

Inspection of the effectiveness of police and law enforcement bodies' response to group-based child sexual exploitation

A progress report

Contents

Foreword	1
Summary	4
Recommendations	10
Introduction	14
1. Creating a national standard in policing to tackle child sexual exploitation	18
The Hydrant Programme and its Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce	18
The complex and organised child abuse dataset	18
Operation Makesafe	19
Learning, review and support processes	20
2. Progress made since our 2023 report	21
Our 2023 recommendation 1	21
Our 2023 recommendation 2	24
Our 2023 recommendation 3	26
Our 2023 recommendation 4	27
Our 2023 recommendations 5 and 6	30
Our 2023 recommendation 7	31
Our 2023 recommendation 8	32
Our 2023 recommendation 9	34
Our 2023 area for improvement	35
3. The quality of investigations	40
Our assessment	41
Conclusion	46

Foreword

Between 2015 and 2022, the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse \(IICSA\)](#) exposed harrowing failures across public institutions to protect [children](#) from organised and group-based [child sexual exploitation](#). Its findings revealed not only the devastating scale of these crimes but also how agencies repeatedly failed to recognise, prevent and respond to them. In 2022, the IICSA highlighted the persistent threat of group-based child sexual exploitation and called for urgent action.

In 2023, we inspected how the police, law enforcement agencies and other public bodies were tackling this challenge. While we identified some progress, we found that deep-rooted problems remained. These included inconsistent definitions of group-based child sexual exploitation, weak data collection, the use of [victim-blaming](#) language and a lack of national understanding about the true scale of the threat. We made nine recommendations and identified one [area for improvement](#) to strengthen [safeguarding](#), improve consistency and enhance investigative practice.

In 2025, we reviewed progress against our recommendations. We found encouraging signs of progress, despite a two-year period of challenging policing budgets. We found that nearly all police forces had adopted the IICSA definition of group-based child sexual exploitation. And better-performing forces had developed their own quality assurance processes to scrutinise their use of the definition, their policing responses and, where necessary, to reopen previously closed cases.

At a national level, the [National Police Chiefs' Council's Hydrant Programme](#) scrutinises police data to build a more reliable picture of the scale and nature of group-based child sexual exploitation. And the [National Crime Agency](#) has shared insights with forces into the evolving threat of group-based child sexual exploitation, including online and offline abuse.

Investigators receive training from Hydrant Programme specialists to strengthen their knowledge and skills. In complex investigations involving multiple [victims](#) and offenders, more forces are using the [Hydrant Programme's learning, review and support processes](#) to scrutinise cases and access specialist [intelligence](#) and other investigative assets. This reflects a co-ordinated, whole-system approach to bring more perpetrators to justice.

Police forces are increasingly responding decisively and swiftly to reports involving vulnerable children at risk of sexual exploitation. As a result, more children are being safeguarded, and more suspects are being arrested. During this review, we found better supervision and a stronger focus on using prevention orders to disrupt criminal activity during and after investigations.

Cultural change programmes have helped many forces to eliminate victim-blaming language, which has resulted in a more informed and compassionate workforce. We also found a more consistent approach to prevention and disruption initiatives. Police and local authority partners are working proactively together to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation within business communities. This helps individuals such as taxi drivers, ticket inspectors and hotel staff to intervene when they see children who may be at risk. These efforts are making a real difference in protecting children. This demonstrates how critical joint work is to achieving better outcomes for children, and it must remain a focus for all agencies.

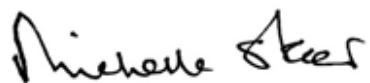
However, significant challenges remain. The Home Office and Department for Education have yet to fully adopt the IICSA definition in key guidance documents. This is important to improve data accuracy and national co-ordination. More than half of police forces still fail to include data from partners, such as charitable organisations and children's social care, in their strategic assessments, and some misapply the IICSA definition altogether. These issues risk weakening the policing response and failing children.

The Home Office hasn't yet stopped collecting data from forces that serves no meaningful purpose. And inaccurate and inconsistent flagging of child sexual exploitation on many police management systems means that vital early opportunities to identify and protect children are being missed.

In this progress report, we describe the improvements that have been made and the critical gaps that remain. But we can't fully convey the profound physical, emotional and psychological harm inflicted on children treated as commodities for the sexual gratification of criminals. Many children endure horrific crimes of sexual exploitation, abuse and entrapment at the hands of multiple perpetrators for months or even years. Some victims take decades to disclose what happened to them. Others never do. For many victims and their families, the impact of this abuse can be lifelong.

More should be done to build on the progress made to provide the comprehensive, co-ordinated response that victims need and deserve. Group-based child sexual exploitation should be consistently identified, properly understood and addressed with urgency. In addition to the four outstanding recommendations from our 2023 report, we have issued six new recommendations. These include recommendations for the universal adoption of the IICSA definition, a national data collection solution and the consistent use of the Hydrant Programme's proven tools.

I commend this report and its six recommendations to all those involved in child safeguarding.



Michelle Skeer OBE QPM

His Majesty's Inspector of Fire & Rescue Services

Summary

Background

Between 2015 and 2022, the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse \(IICSA\)](#) published 19 reports on 15 investigations, an interim report and a final report. In these reports, the IICSA sets out the extent to which institutions have failed in their duty of care to protect [children](#) from [sexual abuse](#) and exploitation.

In its [February 2022 investigation report, 'Child sexual exploitation by organised networks'](#), the IICSA said that children were being sexually exploited by networks in all parts of England and Wales in the most degrading and destructive ways. There was evidence of extensive failures by police forces and local authorities.

Our 2023 report

The IICSA reports highlight the repeated failures by the police and other public services to identify and take seriously the threat of group-based [child sexual exploitation](#). In March 2022, the then Home Secretary commissioned us to carry out an inspection into the policing of this especially harmful form of criminality.

We published our findings [our 2023 report, 'An inspection of the effectiveness of the police and law enforcement bodies' response to group-based child sexual exploitation in England and Wales'](#).

We found that the challenges previously identified in academic literature and reported through public inquiries persisted. These included the lack of a clear definition for group-based child sexual exploitation. This meant that there was no common understanding of the threat. And the use of [victim-blaming](#) language during investigations meant that [vulnerable children](#) might not be safeguarded promptly enough, or at all, and instead left at risk of exploitation. We also found that the police, law enforcement bodies and the Government still didn't have a full understanding of the scale or nature of these crimes.

In our 2023 report, we issued one [area for improvement](#) and made nine recommendations to the police, law enforcement agencies and other bodies.

Progress since 2023

In January 2025, the then Home Secretary commissioned us to review the progress made since our 2023 report.

Based on our most recent findings in respect of the area for improvement we issued in 2023, we consider that police forces have made the necessary improvements. We have therefore closed this area for improvement. Four recommendations have either been met in full or are nearing completion in a clear programme of work. One recommendation isn't due for completion until March 2026. However, four recommendations, all of which relate to data, [flagging](#) and the IICSA definition of group-based child sexual exploitation, haven't been met and are overdue. In this progress report, we make six new recommendations.

Not all bodies have made enough progress to adopt a common definition of group-based child sexual exploitation

Since our 2023 inspection, the police service has taken steps to improve its response to child sexual exploitation. Nearly all police forces have adopted the IICSA definition of 'organised networks', which also serves as a definition of group-based child sexual exploitation. This is good, but we found that this definition wasn't fully understood by some force analysts who create strategic [problem profile](#) assessments. This means that some assessments may not be based on reliable information.

This risks an ineffective policing response that could fail to protect already vulnerable children. Failure to apply the IICSA definition properly also makes it impossible to understand the true scale and nature of group-based child sexual exploitation on a national level. And this understanding is vital for both the Government and police forces to develop a robust response.

We found that the Home Office and the Department for Education hadn't yet adopted the IICSA definition in their key guidance documents for [safeguarding](#) professionals. This is disappointing.

Importantly, the failure to use this definition is contributing to a persistent lack of reliable data to build a national understanding of the scale and nature of group-based child sexual exploitation.

We make a new and definitive recommendation in this report that police forces, agencies and bodies that are yet to do so should use the IICSA definition. And they should make sure that they use this definition in all relevant policies, training products, procedures and guidance.

Police forces who use the Hydrant Programme template develop better strategic assessments of child sexual exploitation

The [Hydrant Programme](#) is the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#)'s response to tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation. With the Hydrant Programme's support, police forces are better able to develop strategic assessments to identify the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation and group-based offending.

But the assessments of some forces are weak because they don't consistently apply the IICSA definition. And, crucially, less than half include a broad range of partner data in their problem profiles. This means that their response may be less effective.

Better-performing forces use the Hydrant Programme's problem profile template for their assessments. We make a new recommendation that all forces should adopt the Hydrant Programme template to help them create better quality problem profiles.

The National Crime Agency has provided insight into the scale and nature of group-based child sexual exploitation as a national threat

The [National Crime Agency](#) has provided police forces and law enforcement agencies with detailed insight into the complex threats around child sexual abuse and exploitation in all its forms. This helps police forces to consider and respond to these threats in individual force assessments. The National Crime Agency will be including this insight in its 2026 'National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime'.

