

Witness Name: Deborah Denis

Statement Number: 1

Exhibits: DD/01 – DD/30

Dated: 19/06/2025

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WITNESS STATEMENT OF DEBORAH DENIS

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I, Deborah Denis, will say as follows:

1. I make this statement pursuant to a Rule 9 request from the UK Covid-19 Inquiry dated 6 March 2025.
2. I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation ('LFF') and make this statement on behalf of it.

**Background**

3. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation is a UK wide child protection charity that was established in 1992. Our mission is to prevent child sexual abuse by intervening with people at risk of causing harm and enabling everyone to create a safer world for children. We are uniquely placed because we are one of only a few organisations tackling the problem of child sexual abuse at source by working with those perpetrating abuse or at risk of doing so.
4. Our work to prevent child sexual abuse covers abuse whether online or offline or a combination of the two. It encompasses child sexual abuse wherever it occurs: in families, in institutions, in communities and on the internet. Consequently, in this statement, when I refer to the harms or risks to children, I am generally doing so without distinguishing between online and offline child sexual abuse, unless I have specifically indicated otherwise.
5. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation has many varied services and projects which are all tied together by our mission to prevent child sexual abuse:

- a. We run the Stop It Now helpline in the UK, the largest helpline of its kind in the world for people concerned about their own sexual thoughts and behaviour towards children and anyone concerned about child sexual abuse. In 2023/2024, we supported 8,774 people who made 19,328 calls, chats or emails to the helpline. The majority of those contacting the helpline, 50%, are adults concerned about their own sexual thoughts or behaviour towards children.
- b. We operate self-directed interventions online (self-help) for those concerned about their online or offline sexual behaviour towards children, which are accessed by tens of thousands of people each year.
- c. Annually, we assess risk in hundreds of adults and adolescents and provide groupwork interventions to several hundred more. Where abuse has occurred, our team of practitioners advise statutory agencies on case management and provide intervention programmes to rebuild family safety.
- d. Our preventative work includes early intervention programmes for families considered at risk of harm and public education.
- e. We also work to prevent harmful sexual behaviour amongst young people through our work in schools and our programmes designed for young people themselves. This includes our website and live chat service, Shore ([www.shorespace.org.uk](http://www.shorespace.org.uk)). The only resource of its kind in Europe and one of only three in the world, Shore launched in 2023, and is for young people concerned about their own sexual thoughts or behaviour or that of a friend.
- f. We deliver training across the UK and the sector, reaching more than 2,000 frontline workers a year, including those in law enforcement, education and social care.
- g. We run online deterrence activities. In the UK, we have for the past 10 years been running an online deterrence campaign, a national multi-channel communications campaign which seeks to deter those viewing illegal sexual images of children or having sexual conversations with under-16s and redirect them to our Stop It Now helpline and online self-help. We also run a tech project called Project Intercept that was launched in 2023 and is working with tech companies around the world to help them develop and implement deterrence messaging on their platforms.
- h. We conduct research, from the evaluation of our projects and services to ensure that we are developing evidence-based interventions that are as effective as possible, to collaborative studies with academic institutions.

- i. We engage in public policy and through our advocacy work, we seek to influence change and inspire action by decision-makers that will enable a greater focus to be placed on preventing child sexual abuse, before it happens.
6. I became CEO of LFF at the beginning of the pandemic in February 2020. I first joined LFF in 2009 as media and communications manager. After 18 months away, I re-joined LFF in 2016 as head of fundraising and external relations, before being appointed director of fundraising and communications in 2018. I have almost 15 years experience working for LFF.
7. I would describe LFF as a medium-sized charity. We have an annual turnover of approximately £5 million and employ roughly 140 full and part-time staff. We are based in 4 locations in the UK: Bromsgrove, where our headquarters is situated, Epsom, Edinburgh and we have a small team that works remotely in Wales.
8. The senior leadership team at LFF is made up of:
  - Director of Operations, Adrian McNulty
  - Director of Finance, Annabel Kroeger
  - Director of People Services, Alison Dexter
  - Director of Advocacy and Communications, Frances Frost
  - Director of Research and Impact, Tom Fisher
  - Director of LFF Scotland, Stuart Allardyce
9. LFF is overseen by a board of trustees, currently comprised of 12 trustees. Our trustees come from a variety of backgrounds including clinical practice, finance, business, law, human resources, public service, technology and academia.
10. LFF is a charity registered with the Charities Commission under charity number 1013024 and a company limited by guarantee registered with Companies House under company number 2729957.

#### **Pre-pandemic period: harms, trends, impact, mitigations**

11. The fundamental nature of the work carried out by LFF did not change as a result of the pandemic. However, there were operational implications for our work that resulted from lockdowns. Essentially, the manner in which we deliver our services changed as a result of the pandemic and that continues to be the case today.

12. Additionally, the pandemic put children at increased risk of harm from child sexual abuse for reasons which will be explored further below. The pandemic was also a factor affecting many of our service users who were in contact with us during the pandemic period.
13. Before looking at the pandemic period of January 2020 to June 2022, I will set out some background information regarding LFF's activities in the pre-pandemic years 2015 to 2019. The most helpful measure is in relation to our largest service, the Stop It Now helpline. The table below shows the number of contacts (calls and emails) to the helpline and the number of callers where available in the years leading up to the pandemic:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Contacts (calls and emails)</b>	<b>People contacting</b>
2015/2016	9,414	
2016/2017	9,338	
2017/2018	9,489	5,329
2018/2019	8,795	5,388
2019/2020	10,636	5,959

As seen from this table, calls to our Stop It Now helpline in the years prior to the pandemic numbered approximately 9,000 to 10,000 per annum.

