

Witness Name: Victoria Green

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: VG/001 - VG/123

Dated: 29 July 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF VICTORIA GREEN

I, Victoria Green, will say as follows: -

1. The Marie Collins Foundation (MCF), founded in 2011, is a UK charity uniquely focused on responding when a child has been the victim Child Sexual Abuse that is enabled or facilitated through technology – what we call Technology-Assisted Child Sexual abuse (TACSA). Our work is both national and international. We are dedicated to supporting victims of TACSA on their recovery journey, to go on to live safe and fulfilling lives. In summary, MCF use our expertise to:
 - 1.1. Support children, young people and their families affected by technology-assisted child sexual abuse by working with them directly and indirectly – directly by supporting individuals and their families, and indirectly through advocacy and education.
 - 1.2. Provide training both nationally and internationally that promotes a victim focussed and recovery approach for professionals and advice to those helping children in their recovery.
 - 1.3. Influence policy and decision-makers at local, national and international levels and supporting victims and survivors to have a voice through our active victim and survivor network.

- 1.4. Collaborate with partners to raise awareness of the challenges and emerging behaviours impacting children and young people and their use of the internet and mobile technologies
 - 1.5. Engage national and international governments to initiate sustainable development of national infrastructures to improve child protection services and appropriate responses to their recovery needs
 - 1.6. Identify gaps in existing research and advise on new academic studies
 - 1.7. Remain at the forefront of the ongoing public debate and engage the media regarding the impact of online abuse on children and young people.
2. We are a very small, but expert team. I have been working with MCF since 2016 but have been leading the organisation as CEO since July 2021. Our previous CEO, Tink Palmer MBE, was CEO since the inception of MCF in 2011, and during the period of Covid-19, but is no longer with MCF. Tink Palmer retired at the end of May 2021.
 3. We have a small Senior Leadership Team, which consists of myself, our Deputy CEO, our Head of Advocacy and our Director of Operations. Other members of staff include a Training and Development Manager, Victim and Survivor Advocate, Research and Policy Officer, and Administrator. We also have several consultants who work with us on various projects, as and when needs arise. Most of our current staff have only joined MCF post-pandemic, which I have outlined in the table below. This is important context to understand the level of detail I can offer to the inquiry team, given that most of our staff are relatively new in MCF. There have been some staffing changes in the relevant period, including some moving out of MCF into different organisations and roles. MCF also has a Board of Trustees.

MCF Personnel	Start Date	Current Role
Victoria Green	October 2016	(Previously Director of Services); CEO since July 2021
Rhiannon-Faye McDonald	November 2019	Head of Advocacy
Lawrence Jordan	May 2021	Deputy CEO

Claire Cheeseman	October 2021	Director of Operations
Philip Baines	March 2022	Consultant
Sarah Brown	May 2022	Training and Development Manager
Megan Hinton	October 2023	Victim and Survivor Advocate
Karen Garland	October 2024	Research and Policy Officer
Tracy Cooper	April 2025	Administrator

4. I do not believe the work of MCF today has significantly changed as a direct result of the pandemic. The numbers of families seeking our support has increased in the last two years but prior to that the numbers remained consistent. We are generally very busy, and our work is in increasing demand. I cannot directly attribute this to just Covid-19, however. Rather, I believe that as technology use becomes more and more common and accessible to everyone, there is a corresponding increase in the opportunities it offers to groom and exploit children. There has been a general and increasing awareness of both the existing and evolving risk that the use of technology brings. Our previous CEO, Tink Palmer, highlighted this in 2015 in her report 'Digital Dangers', published by Barnardos (attached, VG/001 - INQ000616805). This awareness is both within the public domain, as well as at government, statutory and civil society level. This is matched with what appears to be an upwards trend in reports of children and young people being exposed to abuse and harm online. This has been documented within police recorded crime statistics, as well as reports from the Internet Watch Foundation and others, and has also been noted within academic research. For example, reports by NSPCC (VG/002 – INQ000616843 and Childlight (VG/003 – INQ000616791). I am not of the view that this is entirely or solely due to the pandemic, although as identified by WeProtect Global Alliance (URL attached and included within exhibit schedule; VG/004 – INQ000643783) and others in the industry, it is highly probable that the pandemic did lead to an increase in opportunities to access children to harm them and had a significant impact on their mental health and wellbeing. I sense that the increasing use of technology and its various capacities which can be exploited to cause harm towards children and young people is the main driver to our current situation. Additionally, there appears to be an acceleration in innovative and novel technologies over the past number of years, which may have coincided with the pandemic and extended beyond this period. Examples include the development of

Virtual Reality technologies and Generative Artificial Intelligence. This may have created something of a “perfect storm” for online harms and risks to flourish.

