

POLICY BRIEF

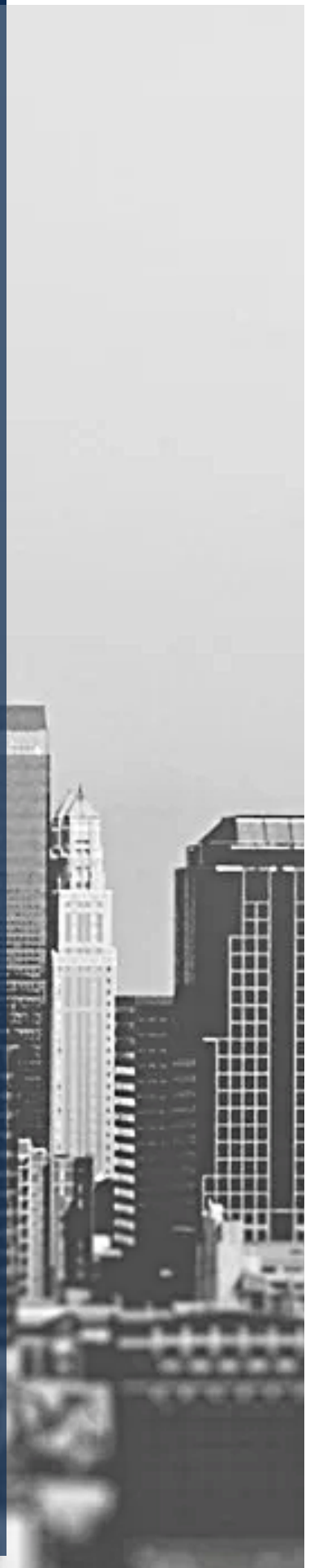
OPERATION BEACONPORT AND THE INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO GROOMING GANGS

Cross-Government Safeguarding
Considerations and
Recommendations

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Executive Summary

Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs represent one of the most significant national responses to historic child sexual abuse and exploitation in recent decades.

The reopening of investigations across multiple police force areas, together with the establishment of the Independent Inquiry, provides an important opportunity not only to pursue justice for historic offending, but also to strengthen safeguarding, improve public confidence and embed lasting system reform.

This policy brief does not examine the criminal investigations themselves. Instead, it considers the wider governance, safeguarding and cross-government arrangements that may be required to support the effective delivery of this national programme.

Drawing upon experience across safeguarding, policing, health, criminal justice and sexual exploitation reform, this paper identifies several strategic considerations, including national governance, investigative capacity, safeguarding across the life course, survivor engagement, independent oversight, investment and measures of success.

The paper proposes six recommendations designed to strengthen the national response by improving cross-government coordination, safeguarding accountability, independent oversight, long-term support and implementation. Collectively, these recommendations seek to ensure that Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry are supported by a coordinated, trauma-informed and sustainable framework that protects those affected whilst strengthening the systems responsible for preventing future harm.

Key Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered to strengthen the national response to Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs. They are intended to complement investigative activity by strengthening governance, safeguarding, accountability and long-term system reform.

Recommendation 1

Establish an Independent National Safeguarding Coordination and Assurance Function

Consider establishing an independent national function to provide safeguarding oversight, cross-government coordination, quality assurance and accountability alongside Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry. Such a function should support local safeguarding arrangements rather than replace existing statutory responsibilities, whilst ensuring safeguarding remains central throughout the programme.

Recommendation 2

Develop a National Safeguarding Strategy

Publish a cross-government safeguarding strategy to accompany Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry, setting out national arrangements for safeguarding, survivor engagement, risk management, independent advocacy, information sharing and partnership working across all relevant agencies.

Recommendation 3

Ensure Sustainable Investment Across the Whole System

Alongside investment in the Independent Inquiry and specialist police investigations, ensure appropriate investment is also made in safeguarding, independent advocacy, specialist support services, digital forensic capability, prosecutorial capacity and cross-government coordination, recognising that an effective national response requires more than investigative resources alone.

Recommendation 4

Embed Support Across the Life Course

Recognise that many of those affected are now adults and ensure that appropriate support—including independent advocacy, legal advice, practical assistance, NHS services, adult social care and specialist sexual violence and exploitation services—is available across the life course, whenever and if individuals choose to access it.