14. The range of services we provide and the number of people we have helped in the years 2015 to 2019, including those accessing our Stop It Now helpline are fully set out in our annual reports 2015/2016 through to 2019/2020. These annual reports are attached as exhibits DD/01 – INQ000620558, DD/02 – INQ000620559, DD/03 – INQ000620560, DD/04 – INQ000620561 and DD/05 – INQ000620562.
15. As evidenced in our annual reports, from an operational point of view, many of our services were delivered face to face and office-based. Our Stop It Now helpline at the time was operating from our Epsom offices which were equipped with sound-proof booths where helpline advisers answered calls. Our programmes were delivered in face to face groups, usually based from one of our office locations. And in Wales much of our early intervention work with families was delivered through family centres.

16. With respect specifically to online harms, we had done significant work in this area prior to the pandemic. In 2015, we launched online self-help for people concerned about their online sexual behaviour towards children. The same year, we piloted an online deterrence campaign. The aim was to establish whether we could intervene and deter online sexual offending against children. We set out to reach those offending or at risk of offending online, and through communications across various channels, drive these audiences towards help to change their behaviour. Part of the motivation for this work was a recognition that the scale of those offending online was outreaching the capacity of police forces to make arrests and conduct investigations. The pilot in 2015 resulted in increased calls to our Stop It Now helpline and users to our online self-help modules. Consequently, in the years 2015 to 2019, we continued to run an annual online deterrence campaign, funded by the Home Office, each campaign phase was evaluated independently and the findings would inform the phase that followed. I attach as exhibit DD/06 – INQ000620563 our published *Faithfull Paper: Deterring online child sexual abuse and exploitation, lessons from seven years of campaigning*, which sets out further information about the deterrence campaign in the years preceding the pandemic 2015 to 2019.

17. Our deterrence work prior to the pandemic also extended to working with tech companies to implement deterrence messaging on their platforms. By the time the pandemic started, we had interventions running with Google and Bing, as well as Facebook. In essence, when users on these platforms in the UK searched for a term which suggested that they were looking for sexual images of children, they were presented with a warning that alerted them to the fact that sexual images of children are illegal and signposted them to help to change their behaviour at Stop It Now. Similar warnings were also deployed by tech companies who were members of the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and used its URL List to block access to URLs that the IWF found to contain images and videos of child sexual abuse. Since in or around 2015, the IWF has been recommending to its members that splash pages should be deployed when users are seeking to access URLs on the block list. Similar to the warnings, the splash pages alert the user seeking access to the fact that the URL has been blocked for containing illegal images of children, that this material causes harm to children and has serious consequences for those seeking it but there is help to stop with signposting to Stop It Now.

18. A further reference point for our understanding of the threat posed by child sexual abuse at the time can be found in the National Crime Agency (NCA) National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2020. The 2020 assessment reflects on the picture in 2019. In respect of child sexual abuse, the NCA's view on the threat posed by child sexual abuse was as follows:

*“Based on our developing understanding, including our assessment of the number of registered sex offenders who are being managed for CSA offending (35,000) and the number of offenders on the dark web (250,000), we have high confidence that there are a minimum of 300,000 individuals in the UK who pose a sexual threat to children, either through contact abuse or online. This level of confidence is supported by data from various sources, including from Stop It Now!, who state that in 2019, 94,342 people from the UK contacted their confidential helpline and self-help website to address their sexual attraction to children, increasing from 43,000 people in the previous year.*

I attach the NCA's National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2020 as exhibit DD/07 – INQ000620564.

19. Inputting into the NCA's threat assessment is just one example of the type of cross-sector engagement that was a feature of our work prior to the pandemic. We sat in various stakeholder networks such as the Home Office Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy stakeholder group, the National Police Chiefs' Council Prevent, Prepare and Protect Boards, and the WeProtect Global Alliance civil society reference group. There was a recognition across the sector prior to the pandemic that collaborative working was fundamental to effectively tackle child sexual abuse as no single agency could solve the problem on its own and only by working together and sharing insights, could our collective response be stronger.

### **Pandemic period: harms, trends, impact, mitigations**

20. The pandemic had a significant impact on us from an organisational point of view as we had to pivot the delivery of our services which were office-based and in person to be able to continue to deliver those services throughout the lockdowns. The senior leadership team developed a business continuity plan in February 2020 which was put into practice in March 2020 with the first lockdown. The plan set out the steps we

would take to ensure that our services continued to operate smoothly and included provisions for remote working whilst continuing access to our network, purchasing and distributing of zoom licences, and guidelines for staff working from home and social distancing in the office. When the first lockdown was imposed in March 2020, we were able to make changes that enabled helpline advisers to answer calls from their homes, thereby ensuring the continued service of the Stop It Now helpline. Additionally, many of our staff with client-facing roles such as the practitioners, assistant psychologists and project workers were considered key workers under the government's criteria.

21. However, in addition to the operational challenges we faced as an organisation, we were also concerned that the pandemic increased the risks to children of sexual abuse. The increased risk was due to the fact:

- a. The majority of child sexual abuse happens within the family environment. The pandemic meant that families were experiencing higher levels of stress and social isolation, as well as an increase in opportunity that the confinement to homes that the lockdowns brought.
- b. Protective adults such as teachers, social workers, and healthcare professionals were less available during the pandemic which meant that their ability to protect children from sexual harm was compromised.
- c. Increased use of the internet in the home by primarily men who were experiencing higher levels of stress, social isolation and confinement that contributed to risky behaviours. One example was the increased use of adult pornography during the pandemic and the desensitisation to extreme material that occurred which led some people to then seek sexual images and videos of children.
- d. Young people were spending a lot more time online, potentially unsupervised and this time online could easily stray into consuming inappropriate and illegal content. The increased time online by young people also exposed them to increased risks of solicitation by adults online.
- e. Harmful sexual behaviour would likely increase among children and young people within the home. Roughly a third of sexual abuse is committed by under 18s and children posed an increased risk to others within the family.

