NC47](#)

¹⁹ WPQ 21754 [on [Rape: Inquiries](#)], 10 January 2025

²⁰ Sky News, “[Further pressure on Sir Keir Starmer as Rotherham MP backs national grooming inquiry](#)”, 13 January 2025

²¹ Home Office, [Tackling Child Sexual Abuse: Progress Update](#). A further update was provided by Jess Phillips MP in response to a parliamentary question in January 2026: see WPQ 105567 [on [Offences against Children: Compensation](#)], 21 January 2026

²² [HC Deb 16 January 2025, cc561-2](#)

Baroness Casey made 12 recommendations, including:

- introducing mandatory charges of rape for adults having penetrative sex with a child under 16
- reviewing (and where appropriate, quashing) the criminal convictions of victims of child sexual exploitation
- mandatory information sharing between safeguarding agencies
- mandatory collection of ethnicity and nationality data for suspects in child sexual abuse and criminal cases, as well as improving the collection of ethnicity data for victims

Speaking about the need to collect ethnicity data, Baroness Casey wrote:

Our collective failure to address questions about the ethnicity of grooming gangs – has led to this issue dominating the political and institutional focus, with energy devoted to proving the point on one hand, or avoiding or playing it down on the other, and still with no definitive answer at the national level.

When we looked at data held in three local areas, there is evidence that men of Asian ethnicity are over-represented as perpetrators in group-based child sexual exploitation in those areas. Taken together with the significant number of prosecutions of men from Asian ethnic backgrounds evident in local reviews and prosecutions across the country, this should have, and indeed still does, warrant further examination.²³

One of the most high-profile recommendations in [Baroness Casey's national audit](#) was to establish a national police operation and inquiry into child sexual exploitation.²⁴ After the publication of the report, Baroness Casey told the Home Affairs Committee that she had not initially been in favour of a national public inquiry, but she came to the view that it should not be left to local areas to volunteer to run their own local inquiries:

During the course of the review, it became abundantly clear on a number of fronts that if we did not have a national inquiry as opposed to just a series of local inquiries, then we would not get to the issue of accountability.²⁵

The government accepted all of Baroness Casey's recommendations.²⁶

²³ Home Office, [National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#), updated 15 January 2026, section 6.5

²⁴ Home Office, [National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#), updated 15 January 2026

²⁵ [Oral evidence given to the Home Affairs Committee](#), HC 616, 17 June 2025, Q5 [Baroness Casey]

²⁶ Home Office, [National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#), updated 15 January 2026; Home Office, [Government response to the National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse report](#), updated 15 January 2026

2

Progress establishing the inquiry

The Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs will be formally opened and begin work on 13 April 2026.

2.1

Decision to establish an inquiry

In its response to Baroness Casey’s National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, the government said that it would “establish a national inquiry under the Inquiries Act to co-ordinate a series of targeted local investigations”. The government also pledged to establish a national police operation, which was set up under the name Operation Beaconport on 2 September 2025.²⁷

In a statement 16 June 2025, the then Home Secretary Yvette Cooper noted that Baroness Casey’s national audit had not recommended “another overarching inquiry” on the model of IICSA, but had instead recommended a time-limited inquiry with a more specific purpose “to challenge what the audit describes as continued denial, resistance and local wrangling among local agencies”.²⁸

2.2

The inquiry chair and panel

In October 2025 four members resigned from the victims and survivors panel, the group set up to guide government in its work around child sexual exploitation and abuse. Some victims raised concerns that the terms of reference would be too broad, in effect “watering down” the inquiry. Some victims expressed anger that former police officers and social workers were being considered as candidates for chair, arguing that the chair should have no connections to institutions that could be investigated by the inquiry. Ultimately, all prospective candidates for chair withdrew from the process.²⁹

On 9 December 2025 the Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood, announced that the inquiry would be chaired by Baroness Anne Longfield, who served as Children’s Commissioner from 2015 to 2021. She would sit alongside two panellists: Zoë Billingham CBE, a former Inspector at His Majesty’s

²⁷ [HC Deb 2 September 2025, c160](#)

²⁸ [HC Deb 16 June 2025, c27](#)

²⁹ The Guardian, “[Last candidate to chair grooming gangs inquiry withdraws over ‘lack of trust’](#)”, 22 October 2025

Inspectorate of Constabulary and current Chair of Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust, and Eleanor Kelly CBE, the former Chief Executive of Southwark Council.³⁰

2.3 Terms of reference

Draft terms of reference

The Home Secretary published [draft terms of reference](#) for the inquiry on 9 December 2025.³¹ According to the draft terms of reference, the inquiry would:

identify and illuminate failings in historic and current practice in tackling grooming gangs in local areas across the country, as well as the role of national government.³²