Recommendation 5

Strengthen National Learning, Accountability and Implementation

Establish clear national arrangements to capture learning from Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry, translate recommendations into policy and practice, monitor implementation and provide ongoing accountability for system-wide improvement across Government and partner agencies.

Recommendation 6

Measure Success Beyond Criminal Justice Outcomes

Develop national measures of success that assess not only investigations, arrests and prosecutions, but also safeguarding effectiveness, survivor choice, public confidence, cross-agency coordination, organisational learning and long-term improvements to safeguarding systems.

About the Author

Debra Cowey is a Sexual Exploitation & Systemic Reform Specialist whose work focuses on strengthening national responses to sexual exploitation through governance, safeguarding, workforce development and whole-system reform across both children's and adults' safeguarding systems.

She is the developer of the End-to-End Sexual Exploitation Reform Framework, a strategic framework designed to strengthen prevention, early identification, safeguarding, recovery, criminal justice and long-term system reform across the life course. She has also developed the Sexual Violence Assurance Standards™, supporting organisations to strengthen governance, organisational assurance and system-wide responses to sexual violence and sexual exploitation.

Drawing on experience working across safeguarding, policing, health, criminal justice and the voluntary sector, her work supports police forces, local authorities, safeguarding partnerships and other organisations to strengthen multi-agency practice, improve organisational capability and embed sustainable system reform.

This policy brief has been prepared in support of constructive discussion on the governance, safeguarding and system-wide considerations arising from Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs.

Cross-Government Considerations

1. National Programme Governance

Operation Beaconport, reopened investigations and the Independent Inquiry together represent one of the largest coordinated responses to historic child sexual abuse in recent years.

Given the scale of this programme, it would be helpful to understand:

- What governance arrangements have been established across Government?
- Which department holds overall responsibility for coordinating the wider programme?
- How will policing, health, safeguarding, housing and victim support services work together?
- How will learning from Operation Beaconport inform the Independent Inquiry and vice versa?
- How will recommendations be monitored and implemented nationally?

2. Resourcing Investigations

Historic investigations of this complexity require substantial specialist capability. It would therefore be helpful to understand:

- What additional funding has been allocated to police forces?
- How will specialist investigative teams be resourced?
- What investment has been made in digital forensic capability?
- What arrangements are in place to support the Crown Prosecution Service and wider criminal justice system?
- Has Government undertaken a national impact assessment regarding the additional demand these investigations are likely to place upon policing and criminal justice agencies?

3. Safeguarding and Support Across the Life Course

Whilst these investigations relate to offences committed against children, many of those affected are now adults.

This reflects a wider pattern seen across national reviews and inquiries, where investigations are rightly framed around child sexual abuse or child sexual exploitation, yet many of the individuals engaging with investigations, support services and justice processes are adults.

An effective national response therefore requires continuity between children's safeguarding systems and adult safeguarding, health, housing, criminal justice and specialist support services.

Many individuals may require no formal support at all. Others may benefit from advocacy, legal advice, practical assistance, NHS services, adult social care or specialist sexual violence and exploitation services.

Support needs should not be assumed, nor should they be regarded as limited to the period of investigation or criminal justice proceedings.

They may arise immediately, many years later, or not at all.

It would therefore be helpful to understand what cross-government arrangements have been established to ensure that appropriate, trauma-informed support remains available across the life course, whenever and if individuals choose to access it.

4. Re-engagement with Those Affected

Re-engaging individuals affected by historic abuse is not simply an investigative exercise.

Many people may have built new lives. Some may never have disclosed their experiences to partners, children, employers or wider family members. Others may have consciously chosen not to revisit past trauma.

For many, renewed contact may be welcomed.

For others, it may be unexpected or deeply distressing.

It would therefore be helpful to understand:

- What national guidance has been issued regarding re-engagement?
- What trauma-informed approaches are expected of police forces?
- How will confidentiality be protected?
- How will individuals' wishes regarding engagement be respected wherever possible?
- Will individuals have genuine choice regarding whether, when and how they engage, whilst balancing investigative responsibilities?

5. Safeguarding During the National Response

The public announcement of reopened investigations and the Independent Inquiry may itself have created new safeguarding considerations. Whilst many individuals may feel encouraged to come forward, others may experience renewed fear, anxiety or concerns about potential repercussions.