22. The increased risks to children from sexual abuse was reflected in an increase in calls to our Stop It Now helpline during the pandemic. In contrast to the level of calls

prior to the pandemic as set out above which ranged from approximately 9,000 to 10,000 per annum, during the pandemic years 2020 to 2022, calls to our Stop It Now helpline increased to approximately 14,000 to 15,000 per annum:

Year	Contacts (calls, emails and chats)	People contacting
2020/2021	14,197	7,300
2021/2022	15,435	7,658

I attach as exhibit DD/08 – INQ000620565 and DD/09 – INQ000620566, our annual reports for the years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022.

23. We also conducted a thematic analysis of calls to our Stop It Now helpline between 1 April 2020 and 3 September 2020. The findings are fully set out in our report *An initial analysis of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on callers to the Stop It Now! UK and Ireland helpline*, which I attach as exhibit DD/10 – INQ000620567. In conducting the analysis of 111 callers during the period who specifically mentioned that the pandemic was having an impact on their circumstances, a number of themes arose which callers believed were pertinent to the level of risk of child sexual abuse as follows:

- Concerning behaviours had escalated during the pandemic
- Protective factors reduced during the pandemic
- Furlough, being made redundant or financial impact to businesses had knock-on consequences for concerning thoughts and behaviours towards children
- Feelings of isolation were amplified
- Experiences of the criminal justice system were impacted, for example a slow down in the process, which led to additional stress and anxiety
- Professional support mechanisms were adversely affected, in some cases that support was no longer available due to the pandemic
- Mental well-being was affected with some individuals identifying depressive or anxious moods due to the pandemic
- Individuals were affected by no longer being able to see adult family members
- Some individuals identified that their adult pornography use increased during the pandemic, and that adult pornography use had been implicated in previous access to sexual images of children



24. To illustrate how these factors were playing out in calls to the Stop It Now helpline, it is helpful to look at some case studies. Several are contained in the report mentioned above but a few are highlighted here:

Case study 1: Potential abuser

*Kevin (mid 30s) lives alone, has no children and works as a labourer; however, he is currently not working due to Covid-19 lockdown. He has been on anti-depressive medication for some three years.*

*He called Stop It Now! with concerns about his intrusive thoughts about sexual contact with underaged/pre-teen girls. Kevin has suffered with inappropriate, intrusive thoughts for several years, but since lockdown restrictions were imposed these thoughts have become stronger and more intrusive and are troubling him. Kevin also stated that on a number of occasions he has accessed indecent images of children online but has not been arrested for this behaviour, which he knows is illegal. He is not in contact with any children and states he has never acted on these thoughts other than accessing images online. But he has engaged in making plans in the past and his current thoughts occur two to three times a day. He stated that these thoughts led to 'mixed emotions'; initially they arouse him, but then afterwards he feels 'horrible'. Kevin is concerned that these thoughts are getting stronger.*

*Kevin was praised for contacting the helpline and seeking help. We discussed various ways he can keep himself busy and his mind occupied during lockdown, including maintaining contact with adult family members and friends. Strategies for managing his inappropriate sexual thoughts and fantasies were discussed and he agreed to implement these immediately. He was advised to contact the helpline on a weekly basis (or more often if needed) to discuss how these strategies were working and for continued support. He also agreed to work through the Get Help online self-help programme over the weeks ahead, as well as the fantasy management module of the Get Support self-help website. Kevin was advised on the illegality of accessing indecent images of children under 18 years old and the harm this does to children, as well as the consequences of this behaviour.*

Case Study 4: Internet offender

*Greg is a labourer who currently lives alone. He has an adult daughter and his ex-wife, who he still sees, has three children from her current marriage.*

*Greg first called the helpline in June 2019 seeking support and advice following his arrest for accessing indecent images of children. At this time, he identified a couple of possible triggers to his offending behaviour, including an escalation from heavy adult pornography use. He was given a range of advice, including a recommendation to read the "Porn Trap" and complete the relevant Get Help online self-help modules. He was also advised to see his GP in light of a number of issues he had raised. He had subsequently followed this advice, engaged with talking therapies arranged by his GP, and sought additional help for pornography addiction. He stated he was doing well to divert his thoughts away from unwanted sexual images and avoided all online sexual material. He ceased contact with the helpline in December 2019.*

*When he called in June 2020, he disclosed that he had begun watching legal adult pornography when laid off from work during lockdown. He recognises his use of this material was a precursor to his previous viewing of illegal material, but he is struggling to resist the temptation. Greg made four further calls to the helpline during the lockdown period and has followed advice given, including returning to working through the Get Help modules, placing parental controls on his internet to assist with him abstaining from explicit sexual content. He stated he is beginning to understand his unhealthy relationship with online sexual material but needed ongoing support in implementing day to day strategies to help him manage his online behaviour. As he still has contact with his ex-wife and adult daughter who are aware of his previous illegal behaviour and arrest, we recommended that he give them the helpline number so we can share similar advice with them, too.*

#### Case Study 5: Online abuser

*Sam (late 50s) currently lives with his wife who has physical health problems. Their relationship is no longer intimate as a result. Sam is a store manager but is currently not working due to the pandemic. He and his wife have adult children but no grandchildren.*