5. I am of the view that Covid-19 likely provoked an increasing normality for children to use technology and be online, including from a younger age, as was seen during the period when millions of children were homeschooled and accessing technology to complete schoolwork. This reality may have created a new norm whereby children and young people were online much more than they were prior to the pandemic, sometimes with limited supervision as parents worked from home too. Technology was provided for children by schools and local authorities to support home schooling which would have given children new or increased access to the internet, thereby increasing the potential numbers of children at risk of harm. However, it is important to put this in the correct context. Being online and using technology is not in and of itself abuse-causing. Children are abused through the use of technology by individuals who are wishing to harness sophisticated technologies and who are motivated to abuse. Therefore, I cannot say that the work of MCF is significantly different from the work we were doing prior to Covid-19. Where our work is new in recent years, this is primarily in response to the use of novel technology or new harms that have appeared (e.g. as previously mentioned, responding to Artificial Intelligence – Child Sexual Abuse Material, AI-CSAM). I cannot see a direct link between AI-CSAM and the pandemic, and therefore I do not feel MCF’s work has shifted because of a clear link with the pandemic.
6. It is important to note that MCF experienced a significant change in the number of referrals and case work we received during the period March 2020 - June 2020. I understand this would have covered the initial lockdown timeframe. During the first lockdown, MCF did not receive any referrals at all for our direct work support services. This was unusual, given our typical caseload. I would attribute this to the highly unusual circumstances of the lockdown. Since the beginning of the pandemic, referrals for direct work support services have almost doubled. I have outlined the referral figures for pre/during/post-pandemic in the table below, to illustrate this, within the given financial year.

Year	No. of direct work referrals/cases
Pre-2017	37

2017-18	14
2018-19	23
2019-20	21
(June 2020) – (March) 2021	23
2021-22	21
2022-23	18
2023-24	32
2024 – to date	38

7. As previously stated, while this aspect of our work has almost doubled, I believe the reasons for this are various and not solely due to Covid-19.

8. All case records up to and including the end of 2020 have been deleted in accordance with our retention of case records policy as we did not have either the consent and/or need to retain the detailed information. From what I recall at the time, there was nothing different or unusual about these cases. Looking over the information we do have, and from my recollection, the contacts were either professionals seeking case consultation, adults trying to understand their abuse in childhood or parents seeking guidance about their child's online activities, including the 'sending of nudes' and 'talking with strangers'. It is difficult to further elaborate due to our recording system at that time which did not code cases by type. (Please note, due to the Rule 9 Request we received, we have developed a more comprehensive coding system). Direct work referrals or cases can cover a single engagement with the family of someone who has experienced TACSA, or may involve ongoing support, for several months to a year or so. Any records we hold are purely metrics-based only (i.e. number of cases, within a specific time period). We have limited data on the age of the child, nature of the TACSA or the length of MCF input to the family. While most of our referrals relate to families affected by TACSA within the UK, we have also offered support internationally, to those who have contacted us in Europe, United States of America and the Middle East.

9. Our CEO at the time, Tink Palmer, was the primary case worker for the majority of MCF's cases before 2021. As she is no longer working with MCF, we are unable to retrieve and provide any specific details on case work prior to this. Furthermore, I experienced a period of ill health during the pandemic and was off work from the end of February until the end of March, then hospitalised between 21 April – 2nd May 2020, only returning to work at the end of June 2020 after recovering from major surgery. My

professional involvement during the first lockdown was considerably limited because of my health situation. This also makes it challenging to provide a complete picture of our work during the pandemic and particularly within the first few months. Our only other member of staff present at the time was a victim and survivor advocate. She did not do direct case work.