Despite efforts by many forces to improve how they identify and flag child sexual exploitation cases, a robust national solution is still needed

The Hydrant Programme has developed a national database to help police forces identify a more accurate picture of group-based child sexual exploitation. But Hydrant Programme analysts told us that only 37 percent of child exploitation cases were accurately flagged on police management systems by police forces. This is due to a failure to use the correct data field, the limitations of some force systems and the complexity of data. Hydrant Programme analysts correct these errors through a specialist manual trawl.

During our inspection, we found that some forces had improved their accuracy in identifying and responding to child sexual exploitation by using a dedicated [intelligence](#) analyst. This role supports exploitation investigators and supervisors who review a range of incident flags and other police data to identify children who may be vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation. This is positive.

The Home Office should work with the Hydrant Programme to develop and identify a robust solution that accurately identifies the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation and group-based offending reported to the police. We make three new recommendations to support this critical need.

The Home Office hasn't yet made progress to collect meaningful police custody data on group-based child sexual exploitation

The Home Office told us to us that it still collected custody-related data on group-based child sexual exploitation, known as ADR149, despite it being aware that it was often inaccurate and its collection served no useful purpose. In our 2023 report, we recommended that it should stop collecting this data and replace it with a new [annual data requirement](#) aligned with its other child [sexual abuse](#) and exploitation crimes annual data requirements.

The Home Office told us that it was carefully considering these recommendations alongside the recommendations from the '[National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#)' led by Baroness Casey of Blackstock.

The quality of police investigations into group-based child sexual exploitation is improving

In our case file review, we found a positive focus on reports that involved children who were repeatedly [missing](#) or otherwise known to be vulnerable to exploitation. In a high number of cases, early action was taken to protect children and arrest suspects.

We found that crimes involving child sexual exploitation were more likely to be investigated by specially trained [officers](#). And outcomes included the use of prevention orders to help safeguard vulnerable children. This is encouraging. We found that forces with dedicated exploitation teams provided valuable advice to investigators to improve the quality of their investigations and [victim](#) support.

Some forces keep track of children who are vulnerable to exploitation and work with other agencies to protect them from sexual and other forms of exploitation. This intensive support helps some victims recognise coercive tactics used against them by criminals and has resulted in offenders being brought to justice.

However, some forces need to do more to make sure that child sexual exploitation investigations, including some group-based offending investigations, don't lose momentum. Encouragingly, in this inspection, we found that forces were increasingly likely to accept support from the [Hydrant Programme's learning, review and peer support team](#) in complex group-based child sexual exploitation cases. This approach to learning helps to build greater expertise across policing and achieve better outcomes for victims.

During our case file review of 67 group-based child sexual exploitation investigations, we found that four closed cases were reopened for further investigation. This was as a result of force quality assurance processes. This is positive and shows decisive action by some forces following the [then Home Secretary's request in January 2025](#) that chief constables re-examine non-recent gang-related cases of child sexual exploitation that were closed with no further action.

National police training to improve the police response to group-based child sexual exploitation is still being developed, but all forces have invested in Hydrant Programme specialist training

A schedule of work is underway to update national police training on group-based child sexual exploitation. The [College of Policing](#) expects a pilot course to be available by the end of 2025. In the meantime, a new national police foundation training course for frontline supervisors includes a focus on identifying child sexual exploitation. Additionally, we were pleased to find that forces were providing their investigators with some form of Hydrant Programme specialist training and development.

The police are making efforts to eradicate victim-blaming language

The police should make it a priority to make sure that victims feel heard and have the confidence to report child sexual exploitation. The use of [victim-blaming](#) language can be especially damaging. It can leave victims feeling like they aren't believed, and it reduces both their trust in the police and their courage to come forward. It can also undermine the way the police and others approach child sexual abuse.

In this inspection, we found that, in an effort to eradicate victim-blaming language, almost all police forces ran cultural-change programmes to educate their workforces. This is good. Actions taken by forces included quality assurance and specialist training sessions provided by victim-focused charities. To train their workforce, some forces use an [Appropriate Language Guide](#) that was co-developed by the Hydrant Programme and the [National Association for People Abused in Childhood](#). These findings are positive. In most of the investigations we reviewed, we found that records showed victims were heard and safeguarded.

Forces need to adopt Operation Makesafe consistently to maximise its preventative effects

Many police forces use tactics to disrupt and prevent child sexual exploitation, particularly in some cities or hot-spot areas where criminals are known to target vulnerable children. To increase public awareness and make safeguarding children everyone's business, many police forces work with partners to make better use of campaigns that help to prevent and disrupt child sexual exploitation.

[Operation Makesafe](#) is a national police initiative to raise the business community's awareness of child sexual exploitation. Training is provided to partners to help them recognise and report vulnerable children who may be at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation. Trainees include vape and fast-food vendors, hotel and door staff, taxi drivers and ticket inspectors. In this report, we make a new recommendation that police forces maximise the guidance provided by the Hydrant Programme to make Operation Makesafe a nationally trusted and recognised programme to raise awareness and prevent child sexual exploitation.

The Hydrant Programme has laid a positive foundation to tackle child sexual abuse, but some critical gaps still remain

In this review, we found signs of notable progress, with the exceptional support of the Hydrant Programme's [Child Sexual Exploitation \(CSE\) Taskforce](#), in the commitment of forces to effectively tackle the depravity of child sexual exploitation and group-related offending.

We commend the hard work of the Hydrant Programme, its CSE Taskforce and the dedicated investigators and supervisors who work tirelessly to support children as victims of the most appalling crimes.

In this report, we make six new recommendations to police forces, law enforcement agencies, government bodies and all of those that have a crucial role in making sure that children are protected from the devastating crimes of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Recommendations

Recommendations from our 2023 report

In our 2023 report, we made nine recommendations and issued one area for improvement. Of these, we consider that two recommendations have been completed and three recommendations are in progress. The remaining four aren't yet completed and require further action. We have closed the area for improvement.

Recommendation 1

By 31 December 2024, the Home Office, the Department for Education, the Welsh Government, the National Crime Agency, the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing should adopt the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse's definition of an 'organised network' as a definition of group-based child sexual exploitation. Or they should devise and implement a suitable alternative.

Status: Incomplete

Recommendation 2

By 31 December 2024, all chief constables should make sure that their forces have problem profiles for child sexual exploitation, each of which should include an assessment of the nature and extent of group-based child sexual exploitation. This should include relevant data from local partner agencies and should be updated frequently, at least annually.

Status: Incomplete

Recommendation 3

By 30 May 2025, the National Crime Agency should produce an assessment of group-based child sexual exploitation as part of its annual 'Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime'. The assessment should use the agreed definition of group-based child sexual exploitation from our recommendation 1.

Status: In progress

Recommendation 4

By 31 December 2024, all chief constables and the relevant business user groups for police record management systems should make sure there are sufficient measures in place to identify group-based child sexual exploitation.

Status: Incomplete

Recommendation 5

By 31 March 2025, the Home Office should stop collecting group-based child sexual exploitation data through its annual data requirement on custody known as ADR149.

Status: Incomplete

Recommendation 6

By 31 March 2026, the Home Office should introduce a new and specific annual data requirement on group-based child sexual exploitation. This should be aligned with its existing child sexual abuse and exploitation crimes annual data requirement. The supporting guidance to forces should use the agreed definition of group-based child sexual exploitation from our recommendation 1.

Status: In progress

Recommendation 7

By 31 December 2024, the College of Policing should update its authorised professional practice on child sexual exploitation to include group-based child sexual exploitation. And it should use the agreed definition from our recommendation 1.

Status: In progress

Recommendation 8

By 30 June 2024, all chief constables of forces that are yet to receive the Hydrant Programme's continuing professional development offer should arrange it.

Status: Completed

Recommendation 9

With immediate effect, all chief constables should take effective steps to eradicate victim-blaming language in their forces.

Status: Completed

Area for improvement

All chief constables should work with their statutory safeguarding partners to review, promote and make sure relevant group-based child sexual exploitation disruption and prevention initiatives are implemented effectively in their forces.

This should include consideration of options such as the advice given in the Home Office child exploitation disruption toolkit and an Operation Makesafe (a national police initiative to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation in the business community) type of approach.

Status: Closed

Recommendations in this report

In this report, we make six new recommendations.

Recommendation 1

By 31 March 2026, the Home Office, Department for Education and all police forces and law enforcement bodies that are yet to do so should adopt the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse's definition of an 'organised network' as a definition of group-based child sexual exploitation. And they should make sure they use this definition in all relevant policies, training products, procedures and guidance.

Recommendation 2

By 31 March 2026, all police forces should fully adopt and use the Hydrant Programme's child sexual exploitation problem profile template as a minimum when preparing their 2025/26 child sexual exploitation problem profiles.

Recommendation 3

By 31 March 2026, the Hydrant Programme should develop quality assurance guidance for all police forces so they can accurately and efficiently identify child sexual exploitation and group-based child sexual exploitation in their child protection and abuse investigation data returns and police record management systems.

Recommendation 4

By 31 July 2026, all chief constables should use the [Hydrant Programme](#)'s guidance so forces can efficiently and accurately identify [child sexual exploitation](#) and group-based child sexual exploitation in their police record management systems.