*Sam contacted Stop It Now! because he was worried about his online behaviour in chat rooms. For several years he has engaged in sexual chat with adult females online. But during lockdown and unable to work, his online life has got out of control and he is now engaging in sexual chats with girls under 16 years old. These online sexual chats start first thing in the morning when he would otherwise be at work, before his partner is up and about. He believes he is unknown to the police. He stated that he has also accessed indecent images of children on this chat site. He*

*believes he has become addicted to chat rooms and that he has somehow lost his “moral compass”.*

*Sam was given relevant advice around the likely consequences if his illegal online behaviour continues and asked to consider all that he has to lose by getting arrested. The operator then discussed ways to manage his online life, including developing offline interests and putting parental controls on his internet. He was encouraged to engage in the Get Help online self-help website and read a copy of “Your Brain on Porn” and “The Porn Trap”.*

#### *Case Study 10: Professional*

*Daisy is a support worker within a school. She is concerned about a family that she was working with prior to lockdown, where the mother, Susan, had brought to her concerns about her 8-year-old daughter, Heidi, searching inappropriate, sexual search terms and possibly accessing pornographic material. The child was awaiting an ASD/ADHD assessment. At the time Daisy made a referral to the MASH team, but they declined any involvement.*

*Daisy bumped into Susan after a number of months to discover that during lockdown Heidi’s behaviour had deteriorated. A recent search had been for “how do children have sex”. The ASD/ADHD assessment had been postponed for reasons related to Covid-19. There are no counselling facilities available at the school and avenues of support are sparse. Heidi’s behaviour at school had raised no concerns.*

*The family circumstances are complex. Heidi has a different father from her two, soon to be three siblings. She spends time with her natural father every fortnight and seems comfortable with this.*

*A number of aspects were discussed for Daisy to take forward with Susan. It was important that the ASD/ADHD assessment was pursued. And whilst a re-referral to MASH might be considered, suggest that Susan see her GP to explain her concerns and seek potential referral to CAMHS.*

*There is a lot going on at home, including a new baby on the way, and perhaps Heidi was seeking attention. Concerns about Covid-19, and the stresses and strains that brought for families was a further consideration. Could Susan arrange to spend time with her discussing anything that might be worrying or troubling her. But also, Susan*

*needs to explain her concerns about the online searching she is doing and ensure appropriate parental controls are installed to ensure, as best she can, that there is no further access to pornography. A number of books and online resources were recommended to view with Heidi. This online life also needs to be supervised by an adult – the Internet has been used as a baby-sitter over recent months and some clearer parameters were needed. It was important that these steps were discussed with Susan’s current partner and Heidi’s father to ensure they were supportive.*

*Daisy was asked to pass on details of the Parents Protect website and the helpline number to Susan*

25. During the 5 month period of the report, 111 callers specifically mentioned the pandemic as having an impact on their circumstances. These 111 callers made a total of 582 calls over the period, approximately 11% of the total of 5,430 calls received during the period. However, we considered that this was an under representation of the issue. At the time, our Stop It Now helpline did not have a systematic way to log the impact of the pandemic. Changes to this were made which meant by 1 October 2020, we were able to routinely record when the pandemic was mentioned in calls.
26. After the initial report on the 5 month period, we did not publish any further analysis in relation to calls to the Stop It Now helpline during the pandemic. Following the request to provide evidence to the Covid-19 inquiry, we have since revisited the data we hold and are able to provide this summary of the themes that arose from calls during the period:

<b>Total number of callers and chatters from 1 Jan 2020 - 28 June 2022</b>		
	Total calls/chats	30,396
	Total callers/chatters	12,034
<b>Callers/chatters concerned about own behaviour 1 Jan 2020 - 28 June 2022</b>		
	Total calls/chats	18,422
	Total callers/chatters	6,244
<b>Did their behaviour start in Covid-19 lockdown, where known (n=2704)</b>		
	Yes	19% n=511
	No	81% n=2193
<b>Did their behaviour escalate in Covid-19 lockdown, where known (n=2170)</b>		
	Yes	39% (n=857)
	No	61% (n=1313)

<b>Impact of Covid-19 lockdown on caller</b>	
Feelings of isolation	421
Less social interactions	516
Unable to engage in hobbies	114
Financial difficulties	35
Furloughed from work	205
Increase in feelings of stress and/or anxiety	375
Increased time spent online	609

27. In addition to factors resulting from the pandemic which drove an increase in calls to the Stop It Now helpline, we had also received a boost in funding from the Home Office for our Stop It Now helpline. This was announced by the then Home Secretary, Sajid Javid in March 2019, and I attach as exhibit DD/11 – INQ000620568, a copy of the Home Office press release making that announcement. It was likely that the increased calls to the Stop It Now helpline was also resulting from this funding boost.

28. During the pandemic, we also delivered specific projects which were funded by the government under the Covid-19 Support for Vulnerable Children's Charities Grant, as administered by the Home Office. We delivered 3 different projects under this grant:

1. Pilot of a live chat service on the Stop It Now helpline;
2. Creation of a harmful sexual behaviour toolkit to help get messages to parents and carers;
3. A communications campaign so that people would know that confidential and anonymous help is available.

29. Firstly, we developed and piloted a chat service for the Stop It Now helpline that went live at the end of September 2020. As referenced above, demand for the Stop It Now helpline increased during the pandemic in the early part of 2020. Further, people were isolated at home with other members of their household and lacked the privacy to make calls without being overheard. The live chat service was therefore introduced to respond to this need and enable people to communicate with the Stop It Now helpline in real time but in a private manner.