Historic investigations can affect not only those directly involved, but also families, witnesses, communities and professionals supporting those affected. Publicity surrounding these announcements may increase the risk of intimidation, coercion or attempts to discourage engagement with investigative processes. Equally, renewed media attention may lead some individuals to seek support for the first time, whilst others may choose not to engage.

Given these considerations, it would be helpful to understand:

- What national safeguarding arrangements have been established following these announcements?
- How will police forces identify and respond to intimidation, coercion or attempts to silence individuals who choose to engage?
- What safeguarding arrangements exist for individuals assessed as being at increased risk?
- How will information regarding available support and safeguarding services be communicated?
- What arrangements are in place to ensure consistent safeguarding responses across all police force areas?

Safeguarding should operate alongside investigative activity rather than follow it. As Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry progress, safeguarding should remain a continuous and coordinated function, ensuring that risks are identified early and that individuals are able to make informed choices about engagement, whenever and if they choose to do so.

6. Independent National Safeguarding Coordination

Operation Beaconport is not solely a policing programme.
It is also a national safeguarding programme.

Whilst policing rightly leads criminal investigations, responsibility for safeguarding extends across health services, local authorities, safeguarding partnerships, housing providers, victim services and specialist organisations.

This raises an important question of national accountability.
Consideration should therefore be given to establishing an Independent National Safeguarding Coordination and Assurance Function to operate alongside Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry.

Its purpose would not be to replace existing statutory responsibilities.
Rather, it would:

- provide national safeguarding oversight;
- coordinate cross-government safeguarding activity;
- support consistency across police force areas;
- monitor emerging safeguarding risks;
- ensure individuals have genuine choice regarding how and from whom they receive support;
- strengthen accountability;
- capture national learning; and
- provide independent assurance regarding safeguarding arrangements throughout the programme.

Trust in statutory services varies considerably.

Some individuals may wish to engage through the police or local authority.

Others may feel more able to access support through independent specialist organisations because of previous experiences.

National arrangements should therefore place informed choice at the centre of safeguarding.

7. Investment Across the Whole System

The Government has committed £65 million to the Independent Inquiry (HM Government, 2025), recognising the importance of understanding historic institutional failures and informing future reform.

Equally, reopened investigations will require substantial investment in specialist policing capability.

However, it would be helpful to understand what corresponding investment has been allocated to safeguarding, independent advocacy, specialist support services and cross-government coordination.

Investigations and inquiries are essential.

So too is ensuring that individuals can engage safely, voluntarily and with appropriate support should they choose to do so.

8. National Outcomes and Accountability

The effectiveness of Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry should not be assessed solely through investigative outcomes. Whilst investigations, arrests, prosecutions and inquiry recommendations remain important, consideration should also be given to whether the national response has:

- strengthened safeguarding across agencies;
- enabled individuals to make informed choices about engagement and support;
- ensured support remained available across the life course, whenever and if required;
- improved consistency across policing, safeguarding and partner organisations;
- translated learning into lasting system reform; and
- strengthened public confidence in safeguarding and criminal justice responses.

Ultimately, the national response should be judged not only by justice achieved, but by the lasting improvements it delivers to safeguarding systems and the protection of future generations.

Conclusion

Operation Beaconport and the Independent Inquiry represent a significant opportunity not only to investigate historic offending and strengthen accountability, but also to improve the systems that protect and support those affected both now and in the future.

The reopening of investigations, combined with the Independent Inquiry, should be viewed as a whole-system programme requiring coordinated investment in policing, safeguarding, health, specialist support services and cross-government leadership. Success should not be measured solely by investigative outcomes or inquiry recommendations, but by whether those affected are safeguarded, respected, able to exercise informed choice, and supported across the life course whenever and if they choose to access support.

The considerations and recommendations set out within this policy brief are offered constructively to support the safe, consistent and effective delivery of this national programme. They are intended to contribute to discussion around governance, accountability, safeguarding and long-term system reform, ensuring that learning from the past results in lasting improvements for future generations.

It is hoped that these recommendations will assist Government in strengthening the national response and ensuring that safeguarding remains central alongside the pursuit of justice.

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