Recommendation 5

By 31 December 2026, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), the [Hydrant Programme](#) and the Home Office should work together to create and implement a robust and reliable method of identifying and collecting all [child sexual exploitation](#) data, including group-based child sexual exploitation data, in police record management systems.

Recommendation 6

By 31 July 2026, all police forces should devise a strategy to implement [Operation Makesafe](#) consistently and include this in their [child sexual exploitation](#) data returns to the [Hydrant Programme](#). This strategy should include the adoption and use of the rebranded Operation Makesafe police and partnership marketing materials.

Introduction

Background

For many years, the incidence of [child sexual abuse](#) in the UK has been of substantial concern to the public. Since 2015, child sexual abuse has been one of several national threats specified in the [Strategic Policing Requirement](#).

Between 2015 and 2022, the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse \(IICSA\)](#), published 52 reports relating to its comprehensive programme of investigation, research and engagement work. It also shared over 6,200 accounts of child sexual abuse through its [Truth Project](#). The IICSA's reports set out the extent of child sexual abuse across the UK, the failings of public services in dealing with it and the devastating impact on [victims](#). This includes group-based [child sexual exploitation](#).

To help overcome problems with the identification of group-based child sexual exploitation and all its forms, the IICSA created a clear definition of group-based child sexual exploitation for use by police and other bodies.

In March 2022, the then Home Secretary commissioned us to carry out an inspection into the policing of this especially harmful form of criminality. During that inspection, despite the IICSA's work and the inclusion of child sexual abuse in the Strategic Policing Requirement, we found failings by the police and other bodies. In December 2023, we published [our report, 'An inspection of the effectiveness of the police and law enforcement bodies' response to group-based child sexual exploitation in England and Wales'](#).

In our 2023 report, we made nine recommendations and issued one [area for improvement](#).

In January 2025, the then Home Secretary commissioned HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary to review the progress made since our 2023 report.

Also in January 2025, the then Home Secretary commissioned Baroness Casey of Blackstock to lead a three-month, rapid national audit on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse. In June 2025, Baroness Casey published her '[National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#)'. She reported the lack of reliable data to identify the scale of child sexual exploitation but drew data from the [Centre for expertise on child sexual abuse](#), which estimates that around 500,000 children a year are likely to experience sexual abuse.

About us

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) independently assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire and rescue services to make communities safer.

In preparing our reports, we ask the questions that the public would ask and publish the answers in accessible form. We use our expertise to interpret the evidence and make recommendations for improvement.

Our commission

On 24 January 2025, the then Home Secretary commissioned HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary to provide a progress report on the nine recommendations and one area for improvement in our 2023 report, 'An inspection of the effectiveness of the police and law enforcement bodies' response to group-based child sexual exploitation in England and Wales'.

Our terms of reference

Our terms of reference were to:

- inspect all police forces in England and Wales and the [National Crime Agency](#) for their progress in addressing our recommendations;
- consult with the [College of Policing](#), the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), the Home Office, the Department for Education and the Welsh Government about their progress in addressing our recommendations;
- assess the extent to which chief constables have made sure their forces have [problem profiles](#) for child sexual exploitation that include an assessment of the nature and extent of group-based child sexual exploitation and data from local partner agencies;
- assess the extent to which chief constables and the relevant business user groups for police record management systems have made sure that there are measures in place to identify group-based child sexual exploitation;
- assess the quality of forces' investigations and their attitudes to victims of group-based child sexual exploitation;
- establish whether there are any barriers to addressing our recommendations; and
- recommend further action or inspection if needed.

Methodology

We scrutinised problem profiles, delivery plans and associated documents from the 43 Home Office police forces in England and Wales.

We visited six police forces and interviewed senior [police officers](#) who are responsible for tackling child sexual exploitation. The forces we visited were:

- Kent Police
- Avon and Somerset Constabulary
- West Midlands Police
- North Wales Police
- Leicestershire Police
- Durham Constabulary.

We interviewed senior police leaders with strategic and operational responsibility for child sexual exploitation investigations in these forces. We also carried out case file reviews of 67 child sexual exploitation cases that forces identified as involving group-based child sexual exploitation. In our review, we assessed the quality of forces' investigations and their attitudes towards victims of group-based child sexual exploitation.

The Hydrant Programme and its Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce

The [Hydrant Programme](#) is the National Police Chiefs' Council's response to tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation. The [Child Sexual Exploitation \(CSE\) Taskforce](#) is an important part of this programme. The taskforce was established in April 2023 to improve how the police respond to and tackle group-based child sexual exploitation. We visited the taskforce to observe its multi-agency programme board meeting and evaluate how well it had met its objectives in the two years since its formation. We discussed barriers to progress as well as emerging work designed to make further improvements.

National Crime Agency

We interviewed representatives of the National Crime Agency about our recommendation to use the definition of group-based child sexual exploitation proposed by the IICSA. And we asked the National Crime Agency about its progress on our recommendation to produce an assessment of group-based child sexual exploitation as part of its annual '[Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime](#)'.

Other bodies

We interviewed representatives from the [College of Policing](#), the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), the Home Office, the Department for Education and the Welsh Government. We examined their progress in implementing our recommendations.

Terminology in this report

Our reports contain references to, among other things, ‘national’ definitions, priorities, policies, systems, responsibilities and processes. In some instances, ‘national’ means applying to England and Wales. In others, it means applying to England, Wales and Scotland or the whole of the UK.

We recognise that individuals who have experienced exploitation and abuse are commonly referred to, both by themselves and by different organisations, as either victims or survivors. For consistency and to avoid confusion, we use the term ‘victims’ in this report.

We have used the full terms ‘child sexual exploitation’, ‘child sexual abuse and exploitation’ and ‘group-based child sexual exploitation’ throughout this report. However, where we have abbreviated child sexual exploitation to CSE, this is to describe the title of the CSE taskforce and CSE warning flags as adopted titles and terminology.

1. Creating a national standard in policing to tackle child sexual exploitation

The Hydrant Programme and its Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce

In March 2023, the then Prime Minister established the [Child Sexual Exploitation \(CSE\) Taskforce](#) to improve the policing response to group-based [child sexual exploitation](#) and abuse.

Funded by the Home Office, the CSE Taskforce is part of the [National Police Chiefs' Council Hydrant Programme](#) that supports forces to protect [children](#) and investigate abuse. The Hydrant Programme develops policy and strategy on behalf of the National Police Chiefs' Council. The programme supports forces by offering a [learning, review and support service](#).

The CSE Taskforce's membership is wide-ranging. It includes police forces in England and Wales, the Home Office, the Crown Prosecution Service, the [National Crime Agency](#), the [Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme](#) and the [College of Policing](#). To make sure that [victims](#) feel heard, the CSE Taskforce membership also includes the [National Association for People Abused in Childhood](#), which specifically leads on the victims and [survivors](#) strategy.

Each month, the CSE Taskforce's programme board evaluates progress on its action plan. This plan adopts a [4P approach](#) in tackling crime. It supports the CSE Taskforce's objective of improving how the police service responds to group-based child sexual exploitation.

The complex and organised child abuse dataset

One of the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#)'s recommendations was for the collection of data on child sexual exploitation and child sexual exploitation networks.

In January 2023, the Hydrant Programme introduced the [complex and organised child abuse dataset \(COCAD\)](#). On a quarterly basis, the Hydrant Programme receives data from all police forces in England and Wales through the Child Protection and Abuse Investigation dataset. However, the crime report data provided by police forces to the dataset is typically incomplete. This is often because the data is collected at an early stage when some investigations haven't progressed enough to reveal evidence of child sexual exploitation or group-based offending. Once the data has been received,

COCAD analysts group relevant crimes and then assign them to categories that include group-based child sexual exploitation. Crucially, COCAD analysts use the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse's definition of group-based child sexual exploitation.

The Hydrant Programme shares reports of this analysis, which police forces use to determine the resources needed to support an effective investigation. For example, cases that are identified as involving complex or group-based offending are more likely to be allocated to and overseen by specialist detectives.

The Hydrant Programme told us that in the first three months of 2025, the Child Protection and Abuse Investigation dataset recorded 33,532 offline and online child sexual abuse and exploitation crimes. This is a 10 percent increase on the same period in the previous year. This increase in reporting may be an indicator of better public awareness. This is positive because these offence types, which include group-based child sexual exploitation, are known to be under-reported.

Giving victims the confidence to report any form of child abuse helps them access potentially life-changing support as a step towards recovery from these devastating crimes. And it helps increase opportunities to prevent offending while bringing more offenders to justice.

COCAD analysis also provides insights into offending that come to the attention of the police, such as the risk presented by offenders under the age of 18. To tackle this, the Hydrant Programme is now working to understand the relationships between victims, their offenders and the environments where these crimes happen.

Operation Makesafe

Another of the inquiry's recommendations was to raise public awareness of child sexual abuse and exploitation crimes.

The CSE Taskforce oversees Operation Makesafe. This operation aims to prevent child sexual exploitation by working with various business sectors. Training is provided to people including vape and fast-food vendors, hotel and door staff, taxi drivers and ticket inspectors, to help them recognise and report vulnerable children who may be at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation. There is a particular focus on the hospitality industry, to stop perpetrators using hotels to abuse and exploit children.