30. We carried out an evaluation of the live chat service in its first year of operation. The findings were:

- During the first year of service, we received 859 chats from 576 chatters

- The live chat service was favoured by two key groups (as compared to the telephone helpline): people aged 21 or younger and people concerned about their sexual thoughts and behaviour but had not been arrested
- Search engines were more commonly cited by individuals when asked how they heard about the helpline as compared to the telephone helpline
- 97% of those who responded found the live chat service to be a positive experience
- A wide variety of issues could be managed through the chat service, including giving in-depth support and advice

31. The majority of users contacting us through the live chat service were adults concerned about their own behaviour, 55%. Moreover, the majority of those contacting the service had contacted us with concerns about online behaviour, 62%. Full details from our first year evaluation of the chat service are contained in the *Faithfull Paper, Confidential support to prevent child sexual abuse: A review of the first 12 months of live chat on the Stop It Now! UK and Ireland helpline*, which I attach at exhibit DD/12 – INQ000620569.

32. Secondly, we developed a harmful sexual behaviour toolkit for organisations to use to disseminate prevention messages and signpost parents and carers to sources of information and support. This project arose out of concerns that advice to parents and carers during the early days of the pandemic did not help them to consider the risk their own children might pose to others, both online and within the family.

33. The toolkit was launched in September 2020 and was hosted on our Stop It Now website. The toolkit linked to useful information, resources and support, and also gave practical tips to parents and carers to prevent harmful sexual behaviour and provide safe environments for families and advice for both online and offline behaviour. As well as signposting to the Stop It Now helpline for further support and advice, the toolkit also linked to other key organisations. I attach as exhibit DD/13 – INQ000620570 a copy of the harmful sexual behaviour toolkit.

34. The toolkit was promoted through email marketing to all UK schools and our partners and supporters. There was further promotion through direct partner engagement with various partners including local safeguarding children boards, the Children's Charities Coalition of Internet Safety (CHIS) and the National Police Chiefs' Council

(NPCC). Additional promotion was provided via social media, with organic posting on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.

35. Thirdly, we ran a campaign to promote the Stop It Now helpline so that everyone would know that anonymous and confidential help was available whatever their concerns regarding child sexual abuse. The campaign included online digital advertising which was supported by an external agency. The campaign promoted our Guess Who helpline film for 3 weeks in September 2020 and ran across YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, targeting jobs with contact with children such as coaches and childminders as well as families and educational professionals.
36. We also implemented a regional media strategy using the hook that we were seeing an increase in demand to our Stop It Now helpline since the start of lockdown. We secured 16 pieces of coverage with highlights being The Daily Telegraph, The Scotsman, Peterborough Today, Yorkshire Evening Post and syndications across independent radio.
37. Engagement with stakeholders and partners which I referenced as a feature of our work prior to the pandemic, became all the more important during the pandemic. It was essential that those delivering services on the ground could share information about what they were seeing on their respective services. At the time, Simon Bailey was the NPCC lead for child protection and he instigated bi-weekly calls for NPCC and child protection partners which were held online. These calls allowed partners to share information, we would share data and insights from the calls to the Stop It Now helpline as well as traffic that we were seeing to our online self-help whilst other partners like the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) would share information from their respective helplines. I attach example bi-weekly status reports at DD/14 – INQ000620571. In addition to the NSPCC and IWF, I believe that the other charitable partners that participated in these calls included the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, the Marie Collins Foundation, Barnardo's, the Children's Society and Catch 22. The bi-weekly status reports were also shared regularly with the Home Office and the National Crime Agency.
38. The increase in demand across many services felt not only by us but partners, was also reflected by the NCA when it published its National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime in 2021. As mentioned earlier in this statement, the

2021 assessment is based on insights that emerged throughout 2020. In relation to child sexual abuse, the NCA concluded that the overall scale of the threat continued to grow, exacerbated by rising online activity. A different methodology was used for the 2021 assessment which enabled an estimate of the scale of the hidden threat of child sexual abuse, including those currently unknown to law enforcement and thus, a direct comparison to the previous year's figure of 300,000 is not possible. Nevertheless, there was significant growth in the estimate to between 550,000 and 850,000 UK based individuals posing a degree of sexual risk to children:

*“During the past year we have used an innovative and exploratory methodology to improve our understanding of the scale of this threat. This suggests that there are between 550,000 and 850,000 UK based individuals posing varying degrees of sexual risk to children (with a central estimate of 700,000). This figure does not include offenders outside the UK targeting UK victims or some peer-on-peer offenders. Gaps in our understanding of contact abuse remain due to detection challenges and a reliance on victim reporting, which remains limited (see Annex for full methodology).*

*Approximately two thirds of contact abuse takes place within the family environment. During COVID-19 restrictions some offenders living with victims are likely to have had greater opportunity to offend, whereas other offenders will have seen their access to children reduce. However, exploitation is likely to have continued for the most vulnerable young people. Given the time taken to re-establish contact between children, professionals and other confidants following lockdown, it is likely some offences will go unreported or reporting will be delayed.*

*It is highly likely that some individuals who began or increased their online offending or networking during lockdown, will continue these behaviours after COVID-19 restrictions end. The Lucy Faithfull Foundation saw an 11% increase in people contacting their Stop It Now! helpline from 2019 to 2020, alongside a 42% increase in views of its Get Help user introduction page. Whilst each view is potentially linked to an offender, these figures are a positive reflection of an increasing number of individuals proactively seeking help.*



I attach as exhibit DD/15 – INQ000615568, a copy of the NCA's National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2021.