10. The types of cases we are currently working with remains very similar to what it was pre-pandemic. We concentrate our efforts towards making children's online lives safer overall and to improving the recovery journeys of children who have experienced TACSA. We do this through various means, as already outlined in the bullet points above. MCF endeavours to respond to new or emerging online risks, whether highlighted through our own direct work with children and their families; partner organisations; public awareness; police reports or academic literature which reveals new online harms.
11. I can confirm that MCF did undertake some new and/or specific work in response to the pandemic. I have attached the relevant materials to this submission but will briefly outline some of these resources.
 - 11.1. We co-produced a free, online guide for parents and professionals covering online harm reduction. This was in collaboration with NWG. This was made available online and also delivered in hard copy format to a number of recipients including police, colleges and safeguarding teams (VG/005 – INQ000616822), leaflet distribution spreadsheet with leaflet distribution).
 - 11.2. We pivoted our training from face-to-face training into both an eLearning package and a virtual training package for use on Zoom and teams. This enabled us to continue upskilling professionals in their response to TACSA though it did have an impact on numbers. In the two years before COVID we delivered 58 events training 2916 professionals. In the year April 2020 – March 2021 we trained 384 on zoom and 120 through eLearning. I have attached our training metrics spreadsheet to illustrate this, (VG/006 – INQ000616851).
 - 11.3. We usually host an annual conference. This was due to be held in London on 18th – 19th June 2020, with the theme: "Discovery to Recovery: online sexual abuse of children – meeting the needs of children and their families." Unfortunately, this was postponed, initially until Autumn 2020, due to the outbreak of Covid-19, and in line with Government advice. This was subsequently cancelled as an in-person event and moved online, due to the ongoing nature of the pandemic. Rather than a short online event, this was

delivered via a series of sessions, between 26th October until 23rd November 2020, with free access to attend. Three hundred and thirty-nine people attended the sessions, including police, Home Office, and civil society representatives. I have provided a copy of the attendance sheet for the actual attendees 2020 Online Conference (VG/007 – INQ000616784) and an outline of these sessions in a logistics plan session by session (VG/008 – INQ000616823) with this submission.

- 11.4. In June 2020 we launched an initiative in Kirklees as a direct response to COVID 19, in partnership with West Yorkshire Police, Kirklees Safeguarding Children Partnership and Kirklees Council Education to ensure that children are better safeguarded whilst living under lockdown conditions. Guidance was issued to young people, parents and educators about the increased risks of being online more frequently, due to the pandemic. The Kirklees Project (June 2020) PRESS RELEASE is attached to this submission (VG/009 – INQ000616821
- 11.5. We hosted an international webinar on 9th July 2020 entitled “Positive Steps into a New Future.” This was to share projects and services with others in the sector and was attended by 51 delegates, including representatives from civil society, research and local authorities. The Webinar programme 9th July 2020 (VG/010 – INQ000616860); PowerPoint on our Kirklees project (VG/011 – INQ000616846) and delegate list are attached to this submission (VG/012 – INQ000616804).
- 11.6. In 2021, we were still unable to host our annual conference, because of the pandemic. Instead, we held a summer seminar, covering two areas. This was titled “Working together to safeguard children online” with a focus on End-to-end encryption (E2EE) and the impact this has on our work to protect children online. This had a 46% non-attendance rate. Non-attendance has been an increasing issue we have noticed since this time. The online environment made engaging with professionals more difficult. I have included a copy of the slide deck, for reference (VG/013 – INQ000616840). A post-seminar evaluation report has been included, indicating sign-ups and actual attendance, plus delegate feedback (VG/014 – INQ000616833).
- 11.7. We commissioned a piece of international research called ‘Speaking Truth to Power’. This was a Survivor Support and Youth Engagement Research Project which culminated in research in May 2021. I have attached the Executive

Summary of the project, for reference (VG/015 – INQ000616847). We commissioned the University of South Africa to conduct research examining the provision of survivor support and youth engagement in five priority countries. In the final report, the researcher commented on how a lot of emphasis was put on developing online interventions. Although this may be because of the pandemic, the changes were seen as positive to enable ongoing support in changing circumstances and in increasing the accessibility of services. Another participant told us *“Covid without doubt increases the number of files, which had an online component to them, because so many children were online”*. (Participant 07).

- 11.8. In 2021/2022 we were asked to work with the Home Office on a campaign advocating against the implementation of End-to-End Encryption. I have attached the Home Office E2EE coverage summary for your reference (VG/016 – INQ000616766).
- 11.9. We collaborated with Edinburgh and Manchester research and development project called iMinds in 2021. This was about developing and testing a digital intervention for young people's use of technology to improve mental health and interpersonal resilience when they have experienced online sexual abuse: protocol for a non-randomised feasibility clinical trial and nested qualitative study. During this project it became apparent that professionals were having difficulty identifying participants because their presenting 'problem' was not technology abuse. They felt they did not know how to ask the question therefore MCF delivered training to the mental health professionals. I attach project overview slides for your information (VG/017 – INQ000616813), plus iMinds PMG Meeting Minutes 18th May 2021 (VG/018 – INQ000616811); YPAG flyer (VG/019 – INQ000616861); YPAG Information sheet (VG/020 – INQ000616814), along with the final iMinds paper for publication (VG/021 – INQ000616812).
- 11.10. We were also involved in many external meetings, strategic, working and support groups. Work continued in many of these groups despite the pandemic, often moving to online engagement until it was safe to return to in person gatherings. I will outline these in the following table. Any relevant, available documentary support will also be included with my submission to the inquiry team.