In December 2024, the CSE Taskforce formed a national working group for police forces and their partner organisations to help improve and standardise approaches to Operation Makesafe. This is informed by separate meetings with hospitality industry leaders to support the Operation Makesafe working group. This work also links with national missing persons networks.

The CSE Taskforce told us that intelligence shared in the Operation Makesafe working group showed that all police regions reported multiple cases where hotels had been used by perpetrators to carry out child sexual exploitation and abuse. This intelligence revealed that victims were mostly known to be regular missing persons or exploited during missing episodes.

Operation Makesafe makes it more likely that offences of child sexual exploitation will be identified and children will be better protected from its devastating effects.

Learning, review and support processes

We learned of several examples where the CSE Taskforce used its learning, review and support process to share knowledge and help police forces access specialist resources to investigate complex group-based and network offending against children. This approach to learning is helping to build greater expertise across policing.

2. Progress made since our 2023 report

Our 2023 recommendation 1

By 31 December 2024, the Home Office, the Department for Education, the Welsh Government, the [National Crime Agency](#), the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) and the [College of Policing](#) should adopt the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#)'s definition of an 'organised network' as a definition of group-based [child sexual exploitation](#). Or they should devise and implement a suitable alternative.

Status: Incomplete

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse's definition of group-based child sexual exploitation

In February 2022, the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse \(IICSA\)](#) published its report '[Child sexual exploitation by organised networks](#)'. The report highlighted that the lack of a common definition for group-based [child sexual exploitation](#) hindered the police service's ability to understand the true nature and scale of child sexual exploitation.

Progress made

The [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), the [National Crime Agency \(NCA\)](#), the [College of Policing](#) ('the College'), the Welsh Government and most police forces have adopted the IICSA group-based child sexual exploitation definition. Some guidance documents have been updated to reflect this.

Not all the bodies listed in this recommendation have implemented the definition. For example, the Home Office and Department for Education don't use it in some key guidance documents.

Despite adopting the IICSA group-based definition, some forces show poor understanding and application of the definition in their [problem profiles](#), action plans and crime [flagging](#) processes.

Regrettably, the failure to use this definition is contributing to a persistent lack of reliable data to build a national understanding of the scale and nature of group-based child sexual exploitation.

The consequences are evident in [Baroness Casey's report, 'National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse'](#). She described being unable to provide an assessment on the scale of group-based child sexual exploitation and referred to “confusing and inconsistently applied definitions and incomplete data across the police, local authorities, health and the criminal justice system”.

Welsh Government

We spoke with an official from the Welsh Government who said that it had updated its guidance for child protection professionals in line with the IICSA definition of group-based child sexual exploitation.

We confirmed that the Welsh Government included the IICSA's definition in its draft ten-year strategy on preventing and responding to child sexual abuse. At the time of our inspection, the strategy was due for public consultation. Once finalised, we urge the Welsh Government to make sure that it updates other relevant documents, including '[Safeguarding children from child sexual exploitation](#)' (2021) and social care guidance.

National Crime Agency

During our review, we found that the NCA had responded positively to this recommendation. It used the IICSA's group-based child sexual exploitation definition in its '[National Strategic Assessment 2025 of Serious and Organised Crime](#)'. We discuss the national strategic assessment further in [progress made against 2023 recommendation 3](#).

National Police Chiefs' Council and policing response

The National Police Chiefs' Council responded decisively to our recommendation and adopted the IICSA's definition. It was included in several guidance documents through the [Hydrant Programme](#):

- The [complex and organised child abuse dataset](#) uses the IICSA definition in its individual force reports to identify crime records where group-based offending is present.
- The Hydrant Programme's [practice advice](#) includes the IICSA definition. And the IICSA definition features in the Hydrant Programme's November 2024 publication on [group-based offending](#), which it told us had been made available to all forces in England and Wales.
- The Hydrant Programme has provided police forces with guidance and training on preparing group-based offending [problem profiles](#) (as outlined in [progress against 2023 recommendation 2](#)).

Individual forces' responses

In their written responses to this inspection, 35 forces said that they followed the IICSA definition precisely. Seven forces told us they used a close approximation of it. And, in May 2025, one force told us that it hadn't adopted any definition of group-based child sexual exploitation but intended to consider it when next reviewing its policy.

In this inspection, we identified that some police personnel and analysts don't understand the IICSA definition of group-based child sexual exploitation well enough to apply it consistently in their work. This is because, of the 35 forces that said they used the IICSA definition precisely, only 23 of those forces reflected this in their problem profiles.

College of Policing

The College shares the Hydrant Programme's guidance for senior police investigators on its online knowledge hub. This guidance reflects the IICSA definition of group-based child sexual exploitation. However, the College hasn't yet updated some of its specialist child protection investigation training products with the IICSA definition. But the training does discuss the contexts in which these offences can occur, as we discuss in progress made against 2023 recommendation 7.

Further action required

The case for a common definition of group-based child sexual exploitation

Since our 2023 inspection, the National Police Chiefs' Council, the Hydrant Programme and the CSE Taskforce have adopted the IICSA definition as best practice due to its clarity and fitness for purpose.

However, throughout this inspection, we found that when forces didn't use the exact IICSA definition, it could lead to subjective judgments about the classification of the crime type. Baroness Casey reached similar conclusions in her 'National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse'. She said:

"On top of under-reporting, the recording of data on child sexual exploitation (and group-based child sexual exploitation) is subject to additional flaws in definitions, methodology and consistency of application."

This means that forces' analysis of the scale of group-based child sexual exploitation may be less accurate. The accuracy of this analysis is vital to government policy and an effective policing response.

To avoid ambiguity, a clear and universally applied definition of group-based child sexual exploitation (as defined by the IICSA) should become the common standard for policing, law enforcement agencies and other public bodies.

We therefore make a further recommendation.

Recommendation 1

By 31 March 2026, the Home Office, Department for Education and all police forces and law enforcement bodies that are yet to do so should adopt the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#)'s definition of an 'organised network' as a definition of group-based [child sexual exploitation](#). And they should make sure they use this definition in all relevant policies, training products, procedures and guidance.

Our 2023 recommendation 2

By 31 December 2024, all chief constables should make sure that their forces have [problem profiles](#) for [child sexual exploitation](#), each of which should include an assessment of the nature and extent of group-based child sexual exploitation. This should include relevant data from local partner agencies and should be updated frequently, at least annually.

Status: Incomplete

The importance of problem profiles

The police use problem profiles to help them understand threats to public safety. Forces rely on data from partner organisations, such as children's services and [Victim Support](#), to create these. Problem profiles must be based on sufficient, reliable data otherwise forces can't assess the threats accurately or know how to respond effectively.

A comprehensive problem profile also helps the NCA prepare an accurate national assessment of the threat that group-based child sexual exploitation poses.

Progress made

We reviewed child sexual exploitation problem profiles from all 43 police forces in England and Wales.

We found that 23 of 43 forces still lacked partner data in their assessments. Many of these forces told us that strategic partner data wasn't available or was difficult to access. This isn't good enough.

And this is particularly disappointing because in 2024, the Hydrant Programme provided a problem profile template and training to all relevant police force analysts.

The NCA told us that a comprehensive problem profile helped it prepare an accurate national assessment of the threat that group-based child sexual exploitation offences pose. However, when forces don't include enough information in their problem profiles, the NCA can't fully analyse the level of threat. Forces can't fully understand the nature and scale of group-based child sexual exploitation if they don't

secure co-operation, data and insight from a wide range of stakeholders. This includes statutory partners, Victim Support and other charitable organisations as well as organisations such as sports associations that have frequent contact with children and young people.

Force assessments of child sexual exploitation should follow the Hydrant Programme's guidance

As the quality and completeness of problem profiles varies, we carried out a review to understand whether the Hydrant Programme's template would help forces to complete more comprehensive assessments of group-based child sexual exploitation.

We found that the template had been designed to help forces' analytical departments create a profile that includes several essential elements, such as governance, leadership, resource management, investigative strategies, safeguarding and working with partners. The Hydrant Programme has also issued a set of useful guidance notes that explain precisely what forces should consider within each section.

In our review, we found that only 14 of 43 forces had adopted the Hydrant Programme problem profile template in its entirety. These forces tended to produce more complete assessments that reflected the IICSA definition. Many also used a range of partner data, including children's health and social care information. In some cases, this included analysis from interviews carried out with children who had gone missing. This offered a more comprehensive commentary on group-based offending.

We found that forces that didn't adopt the Hydrant Programme's template, or only loosely followed its structure, were less likely to produce good quality assessments. We recognise that at the time of our review, some police forces had produced their problem profiles before the Hydrant Programme's template became available to them.

We encourage all police forces to use the Hydrant Programme's child sexual exploitation problem profile template.

Further action required

Recommendation 2 in our 2023 report remains incomplete, and further action is required. We therefore make a further recommendation.

Recommendation 2

By 31 March 2026, all police forces should fully adopt and use the Hydrant Programme's child sexual exploitation problem profile template as a minimum when preparing their 2025/26 child sexual exploitation problem profiles.