39. We continued to work with government throughout the pandemic to co-ordinate our response to child sexual abuse. Our Stop It Now helpline was and still is funded jointly by the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, with a larger contribution of funding coming from the Home Office. As already mentioned, we sat in the Home Office Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy stakeholder group. This group was brought together prior to the pandemic to facilitate engagement in the development of the government's strategy for preventing, tackling and responding to child sexual abuse in all its forms. I recall that publication of the strategy was delayed due to the pandemic, eventually being published in January 2021. It was the first time that the government had set a longer-term strategy focussed solely on tackling child sexual abuse. I attach at exhibit DD/16 – INQ000552859, a copy of the HM Government Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy 2021.

40. The government department which we are most closely in contact with is the Home Office. Child sexual abuse is a problem that requires a co-ordinated cross-government joined up response, however, we had limited contact with other relevant government departments such as the Department of Education, Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Culture, Media and Sport (as it was then prior to the establishment of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology in 2023). This was the case prior to the pandemic, and during the pandemic and continues to be the case today.

41. With respect to devolved government, in Scotland, our team provides a wide range of services in relation to prevention of child sexual abuse. Some of our funding came from the Scottish Government's Support for Adult Survivors of Child Abuse Support (SOCAS) fund. From the start of lockdowns in 2020, managers of services supported by this fund met on a monthly basis online to share experience and learning while service delivery adapted to issues related to Covid-19 and lockdowns. These meetings were chaired and supported by Inspiring Scotland. Managers of survivors services noted within a few weeks into lockdown that they were hearing of concerns related to children no longer having access to protective adults outside the family home and having extended periods of unsupervised time online.

42. To respond to these concerns, in July 2020, we produced an Upstream Prevention Pack - a set of leaflets for social workers, as well as police and education colleagues.

This built on material on our Upstream website, a one-stop shop for parents and professionals about practical things we can all do to prevent sexual abuse before it happens. I attach as exhibit DD/17 – INQ000620574 4 out of the 6 leaflets that formed the Upstream Prevention Pack.

43. The development of the Upstream Prevention Pack was in response to concerns from survivor agencies as part of the SOCAS portfolio as well as feedback from child protection colleagues who wanted additional resources for families and communities at a time when social work's capacity to monitor and support vulnerable families (particularly those at the edge of statutory measures) was compromised due to Covid-19 restrictions. The pack reached over 200 organisations and agencies across Scotland. We received more than 300 requests for electronic or printed copies of the leaflets and more than 3,000 copies were posted out to a wide range of services. The roll out of our Upstream Prevention Pack was actively supported by agencies working with survivors of child sexual abuse across Scotland. This led to the establishment of Scottish Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Network that continues to meet quarterly with strong support from survivor agencies ensuring that survivor voices are at the heart of child sexual abuse working alongside other third sector and statutory agencies.
44. Funders of our work in Scotland showed flexibility in reporting, but also resourcing to better protect children from harm. In 2021, our Scotland team received funding from the Promise team at the Scottish Government to adapt and roll out a resource we had created for kinship carers in relation to digital resilience to be promoted to social workers across Scotland supporting foster carers and adoptive parents. This was to ensure that carers had adequate and up to date resources and support to help protect children from online exploitation and harm. In 2022, RS MacDonald, another funder of our work in Scotland, asked us to host their annual online safeguarding event which focused on digital safeguarding, and what organisations can do to ensure that online delivery of services to children and vulnerable adults was done in a way that promoted safety for everyone involved.
45. In Wales, we deliver early intervention work with families and this was largely conducted from family centres and hubs prior to the pandemic. When lockdowns were imposed, family centres across Wales were closed and this made it much more difficult to support families as access was limited. The Welsh government supported us to continue to deliver our services in a flexible manner, and we adapted in order to

deliver remotely trying to meet the needs of families. It was challenging to support families online when we had provided that support in-person prior to the pandemic. It meant that sessions were delivered on the phone or Whatsapp amidst the chaos of family life for the individual with the interruptions one would expect with children at home. Families were also under a lot of stress, and had health and financial anxieties which took precedence. Additionally, there was a noticeable increase in children getting into trouble online and being at increased risk due to unsupervised time spent online. We also adapted our public educational sessions as part of our keeping children safe project to remote delivery via Zoom or Teams. Parents and professionals accessing these educational sessions required support as many had not used these platforms before.

46. We are members of the Cross Party Group on Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in response to the Welsh Government's Action Plan. Publication of the legacy report for the first action plan was delayed due to the pandemic. The report recognised the increased risk to children and stated:

*"CSA has always happened but the lockdown and isolation from support heightened the risk for some, while creating 'newly vulnerable' children. As children can take a long time to disclose sexual abuse, we continue to see a 'slow burn' of disclosures and help seeking in the wake of the pandemic. Services have told us complex mental health and safeguarding concerns have increased since the lockdowns.*

I attach as exhibit DD/18 – INQ000620575, a copy of the Legacy Report from Saving Futures: Cross Party Group on Preventing Child Sexual Abuse in response to the Welsh Government's Action Plan on Preventing and Responding to Child Sexual Abuse.

47. As was evidenced across the rest of the UK, services immediately saw an increased demand at the start of the pandemic. This included an increase in calls to the Stop It Now helpline from callers in Wales. In the first 10 weeks of lockdown there was a 153% increase in calls compared to the 10 weeks prior to lockdown starting, and a 98% increase compared to the same period in 2019.
48. We continued our deterrence activities throughout the pandemic period including our work with tech companies. By the time of the pandemic the warning on Google

search which was triggered when users attempted to search for child sexual abuse material had been running for a number of years and we had been seeing very steady traffic in terms of users clicking through to our website from the Google warning. However, in or around June 2020, the traffic coming through to our website from the Google warning completely fell off a cliff. After making enquiries with Google, it became apparent that the warning had been retooled by Google, we were not involved in the retooling and somehow the signposting to Stop It Now had been taken off the warning message. We worked with Google to reinstate the signposting to Stop It Now which was implemented in September 2020. We immediately saw the return of users clicking through to our website, at times in almost twice the number. From this accidental test, we learned that how a warning appears and what it says are factors in how effective it is in driving people to seek help to change their behaviour.