Under the draft terms of reference, the inquiry would have covered issues arising in England and Wales between 1 January 2000 and the start date of the inquiry.³³ It would have co-ordinated local investigations in areas with “particular evidence of past failings”, though it would not have investigated every area where grooming gangs have operated.³⁴ The inquiry would have considered the background of perpetrators and victims and examined how ethnicity, religion or culture played a role in institutional responses to child sexual exploitation.³⁵

The Home Secretary announced that the chair would consult with victims and other stakeholders on the draft terms of reference before final terms of reference were published by the end of March 2026.³⁶

Changes in the final terms of reference

On 27 March 2026, the chair and panel wrote to the Home Secretary recommending certain changes to the draft terms of reference. These changes had been decided after consultation with victims, survivors, parliamentarians and stakeholders in key public services. The changes include:

- a strengthened focus on victims and survivors, including their experiences before, during and after abuse

³⁰ [HC Deb 9 December 2025, c179](#)

³¹ Home Office, [Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs: draft terms of reference](#), updated 11 December 2025

³² As above, para 1.2

³³ As above, para 5.6

³⁴ As above, paras 5.6-5.7

³⁵ As above, para 4.3

³⁶ [HC Deb 9 December 2025, c179](#)

- a more explicit requirement to consider how the ethnicity, religion and culture of both perpetrators and victims may have influenced offending patterns, as well as institutional responses to abuse
- a wider (and non-exhaustive) range of organisations that may be scrutinised by the inquiry
- an extended timeframe for issues that the inquiry can cover, from 1 January 1996 to 31 March 2029
- clear mechanisms for referring criminal allegations or evidence to the national police operation, Operation Beaconport³⁷

The Home Secretary accepted all of the recommendations and published the final terms of reference on 31 March 2026.³⁸

Final terms of reference

Purpose of the inquiry

According to the terms of reference, the inquiry must focus specifically on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse committed by grooming gangs.³⁹

The inquiry will look at “systemic, institutional and individual failures” and make recommendations for improvement at the national and local level. This must include looking at the treatment of victims, the culture of statutory services, and intentional or unintentional inaction or cover-ups.⁴⁰

The inquiry “must examine the factors that allowed or caused exploitation and abuse to happen and go unaddressed”, including the ethnicity, religion and culture of perpetrators and victims as well as the response of public bodies and issues of denial.⁴¹

Ways of working

The inquiry will consider which local areas to review, and “must not consider that the absence of identified cases in a local area means that there is no harm being done there”. The inquiry will publish criteria for selecting areas for local investigations within three months of its formal start date.⁴²

³⁷ Home Office, [Covering letter from Baroness Longfield to the Home Secretary regarding the updated terms of reference](#) (PDF), 27 March 2026

³⁸ Home Office, [Letter from the Home Secretary to Baroness Longfield regarding the final terms of reference](#), 31 March 2026

³⁹ Home Office, [Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs: terms of reference](#), 31 March 2026, para 3.1

⁴⁰ As above, para 4.2

⁴¹ As above, para 4.3

⁴² As above, para 5.6

The inquiry must also develop a charter on how victims and survivors will be engaged throughout the inquiry.⁴³

The inquiry will be unable to determine criminal or civil liability. It will refer all criminal allegations or evidence to Operation Beaconport.⁴⁴

Geographic scope

The inquiry will cover England and Wales only.

The Scottish Government has announced that it will establish a separate inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse in Scotland. This will be chaired by Professor Alexis Jay, the former chair of IICSA.⁴⁵

According to its terms of reference, the UK Government's inquiry will pass material to authorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland where relevant and will liaise with the Scottish Government's inquiry where cross-border issues arise.⁴⁶

Cost and duration

Unusually for a public inquiry, the terms of reference specify the intended budget and duration of the inquiry. The terms of reference state that the inquiry will last for no more than three years, within a budget of £65 million.⁴⁷

The formal setting-up date of the inquiry is 13 April 2026. From this date, the inquiry can officially begin work.⁴⁸

The final report must be submitted to the Home Secretary by 31 March 2029, though the inquiry may publish interim reports and emerging findings before then. Any reports must be shared with the First Minister for Wales as appropriate.⁴⁹

⁴³ As above, para 2.2

⁴⁴ As above, para 1.3

⁴⁵ Scottish Government, [Efforts to protect children from harm: Education Secretary's statement](#), 25 February 2026

⁴⁶ Home Office, [Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs: terms of reference](#), 31 March 2026, para 5.1

⁴⁷ As above, para 6.6

⁴⁸ As above, para 1.5

⁴⁹ As above, paras 7.3-7.5

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