Our 2023 recommendation 3

By 30 May 2025, the [National Crime Agency](#) should produce an assessment of group-based [child sexual exploitation](#) as part of its annual '[Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime](#)'. The assessment should use the agreed definition of group-based child sexual exploitation from our recommendation 1.

Status: In progress

The role of the National Crime Agency

The [Strategic Policing Requirement](#) sets out the current national threats, such as terrorism and [serious and organised crime](#). Since 2015, it has listed [child sexual abuse](#) because of the dramatic surge in the number of reported rapes and sexual assaults against children, both recent and non-recent. These threats are assessed by the NCA in its annual '[National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime](#)'.

In our 2023 report, we said that the NCA can and should play a more proactive role in developing a more complete [intelligence](#) picture of group-based child sexual exploitation.

Progress made

At the time of our inspection in April 2025, the NCA had already produced its 2025 '[National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime](#)'. Although this assessment includes child sexual exploitation as a national threat, the NCA hasn't provided any new insight or analysis of group-based child sexual exploitation.

The NCA told us that it was completing research into group-based child sexual exploitation and that the results would be available in an unpublished report by 31 May 2025.

We reviewed a draft of this report. We saw that it drew on the Hydrant Programme's complex and organised child abuse dataset and other data sources, including police force profiles, academic research, internet and [dark web](#) research, some NCA investigations and intelligence and information from the third sector. The NCA has since told us that it has made this report available to all UK law enforcement and government bodies. And it intends to make a version of it available to safeguarding partners to help them to identify and tackle group-based child sexual exploitation threats more effectively.

Further action required

We consider this recommendation is in progress. Once the analysis is applied to the 2026 national strategic assessment, the recommendation will be complete. No additional action is required.

Our 2023 recommendation 4

By 31 December 2024, all chief constables and the relevant business user groups for police record management systems should make sure there are sufficient measures in place to identify group-based child sexual exploitation.

Status: Incomplete

The use of flags and warning markers

Flags and warning markers alert police officers, who may be carrying out research or responding to an incident, about risk and vulnerability. Forces also apply flags and warning markers to a range of crimes that constitute child sexual exploitation.

The perpetrators of child sexual exploitation can commit offences in different ways. Child abuse and grooming by individuals, groups and organised gangs can overlap in online and offline environments.

Forces can find it difficult to identify child sexual exploitation cases in their records management systems. This is because child sexual exploitation is a contextual factor in several types of crime and not a specific offence in law.

Police forces and law enforcement agencies face an ongoing challenge to accurately identify child sexual exploitation. Where child exploitation involves group-based offences this presents additional challenges.

Progress made

In this inspection, we found that many police forces had made efforts to improve their flagging and quality assurance processes so that they can better identify child sexual exploitation cases and complex group-based cases.

Some forces are using specialist teams to review, direct and monitor child sexual abuse investigations

Some forces have appointed a dedicated intelligence analyst to support the work of specialist exploitation teams. Specialist investigators and supervisors in these teams review a range of crime and incident data, including reports of missing children who may be especially vulnerable to both criminal and sexual exploitation. They decide which teams should investigate these crimes and incidents. During our inspection, we found that they escalated complex group-based child sexual exploitation investigations to forces' major investigation teams or to regional organised crime units.

We found a notable example of this in Kent Police. The force's exploitation team reviews open and closed child sexual exploitation investigations reported to it in the previous 12 months. This is to check whether the investigation was thorough. An analyst makes sure that police personnel apply child sexual exploitation (CSE) flags accurately. And the force's standard operating procedures help it to use flags consistently.

Forces use intelligence models to help tackle group-based child sexual exploitation

The [management of risk in law enforcement model](#) is a recognised process for assessing serious and organised crime threats in England and Wales. This includes mapping [organised crime groups](#) and [priority individuals](#) and helps to identify evidence-based tactics that are more likely to address serious risk.

During our interviews and case file reviews, we were encouraged to find that more forces were escalating complex child sexual exploitation crimes for assessment using the management of risk in law enforcement model to their regional organised crime units. Often these crimes involved multiple [victims](#) and included indications of group-based offences. Within the regional organised crime units, we found that forces were able to obtain specialist intelligence and analytical support through a Home Office-funded programme known as [Tackling Organised Exploitation](#).

Mapping is important because it helps law enforcement bodies assess the level of threat involved in crime and prioritise their activity against the most serious threats. The NCA uses mapping to maintain a list of organised crime groups. Mapping also helps the NCA to identify the extent and nature of child sexual exploitation, including group-based offences, across England and Wales as part of its national strategic assessment.

The NCA told us that all police forces in England and Wales had at least one complex child sexual exploitation case recorded on the master list.

Many forces have improved how they identify and flag child sexual exploitation cases, but a robust national solution is needed

The IICSA highlighted the limitations of current methods of data collection. It showed that inconsistencies in approaches across organisations impede their ability to properly understand child sexual exploitation. This resulted in the IICSA [recommending that a single core dataset for child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) should be established. A former Home Secretary committed to adopting the IICSA's recommendations in full. However, the [Home Office's update report on progress](#), although broad in scope, doesn't sufficiently address the failings in police data.

The Hydrant Programme's data shows that in 2024, only 37 percent of child sexual exploitation crimes were appropriately flagged by police forces. This is also known as CSE flagging. At the time of our inspection in May 2025, correct CSE flagging had reduced to 34 percent. This is despite the quality assurance processes that individual forces have put in place and the clear guidance on the use of flags issued by the Hydrant Programme to police forces. We wanted to understand the reasons for this.

We spoke with the Hydrant Programme's data specialists and learned that there are several reasons for CSE flags being used incorrectly or not at all. This is mainly because individuals are using the wrong flag or recording the flag in the wrong field.

However, other reasons include poor interpretation of the IICSA definition and the limitations of the many different crime-recording systems used by police forces.

We also spoke to the Hydrant Programme lead about opportunities to improve the reliability of CSE flags and group-based offending datasets. We learned that forces don't use CSE flags consistently and that they don't always link with the overall intelligence picture of crime threats in the force such as child sexual exploitation. Hydrant Programme analysts correct these errors through a specialist manual trawl.

The Hydrant Programme lead also told us that they were concerned about the effectiveness of CSE flagging because it relies on officers' capability and knowledge in applying flags where appropriate. The particular complexities of group-based child sexual exploitation investigations make this a challenge, such as when the numbers of suspects and the full circumstances of the offence may not be sufficiently understood.

Further action required

CSE exploitation flagging remains inconsistent across forces. A robust national solution is needed. Therefore, we consider that this recommendation remains incomplete and have issued three new recommendations.

Recommendation 3

By 31 March 2026, the [Hydrant Programme](#) should develop quality assurance guidance for all police forces so they can accurately and efficiently identify [child sexual exploitation](#) and group-based child sexual exploitation in their [child protection](#) and abuse investigation data returns and police record management systems.

Recommendation 4

By 31 July 2026, all chief constables should use the [Hydrant Programme](#)'s guidance so forces can efficiently and accurately identify [child sexual exploitation](#) and group-based child sexual exploitation in their police record management systems.

Recommendation 5

By 31 December 2026, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), the [Hydrant Programme](#) and the Home Office should work together to create and implement a robust and reliable method of identifying and collecting all [child sexual exploitation data](#), including group-based child sexual exploitation data, in police record management systems.

Our 2023 recommendations 5 and 6

2023 report recommendation 5

By 31 March 2025, the Home Office should stop collecting group-based child sexual exploitation through its annual data requirement on custody known as ADR149.

Status: Incomplete

2023 report recommendation 6

By 31 March 2026, the Home Office should introduce a new and specific annual data requirement on group-based child sexual exploitation. This should be aligned with its existing child sexual abuse and exploitation crimes annual data requirement. The supporting guidance to forces should use the agreed definition of group-based child sexual exploitation from our recommendation 1.

Status: In progress

The Home Office annual data requirement

The annual data requirement (ADR) specifies the crime data that police must submit to the Home Office. In our 2023 report, we said that the Home Office's guidance on ADR149 didn't make it clear whether the requirement to collect data related to the first time an individual came into police custody or at a later date if relevant offences became apparent during the investigation. And we found that when a suspect came into custody, it wasn't always possible to determine the exact nature of the offending or if a suspect had acted alone or as part of a group. Therefore, data collected at that time might be inaccurate and of little value.

Progress made

The Home Office told us that it still collects ADR149 data, despite it being aware of the challenges this poses and the additional burden it places on policing. This is disappointing. The collection of ADR149 data serves no useful purpose.

The Home Office told us that it was carefully considering this recommendation to introduce a new and specific ADR for group-based child sexual exploitation. It said it would consider this alongside the recommendations in Baroness Casey of Blackstock's 'National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse'.

Baroness Casey's audit was published on 16 June 2025, soon after we completed this inspection. Her report reinforces why improvements in data collection on group-based child sexual exploitation are needed.

Just over 12 months elapsed between the time we published our recommendation on ADR149 in our 2023 report and the then Home Secretary's announcement of Baroness Casey's commission in January 2025. It is disappointing that no

consideration or action relating to our recommendation appears to have taken place prior to this.