49. During the pandemic we also expanded our work with tech companies to include the adult industry. We began working with Aylo, known as MindGeek at the time, who are the owners of Pornhub. As a result of this collaboration, a search warning was implemented across Aylo sites globally when users entered search terms suggesting that they were looking for child sexual abuse material. The warning made it clear that sexual images of children are illegal and notified users of the confidential and anonymous support available at Stop It Now. The warning went live in February 2021 and since then we have seen thousands of users across the globe click through to our Stop It Now website every month. Although this work with Aylo started during the pandemic period, we believe that there were other drivers that contributed, most notably Mastercard and Visa blocking the use of their credit cards on Pornhub sites around the world due to concerns regarding the hosting of child sexual abuse material. As a result, Aylo implemented a number of measures to make its platforms safer including adopting deterrence messaging.

50. For many years, including prior to the pandemic, we have been highlighting how the viewing of adult pornography can become problematic for some individuals. Through our work, we hear from many men who tell us that viewing adult pornography has contributed to them viewing sexual images of children. During the pandemic, we believe that pornography viewing increased as people were isolated and confined to their homes. Increased viewing led some individuals to seek more and more extreme material, eventually accessing illegal sexual images and videos of children. I attach as exhibit DD/19 – INQ000620576 a copy of our *Faithfull Paper, What's porn got to*

*do with it? The link between viewing adult pornography and online sexual offending against children*, which explores the link between legal adult pornography and online child sexual abuse.

### **Post-pandemic period: harms, trends, impact, mitigations**

51. Following the pandemic, we have continued to deliver many of our services remotely. For example, advisers on the Stop It Now helpline continue to work remotely from their homes. The advantage of this means that we are able to recruit helpline advisers from a much wider geographical area across the whole of the UK, whereas prior to the pandemic, our helpline advisers needed to be within reasonably close proximity of our office in Epsom, where the helpline was based. Consequently, the diversity and reach of our helpline advisers has increased, and we have a Welsh speaking helpline adviser based in Wales.

52. In terms of the volume of calls to our Stop It Now helpline, this has continued to increase following the pandemic but not as sharply as it rose in 2020:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Contacts (calls, emails and chats)</b>	<b>People contacting</b>
2022/2023	16,764	8,614
2023/2024	19,328	8,774

I attach as exhibit DD/20 – INQ000620577 and DD/21 – INQ000620578 our annual reports for 2022/2023 and 2023/2024. Continued investment in the helpline and expanding our adviser staff team have contributed to the increase in contact numbers.

53. In terms of the NCA's threat assessment in respect of child sexual abuse, this has stayed roughly the same in the period since the pandemic. In its 2023 assessment, the NCA estimated there were between 680,000 and 830,000 UK adults who posed varying degrees of risk to children. In 2024, the NCA adjusted its estimate to 710,000 to 840,000 UK adults who pose a risk to children. I attach as exhibit DD/22 – INQ000620579 and DD/23 – INQ000620580, the NCA's National Crime Agency: National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime 2023 and 2024.

54. One of the risks identified earlier in this statement posed by the pandemic was an increase in time spent online by children and young people which would expose them to harmful and illegal content. Following the pandemic in 2023, the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP) published its first Analysis of Police-Recorded Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Crimes Report 2022. The analysis showed that child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) reported to police had grown to 107,000 per year. Strikingly, the most significant growth was in respect of CSAE offences committed by children themselves which had increased to 52%. And roughly one third of CSAE offences were carried out within the family environment. We believe that this analysis and the figures within it reflect the increased risks that the pandemic brought. Similar trends and data were seen in 2024 when the second Analysis of Police-Recorded Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Crimes Report 2023 was published and showed that recorded CSAE offences had risen further to 115,489. I attach as exhibits DD/24 – INQ000598447 and DD/25 – INQ000620582, the VKPP Analysis for 2022 and 2023.

55. Since the pandemic, we have expanded our work with children and young people. This includes launching a new website Shore, a safe space for teenagers with concerns about sexual behaviour. In addition to being an online resource (only one of three of its kind in the world), Shore provides confidential support to young people through the anonymous email and chat service. The rise in harmful sexual behaviour amongst young people and the need for a service like Shore was recognised by us prior to the pandemic. If anything, the increased risks to children due to the pandemic only reinforced the need for us to create a service like this for young people. Shore was already in development in 2019 before the pandemic started, however, the project was delayed during the pandemic because we lost funding. Originally, Microsoft were planning to fund the project but they pulled out during the pandemic due to a need to redirect resources. We were then able to find new funders, the Charles Hayward Foundation, who supported the technical development of the Shore website. Shore was launched in 2023 and continues to grow its reach. In its first year 37,000 users visited the website, and we supported 191 young people through the chat and email service. The vast majority of the young people we supported, 72%, had not raised their concerns with any other professional at the time they contacted Shore, which emphasises the gap that Shore is filling.

56. In 2022, we also launched our Everyone's Safer project, a 3 year action research project working with schools to develop effective leadership responses to harmful

sexual behaviour. In June 2020, during the pandemic, the Everyone's Invited website was launched. It shone a light on sexual abuse within schools and colleges, with thousands submitting testimonies of their experiences. In 2021, Ofsted published its rapid review and concluded:

*"This rapid thematic review has revealed how prevalent sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are for children and young people. It is concerning that for some children, incidents are so commonplace that they see no point in reporting them."*

I attach as exhibit DD/26 – INQ000620583, a copy of Ofsted's Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges.