Further action required

Progress needs to be made on both the recommendations we made in our 2023 report about ADR. We urge the Home Office to stop collecting ADR149 and to continue to develop a more suitable ADR.

We consider that our 2023 recommendation 5 hasn't been met and it therefore remains open.

Our 2023 recommendation 6 is still in progress and isn't due for completion until 31 March 2026.

Our 2023 recommendation 7

By 31 December 2024, the [College of Policing](#) should update its [authorised professional practice](#) on [child sexual exploitation](#) to include group-based child sexual exploitation. And it should use the agreed definition from our recommendation 1.

Status: In progress

National police training on child sexual abuse and exploitation

The College of Policing sets out the level of training that is required to investigate child abuse cases. This includes [Professionalising investigations programme](#) level 2 accreditation and/or completion of the [specialist child abuse investigation development programme](#) as part of detective training. Given the complexity of investigating group-based child sexual exploitation, we would expect officers to be suitably trained.

Progress made

A programme of work to revise and update the relevant national training is underway to meet this recommendation. Meanwhile, updated Hydrant Programme guidance to police investigators is available through College of Policing networks.

Progress is being made to update national training on group-based child sexual exploitation

In April 2025, the College of Policing told us that it had started a comprehensive review of its child abuse authorised professional practice (APP). Given the complexity of the work, it anticipated that it would take a year to complete.

We interviewed a senior officer at the College who explained that the delay was necessary because of a wider, linked programme to develop training under the new [National Centre for Violence Against Women and Girls and Public Protection](#).

The College told us that it was continuing to modernise its public protection APP and guidance, with the [modern slavery](#) APP being the latest example. The child abuse APP (incorporating child sexual abuse and exploitation) has been prioritised and at the time of our inspection was undergoing a full review. The College told us that it was drawing on expertise from the Hydrant Programme and Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme specialists for the review. The College confirmed that the IICSA definition of group-based offending would be included without deviation.

In the meantime, comprehensive and up-to-date guidance by the Hydrant Programme is available to [senior investigating officers](#) and practitioners through the College's knowledge hub. The College told us that the refreshed course material would be used with the first pilot group of forces before the end of 2025.

The College also told us that its current training priority was the Professionalising investigations programme level 1. It said this programme was "designed as a lynchpin to prioritise policing performance and cultural change by focusing on the first line of supervisors: sergeants and staff equivalents". The programme uses evidence-based research and behavioural science. The College told us that the aim was to equip frontline supervisors with the skills to:

- improve investigative, criminal justice and prevention outcomes;
- embed these core skills and behaviours within officers and [staff](#); and
- reinforce learning on identifying signs and indicators of child abuse.

The course includes an [immersive learning](#) scenario where supervisory officers must assess whether children could be at risk of child sexual exploitation.

Further action needed

This recommendation is nearing completion. No additional action is required.

Our 2023 recommendation 8

By 30 June 2024, all chief constables of forces that are yet to receive the [Hydrant Programme's continuing professional development](#) offer should arrange it.

Status: Completed

Progress made

Since 2022, the Hydrant Programme has provided some form of [continuing professional development \(CPD\)](#) training to all 43 police forces in England and Wales.

Some forces have invested heavily in the Hydrant Programme's CPD training and shown a willingness to draw on its national expertise

During our inspection, we spoke with leads at the Hydrant Programme who told us that by May 2025, it had held 40 CPD events involving 26 police forces in England and Wales.

Some forces have invested heavily in comprehensive Hydrant Programme CPD training. This has been provided to police personnel such as child sexual exploitation analysts, call takers, response teams, specialist exploitation teams, children's voluntary sector partners and local authority social care practitioners. This inclusive approach is positive. It creates a shared understanding of the risks to children and the types of joint approaches that are needed to effectively tackle child sexual exploitation and group-based offending.

Other forces, such as the Metropolitan Police Service, told us that they had used the Hydrant Programme CPD offer as a tool to train their audit and review team, which carries out quality assurance and monitoring of child sexual exploitation investigations. The force told us that it had used its in-house training teams to provide child sexual exploitation training to 11,000 police personnel and child exploitation teams. However, future training will include important messages from the Hydrant Programme and information about its [learning, review and support offer](#).

In its first year of operation, the CSE Taskforce told us that it completed 49 learning, review and support debrief sessions. It offered these to forces for free. The Hydrant Programme also routinely uses the complex and organised child abuse dataset to identify complex group-based child sexual exploitation investigations that might benefit from the offer of specialist support. At the time of our inspection, the Hydrant Programme said that it had made 131 proactive offers of support to police forces.

The Hydrant Programme uses a team of subject matter experts to carry out learning, review and support functions. They help forces to consider the full range of investigative options available to them. At the end of an investigation or trial, structured debriefs with Hydrant Programme specialists also provide an opportunity to examine and learn comprehensive lessons.

In our case file reviews, we found consistent evidence of forces contacting the Hydrant Programme for tactical advice or a [peer review](#) of their investigations, particularly for group-based child sexual exploitation cases that involved more than one victim. We found that senior investigating officers and specialist teams in these forces recognised the Hydrant Programme's value, which often meant that they worked collaboratively with Hydrant Programme or Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme specialists. Positively, they showed openness and a willingness to draw on national expertise to help them protect victims and bring offenders to justice.

No further action required

We find that this recommendation is complete. However, we encourage all forces to continue to reinforce continuing professional development and take full advantage of the learning, review and support services offered by the Hydrant Programme.

Our 2023 recommendation 9

With immediate effect, all chief constables should take effective steps to eradicate victim-blaming language in their forces.

Status: Completed

The police have taken effective steps to eradicate their use of victim blaming language

The IICSA concluded that the police's use of victim-blaming language was a significant barrier to effective reporting of child sexual abuse. For some victims, this language caused feelings of shame, and it reduced both their trust in the police and their courage to report crimes. It also undermined the way police and others approached and investigated child sexual abuse. We made similar findings in our 2023 inspection where we reported dozens of examples of the police using victim-blaming language.

Progress made

Most forces have shown leadership and implemented cultural training to address the use of victim-blaming language. We reviewed 67 investigations. In these, we found only two cases of inappropriate language.

We carried out a document review of all 43 police forces in England and Wales and found that almost every chief constable had personally led efforts to eradicate victim-blaming language. However, we were disappointed that two police forces failed to provide us with any information on their plans or progress in this critical area. We have contacted those forces directly to address this issue.

Most police forces maintain an ongoing programme of vulnerability-related training for new recruits, frontline personnel and specialist officers. This training includes the College's online resources, chief officer-led briefings and video blogs on lessons learned. We found that many forces also used quality assurance audits and dip-sampled cases to supplement training with their findings to help bring about cultural change.

Some forces partner with specialist victim services to highlight the damaging effects of victim-blaming language

We were pleased to find that some forces commissioned specialist trainers from charities, such as NWG (formally the National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People) and Barnardo's, to raise awareness of the damaging effects of victim-blaming language. Other forces train their personnel using an appropriate language guide, co-developed by the Hydrant Programme with the National Association for People Abused in Childhood and The Children's Society in response to our 2023 recommendation 9.

In our case file review of 67 child sexual exploitation investigations, we found two isolated references to victim-blaming language. We referred both these cases to the forces for action.

One case involved a senior officer who was asked to authorise a telecommunications investigation in a case where a teenage girl entered the car of a man who was believed to present a sexual abuse threat. Without assessing the full circumstances, the senior officer suggested that the child had got into the car “willingly” and therefore rejected the authorisation. We brought this poor assessment and the dismissive language used to the attention of the force. It took comprehensive steps to address the matter, which included a review of past telecommunications authorisations to make sure that lessons were learned.

Conversely, throughout our case file review and interviews, we saw many positive examples where investigators and specialist officers displayed tact, sensitivity and a good understanding of trauma. For example, North Wales Police’s Onyx (specialist exploitation) officers supported a 17-year-old girl who was at risk of being trafficked. They used their training to help her understand how exploitation happens and how she might suffer harm. Due to the consistent support and safeguarding given by the Onyx team, the victim eventually felt safe enough to give video evidence in support of a prosecution.

No further action required

We find that this recommendation is complete. No further action is required.

Our 2023 area for improvement

All chief constables should work with their [statutory safeguarding partners](#) to review, promote and make sure relevant group-based [child sexual exploitation](#) disruption and prevention initiatives are implemented effectively in their forces.

This should include consideration of options such as the advice given in the [Home Office child exploitation disruption toolkit](#) and an [Operation Makesafe](#) (a national police initiative to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation in the business community) type of approach.

Status: Closed

Progress made

In the six forces we inspected, we found that [Operation Makesafe](#) was being used more widely. It was also an important partnership feature in the child sexual abuse action plans we reviewed from all 43 police forces in England and Wales.

The police are working more consistently with partners to prevent and disrupt offending

When we assessed forces' problem profiles on child sexual exploitation, we found that nearly every profile included an action plan that used a [4P approach](#) to track and monitor activity to tackle the problem. Often, these plans specified opportunities to work with partners to prevent offending and disrupt suspects. However, as seen in [the response to 2023 recommendation 2](#), too many problem profiles failed to include enough data from strategic or third sector partners. This risks an inaccurate assessment of the threat and an ineffective response to the problem.

At the time of this inspection, the Hydrant Programme was working towards publishing a further national template on partnership working to tackle group-based child sexual exploitation.

During this inspection, all six forces that we visited had improved in this area. This frequently included a range of police and partnership activity that took place in tandem with the investigation to prevent further child sexual exploitation offences and disrupt perpetrators. For example, North Wales Police held a day of action to tackle child criminal and sexual exploitation. During the police operation, potentially [vulnerable children](#) were removed from the scene and supported at neutral locations where specially trained police and partners worked with them to identify offences and safeguard them.

In another example, Avon and Somerset Constabulary implemented an operation to investigate group-based child sexual exploitation involving multiple victims and 20 suspects. The force ran a multi-agency safeguarding operation alongside the primary investigation to protect victims and other vulnerable children.

We found that some forces and their partners used similar approaches to those used in West Yorkshire and Merseyside to reduce serious and organised crime and improve community confidence. Tactics known as [clear, hold, build](#) are used to tackle [child criminal](#) and sexual exploitation involving serious and organised gangs in hot-spot areas. This is positive because it also helps to raise community awareness about these serious crimes and encourages reporting.

Many forces are making greater use of Operation Makesafe, but momentum needs to be sustained

Operation Makesafe is a national police initiative used to raise awareness of child sexual exploitation in the business community. As we discussed in [the section on Operation Makesafe](#), forces work with taxi drivers, ticket inspectors and hotel staff to help them recognise and report any signs of exploitation. This also helps to increase the public's awareness of child sexual exploitation and the action taken by police and partners to safeguard victims.

In our 2023 report, we said that some forces made limited and inconsistent use of campaigns to prevent and disrupt child sexual exploitation. We found that campaigns were usually limited to one officer in one part of the force area.

In this inspection, we found that all six forces we visited used Operation Makesafe to varying degrees. And we did see an improving picture that was usually based on intelligence and analysis of hot-spot areas.

In most of the forces we visited, we found that Operation Makesafe was a shared responsibility between a dedicated modern slavery or child sexual exploitation prevention officer, specialist exploitation teams and neighbourhood policing teams. However, not all forces had a shared calendar of prevention and disruption events with their partners.

Two of the six forces we visited told us that they were updating their Operation Makesafe arrangements to extend awareness training to taxi drivers, transport ticket inspectors, vape shops and fast-food outlet employees. We view this positively because fast-food outlets and transport hubs have been a feature in some child sexual exploitation investigations.

Case study: Greater Manchester Police uses disruption tools and Operation Makesafe to prevent and disrupt child criminal and sexual abuse

In December 2024, as part of our national child protection inspection programme, we published our report on Greater Manchester Police. In it, we commented on how an effective multi-agency approach can help to identify and protect more vulnerable young people before they become victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

During that inspection, we found that Greater Manchester Police worked well with partner organisations to minimise risks to children. For example, the force introduced Operation Luka when analysis of intelligence and other data revealed that children at risk of exploitation and perpetrators were regularly visiting a part of Manchester city centre.

The force worked with the local authority to improve lighting and CCTV. It used high-visibility patrols and covert tactics to disrupt offenders and made good use of criminal and civil orders. The operation included British Transport Police and Metrolink (the tram operator) to prevent suspects from using rail and tram networks to travel to the area. And it identified that many reports about missing children related to a small number of care providers. So, it developed prevention plans with those care providers. These plans helped to reduce the number of times children went missing, which meant they were less likely to come to harm.

The police reported interactions they had with other vulnerable children to education and [safeguarding](#) partners. This helped safeguarding partners provide support and work with the children and their families to raise awareness of the risks they faced and prevent future vulnerability.

Forces need to adopt Operation Makesafe consistently to maximise its preventative effects

We spoke with the Hydrant Programme about its efforts to work with non-policing partners to improve the response to child sexual exploitation. We learned that the implementation of Operation Makesafe was inconsistent, something which hotel industry representatives have also identified as an issue. As a result, the Hydrant Programme has taken steps to standardise this practice, which includes work to develop safeguarding assessments of hotels and help forces understand the impact of their work in this area. The Hydrant Programme also told us that it had commissioned work to examine the scale and nature of exploitation in the hotel industry. This analysis identified 504 offences and showed that exploitation was frequently taking place in and around public transport hubs.

Four times a year, the Hydrant Programme holds two separate Operation Makesafe meetings to share information, one with police forces and the other with hospitality industry leaders. Those partners include representatives from the UK's hotel industry, which together are responsible for 170,000 hotel rooms. Importantly, this builds relationships with the industry and helps to alleviate hotel owners' concerns about being associated with child sexual exploitation risk.

During our case file review, we saw examples of how the police worked with hotel industry staff to identify and respond quickly to reports of concern. In some cases, this led to multiple suspects being charged with offences and more victims being safeguarded.

The Hydrant Programme has rebranded Operation Makesafe using slogans such as 'If we ask, it's to protect'. It hopes this will help Operation Makesafe become a trusted national public safety campaign. We urge forces and their partners to adopt the range of guidance and marketing materials it offers.

More police forces are making use of prevention and disruption tactics in the child exploitation disruption toolkit

The [child exploitation disruption toolkit](#), issued by the Home Office, is used by frontline practitioners (including police, social workers and teachers) to safeguard children and young people from sexual and criminal exploitation.

In all six of the forces we inspected, we found that specialist officers and staff made use of tools to prevent child sexual exploitation offences and disrupt perpetrators. Frequently, the investigative strategies that we examined included a clear direction by supervisors to consider the use of [child abduction warning notices](#) and [Sexual Risk Orders](#) before suspects left police custody.

As we noted in [progress made against 2023 recommendation 4](#), there are problems in how the police use flags to identify group-based child sexual exploitation in data returns. However, many forces add flags as warning markers to the records they keep on both suspects and victims to help them take a more informed approach to any future response.

During this inspection, we also found that some forces monitored the quality of 'return home' interviews in cases involving missing children. This helps them to create an up-to-date intelligence picture of risk and develop appropriate safeguarding actions. In one force we visited, this shared intelligence led to the identification of a child sexual exploitation perpetrator who was known to six police forces.

At the time of our inspection, in response to feedback from some forces, the Hydrant Programme was updating the child exploitation disruption toolkit with practical guidance on how to apply for a range of orders and make use of the tactics to disrupt criminals who target children.

Many forces have positively addressed this [area for improvement](#) by working with [statutory safeguarding partners](#) on prevention and disruption tactics to raise the business community's awareness of child sexual exploitation.

Further action required

Due to the progress made, we have closed our 2023 area for improvement. However, this inspection reveals that more could be done to implement Operation Makesafe consistently and maximise its impact through common branding. Therefore, we make one further recommendation.

Recommendation 6

By 31 July 2026, all police forces should devise a strategy to implement [Operation Makesafe](#) consistently and include this in their [child sexual exploitation](#) data returns to the [Hydrant Programme](#). This strategy should include the adoption and use of the rebranded Operation Makesafe police and partnership marketing materials.

3. The quality of investigations

In [our 2023 inspection](#), we carried out fieldwork in police forces to assess the quality of group-based [child sexual exploitation](#) investigations.

In this inspection, we carried out fieldwork in six police forces to assess the impact of the recommendations we made in our 2023 report.

We reviewed case files for 67 individual [child sexual abuse](#) investigations that were recorded as group-based child sexual exploitation offences.

During our review, we assessed the quality of investigation against three categories:

1. reporting and initial assessment;
2. investigation; and
3. [victim](#) care.

First, we evaluated whether there was correct identification of group-based child sexual exploitation following the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse \(IICSA\)](#) definition. This included the timeliness of response and appropriate action to mitigate risk.

To evaluate the quality of investigation, we assessed whether:

- the appropriate resource was allocated;
- the focus was on the suspect and;
- there was a meaningful investigation plan.

This included the quality of supervision and whether the outcome of the investigation was appropriate and proportionate.

Finally, we assessed whether there was appropriate work with victims, including support and referral to specialist workers. We also examined whether any [victim-blaming](#) language or bias was evident.

Our assessment

Police forces can better identify complex child sexual exploitation cases

In our 2023 report, we said that forces struggled to distinguish between group-based child sexual exploitation investigations and wider child sexual exploitation investigations. However, during this inspection, we found that some forces were using dedicated analysts and quality assurance review teams to identify cases. We also saw how the [Hydrant Programme](#)'s use of the [complex and organised child abuse dataset](#) was providing a quality assurance role that helps forces to identify group-based child sexual exploitation more effectively.

We found that 49 of the 67 case files we reviewed met the IICSA definition of group-based child sexual exploitation.

We found that Kent Police applied the IICSA group-based definition well when it reviewed approximately 3,000 closed child sexual exploitation reports. Sometimes this resulted in the identification of other linked crimes or further lines of enquiry, and investigations were reopened. One of these cases involved links to organised group-based child sexual exploitation that might not otherwise have been identified.

[Baroness Casey of Blackstock's 'National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse'](#) reinforces our view that police forces need to review closed crimes of [grooming](#) and child sexual exploitation that resulted in no further action. Scrutinising these cases is particularly important for victims as it helps to build confidence that the police are taking these crimes seriously and will bring offenders to justice.