57. Through our Everyone's Safer project, we have been working with ten schools each year across the Midlands area to support their responses to harmful sexual behaviour. And we have been supporting dozens more schools via the call-back service on our Stop It Now helpline. The pandemic has had a substantial impact on all the schools we have worked with over the course of the last 3 years. Some of the themes that we often hear about from schools include:

- Delayed developmental issues for children and young people due to lockdowns
- Lack of opportunities for children and young people to interact socially during the pandemic which has been a step back for their social development and impacts their peer relationships
- More unsupervised time online increased risky behaviours by children and young people
- Younger age groups being involved in online offending like image sharing
- Exposure to pornography online

58. One way in which we hope that young people's experiences online will be transformed is through the Online Safety Act, which was passed after the pandemic in 2023. Ofcom has now begun its work as the regulator and we have been inputting into various consultations and engaging with Ofcom over the past two years. There is still a lot more to do before we see products and platforms designed with children's safety at the forefront of minds. We do think that the bar has been set low by Ofcom in the first iteration of the codes for illegal harms and the children's safety duties. For

example, in relation to deterrence messaging for online child sexual abuse, we are disappointed that this has only been mandated for large search services, something that these services have been doing in any event for the past 10 years. We would like to see Ofcom adopt deterrence messaging as a recommendation universally applied and consider that much more could be done to create friction directed at those who are seeking to harm children online. We cannot place the onus on children to protect themselves online and we will continue to support Ofcom to be more ambitious for children.

59. We have increased our work with tech companies with the launch of Project Intercept in 2023. Funded by Nominet, over 3 years, this project is working to build partnerships with tech companies across all sectors to support the development, implementation and evaluation of warnings targeted at those seeking to cause harm to children in order to deter them and drive to help from our Stop It Now services to change their behaviour. We are building the evidence base for online warnings which we hope in time will assist Ofcom to make wider recommendations for deterrence messaging in the future. A major contribution to the evidence base has been the publication of the ReThink chatbot project in collaboration with the IWF and Aylo that was referred to earlier in my statement. The chatbot was launched in March 2022 during the pandemic period, and the evaluation period ran for 18 months until September 2023. Key findings included that the chatbot reduced searches for child sexual abuse material on Pornhub UK over the course of the 18 month experiment. The chatbot was also successful in driving users to seek support from Stop It Now but also in deterring users, in 82% of sessions in which the chatbot had been triggered, only one warning was needed to stop the user from searching for illegal material within that session. Full details regarding the work of Project Intercept and the chatbot are set out in our *Faithfull Paper, Chatbots and Warning Messages – Innovations in the fight against online child sexual abuse*, which I attach as exhibit DD/27 – INQ000620584.

60. The experiences of children online can be further transformed with robust implementation of age verification overseen by Ofcom. Children should simply not have access to certain types of content online such as pornography, which was much too easily available to them during the pandemic (and still is). This would be further strengthened if the government takes forward the recommendations of the independent Pornography Review which published its report, *Creating a Safer World – the Challenge of Regulating Online Pornography*, in February 2025, and is



attached as exhibit DD/28 – INQ000620585. One of the key recommendations which we have been calling for with charitable partners for some time is ensuring that there is parity between online and offline pornography. We will be encouraging the government to take forward all of the recommendations, in particular recommendation 1:

*“Harmful pornographic content, that is illegal to distribute in physical formats, should also be treated as illegal content on online platforms. This could be done either through a Safe Pornography Code in the Online Safety Act, or by creating a new publication offence. The aim of this would be to prohibit certain pornographic content online – including degrading, violent, and misogynistic content, as well as that which could encourage an interest in child sex abuse – just as it is prohibited in the ‘offline’ world.”*

61. We have not carried out a formal lessons learned process following the pandemic. The risks for children from sexual harm existed before the pandemic and continue today but were heightened during the pandemic period. Looking ahead at a future possible pandemic, we must consider the ways in which we could better mitigate those increased risks. We believe that a safer internet for children, through robust implementation of the Online Safety Act and taking forward the recommendations of the independent Pornography Review could contribute to preparing us better for any future pandemic. Further, ways in which to increase the supervision of children and the protective factors for those at risk of causing harm should be explored. We have long advocated for a public health approach to tackling child sexual abuse which encompasses universal measures. Parallels can be drawn with the public health crisis that the Covid-19 pandemic brought and the universal measures that were adopted in response. These views are summarised in our published editorial *Harris, Allardyce & Findlater (2021), Child Sexual Abuse and Covid-19: Side effects of changed societies and positive lessons for prevention*, which I attach as exhibit DD/29 – INQ000620586.

62. A truly cross-government approach to child sexual abuse is needed. I have referenced throughout this statement our close relationship with the Home Office, who supports many areas of our work and with whom we are engaged with on wider strategy. Engagement with other government departments has been lacking. In April this year, the Home Office published its Progress Update on Tackling Child Sexual abuse which I attach as exhibit DD/30 – INQ000620587. The update sets out a vision

for much closer collaborative working across government with specific actions including establishing a dedicated interministerial group on child sexual abuse. We wholly support this, and a joined up cross-government focus would hold us in good stead for a future pandemic.

63. Finally, we need to engage with children and young people themselves regarding their experiences of the pandemic. Their voices need to be heard in the discussion about what could be done differently to better protect children from sexual harm in any future pandemic.

### **Statement of truth**

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings for contempt of court may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.

Signed:

**Personal Data**

Dated: 19/06/2025