The initial response to most reports is timely, but some forces need to improve their focus to avoid delays

In 64 of the 67 cases of cases we reviewed, we found that the initial response to group-based child sexual exploitation crimes was timely. But, in some cases, the progress of investigations lost momentum after a few weeks, which led to unjustifiable delays.

In eight cases, we found unacceptable investigative delays. Of these, two cases were delayed by the transfer of the investigations to another force. Others were delayed where there were cross-border enquiries between police forces. In one case, we found that the late identification and mapping of a group-based child sexual exploitation crime led to delays in securing specialist support.

More reassuringly, we found that most forces prioritised arrests and acted with urgency to secure evidence and protect victims. This was more likely to result in charges being brought or suspects being remanded to court. We found that many forces frequently considered using the [Home Office child exploitation disruption toolkit](#) for guidance on disruption tactics, including [child abduction warning notices](#), [Sexual Harm Prevention Orders](#) and [Trafficking Prevention Orders](#). And, in a few cases, we saw how forces worked with their partners to close licensed premises where staff or the licence holder sexually abused young people in exchange for vapes. This [safeguards](#) potential victims and disrupts criminals who prey on [vulnerable children](#).

When the police close a case, they are more likely to consider the risk to victims and others and action to mitigate the risk

In 53 of the 67 investigations we reviewed, investigators identified suspects. In 38 of those cases, they made arrests. However, in several cases where the investigation involved more than one police force area, we were unable to count the number of arrests made. Even when the victim chose not to pursue a prosecution or speak to the police, most police forces still made arrests that investigators considered necessary to safeguard the victim and other unknown victims.

In one police force area, we reviewed 19 child sexual exploitation investigation case files and found that in 9 of these, the victim didn't wish to engage with the police. This was often because the children concerned didn't see themselves as victims because they were coerced into believing they were in a romantic relationship. And in other cases, some victims felt the need to protect their perpetrators, who may also be family members. Nevertheless, we frequently found that the police still considered the full facts and action needed to mitigate risk before closing a crime report.

In one case, a crime of child rape was reported to have taken place in the child's family home. Although the child didn't wish to speak to the police, the child's parent was arrested and interviewed. This revealed other evidence that suggested the child had been coerced into having sex with multiple men to fund the parent's drug addiction. Although there was insufficient evidence to prosecute for the offence of rape, the force investigated the parent for a separate offence of causing or inciting the sexual exploitation of a child.

Of the 67 cases we reviewed, 55 were closed or finalised with an [outcome](#). In three of these cases, we disagreed with the outcomes assigned and brought this to the attention of the forces concerned.

In two of the three case outcomes that we disagreed with, the police decided to take no further action because all parties were aged under 16 years old. Instead, the police decided that the reports should be resolved by the victims' schools. However, both of these crimes involved sexual assault, and one also included grooming and distributing indecent images of a child. We considered these outcomes to be inappropriate because of the seriousness of the crimes. Positively, in one of these cases, the force had already taken corrective action and opened a further investigation after its own internal audit recognised the same failures that we found.

The third case we disagreed with involved a report of rape. Although the 17-year-old victim didn't wish to support a prosecution, we found no evidence that the police had carried out any police national database checks to see what ongoing risks the suspects might pose to others. This may have given the police the opportunity to consider an evidence-led prosecution without relying on the support of the victim.

Trained specialists are more likely to investigate complex child sexual exploitation cases

We found that when specialist officers took charge of investigations, they were more likely to identify and pursue lines of enquiry promptly and address any safeguarding concerns. This is because they have the right training and skills to investigate group-based child sexual exploitation offences.

We found that 58 of the 67 cases we reviewed were allocated to trained detectives or specialist investigation teams. The remaining nine cases were allocated to other frontline officers because they didn't involve groups and were less complex. Many of these allocations also included clear investigative strategies set by a detective sergeant. In some forces, we found that specialist exploitation officers also provided peer support and guidance to frontline officers during their investigations.

Many child sexual exploitation cases have good supervision, and there are positive efforts to build trust with more victims

During our review, we identified many good examples of complex child sexual exploitation investigations being well supervised and investigated. In 60 of the 67 cases we reviewed, regular and timely supervision of group-based child sexual exploitation investigations was evident and bespoke investigation plans had been set.

In five cases, it wasn't possible to determine the level of supervision because the case files were held with other forces. Disappointingly, in two cases we found that the 28-day supervisory review by first-line managers amounted to no more than a passive endorsement of the investigation's status when there should have been a greater focus on directing the remaining enquiries.

However, after detective chief inspectors had carried out a 90-day review of live investigations, cases that had lost momentum began to make better progress. Some of these cases resulted in charges.

In our case file review, we found evidence that some forces carried out critical analysis to identify complex group-based child sexual exploitation offences. As a result, they were risk assessed and mapped in line with serious and organised crime procedures. All six forces we inspected had asked for help from the Hydrant Programme for learning review and support, which included the specialist intelligence capabilities of the Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme. This is positive.

Where victims weren't yet ready to support a prosecution, we saw how investigations still took place to identify the suspect and mitigate risks they may have posed to the victim and others. In five of the six forces we visited, we found positive examples of continued contact with victims over lengthy periods of time to build trust. This led to some victims who were initially reluctant to support a police prosecution feeling able to engage with investigators. In most investigations, officers updated victims frequently on the progress of the investigation, and those updates reflected victims' views and responses.

Most forces complete victim risk assessments and safeguard appropriately

In 63 of the 67 cases we reviewed, forces completed comprehensive victim risk assessments that identified all apparent risks. In 54 of those cases, we found that the police took appropriate action to safeguard victims and prevent further harm. This included holding early case conferences with social care professionals in multi-agency child exploitation meetings and making outreach referrals to specialist support workers. It also included the use of prevention orders, such as Sexual Harm Prevention Orders and child abduction warning notices.

In the cases we reviewed, police officers frequently showed professional curiosity and took action to mitigate the risk of harm associated with child sexual exploitation offences and missing children.

Police attitudes towards and understanding of child sexual exploitation victims are improving

Throughout our review, we found frequent examples of passionate, dedicated and well-trained officers who try their best to support vulnerable children and protect them from harm. As we discuss in progress made against 2023 recommendation 9, rather than the many examples of victim-blaming language that we found during our 2023 inspection, we found only two examples of victim-blaming language during our case file review.

Despite improvements, some forces could be better at identifying and investigating group-based child sexual exploitation and protecting victims

Although our inspection showed that the police have made improvements in identifying and handling group-based child sexual exploitation investigations, more should be done to consistently identify cases, give victims the service they deserve and bring perpetrators to justice.

We found several areas in which forces still need to improve.

Some forces don't reliably identify group-based child sexual exploitation

Forces' identification of group-based child sexual exploitation is unreliable, and there is confusion about which investigations meet the IICSA definition. In a few cases, forces incorrectly applied the definition. For example, some forces applied the definition to perpetrators who weren't even loosely connected to each other. Other failings are more serious. One force didn't identify group-based child sexual exploitation on their systems in ten cases. However, Hydrant Programme analysts corrected and highlighted these in the dataset return.

The use of safeguarding plans

In five cases we reviewed, we considered that safeguarding plans were insufficient to mitigate the risks posed to the victim. Overlooking risk can lead to disastrous outcomes for children.

In one example that we brought to the attention of the force, a 15-year-old child had disclosed that her father had raped her. The child didn't wish to speak to the police and officers failed to complete a risk assessment or make a safeguarding referral to social services. This is unacceptable and should have been addressed by supervisors.

In another case that was still being investigated, a 16-year-old child who was in a foster placement was believed to have been subject to child sexual exploitation. The child didn't wish to speak to the police or make a complaint. The social worker involved agreed with the child's wishes to stay with an older woman who the police believed had facilitated her exploitation. The reasons for this decision weren't recorded, and this should have been challenged by a supervisor. This did nothing to mitigate the ongoing risk to the child. The force should have challenged this.

Some investigations don't progress quickly enough

In 8 of the 67 cases we reviewed, we found unacceptable investigative delays. In one case that had been investigated for over a year, enquiries began to reveal multiple victims and suspects. But it still took several months before a senior investigating officer intervened and recognised the case as an organised network of offenders who were involved in group-based child sexual exploitation. The investigation was escalated as a major crime inquiry and several charges were brought against multiple suspects. But during the time that elapsed, the ringleader died, which meant they never faced justice.

When investigations are delayed and not supervised effectively, it can mean that some children are left at risk and some suspects aren't investigated properly or at all. In some cases, a lack of effective reviews can mean that cumulative and escalating risk isn't spotted at the earliest opportunity. This means that the development of protective plans to safeguard children is delayed.

Conclusion

Crimes of child sexual exploitation, particularly those involving groups of offenders, are often complex and difficult to investigate. In our case file review, we found that many improvements had been made since we published our 2023 report.

Better training, improved identification of offences, timely and well-supervised responses and comprehensive investigation strategies are helping bring more perpetrators to justice and safeguard victims.

Police forces should maintain and build upon this work. They should pay special attention to the early identification of cases and provide effective supervision that maintains the quality and pace of investigation.