12.

Engagement	Date(s)	Additional Information (if available)
Child Protection and Abuse Investigations (CPAI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11th March 2021 25th May 2021 	<p>Tink Palmer CEO in attendance. Minutes of meeting attached. Mentions of Covid impact on pages 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. (VG/022 – INQ000616797)</p> <p>Tink Palmer CEO sent apologies. Minutes of meeting attached to submission. Mentions of Covid impact on pages 5, 16, 18. (VG/023 – INQ000616798)</p>
Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Support Services (perpetrators)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18.08.20 21.10.20 10.02.21 	<p>Minutes of the three meetings attached.</p> <p>VG/024 – INQ000616802; VG/025 – INQ000616803; VG/026 – INQ000616801;</p>
National Crime Agency/CEOP Online CSA Protect and Prepare Board	<p>Meeting dates included, but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10.12.20 10.03.21 15.06.22 13.09.22 27.09.22 14.12.22 	<p>We have a note that various meetings took place, but we have an incomplete record of meeting notes and/or documents associated with these meetings. We have provided as many meeting notes/agenda/associated documents as we can locate within this engagement area (Online CSA Protect and</p>

		<p>Prepare Board). The documents we have provided total thirty-four separate items and all listed below in no particular order.</p> <p>VG/027 – INQ000616744 VG/028 – INQ000616745 VG/029 – INQ000616746; VG/030 – INQ000616756; VG/031 – INQ000616757; VG/032 – INQ000616768; VG/033 – INQ000616769; VG/034 – INQ000616770 VG/035 – INQ000616772; VG/036 – INQ000616773; VG/037 – INQ000616740; VG/038 – INQ000616775; VG/039 – INQ000616776; VG/040 – INQ000616777; VG/041 – INQ000616778; VG/042 – INQ000616779; VG/043 – INQ000616780; VG/044 – INQ000616781; VG/45 – INQ000616782; VG/046 – INQ000616783; VG/047 – INQ000616748; VG/048 – INQ000616749; VG/049 – INQ000616752; VG/050 – INQ000616753; VG/51 – INQ000616754; VG/052 – INQ000616767; VG/053 – INQ000616763; VG/054 – INQ000616759; VG/055 – INQ000616761; VG/056 – INQ000616762;</p>
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		VG/057 – INQ000616764; VG/058 – INQ000616839; VG/59 – INQ000616856; VG/060 – INQ000616857)
Crown Prosecution Service CSA Stakeholder Forum	<p>Started in 2019, and ongoing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15th May 2023 	<p>I cannot access meeting notes from this time period any longer, but I have included the draft Terms of Reference for the group instead. (VG/061 – INQ000616799)</p> <p>Attended by Lawrence Jordan, who was Director of Services at the time. Minutes of meeting attached, (VG/062 – INQ000616800).</p>
National Police Chiefs' Council Voluntary Sector SitRep Calls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15th April 2020 	<p>Attended by Tink Palmer, CEO.</p> <p>These meetings may have been ongoing, but we only hold partial details on these. I have attached email correspondence concerning the meeting on 15th April 2020 (VG/063 – INQ000616859), which included a shared dashboard presentation from Stop it Now! This covered data held by them and shared with the voluntary</p>

		sector call list (VG/064 – INQ000616848).
Home Office Harmful Sexual Behaviours Group/Support Service	Sept 2020	<p>Funded by Home Office and co-led by MCF and South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL).</p> <p>Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges - GOV.UK</p> <p>Evaluation of HSB Support Service Final Report (2022) is attached to this submission (VG/065 – INQ000616853). (- @Tracy, this is noted in the document folder as VG Comments HSB support service fina).</p>
CEOP Governance CSA meetings	Meetings continued but went online June 2020	<p>Back to in-person meetings September 2021.</p> <p>I have only managed to find two documents relating to this engagement area: one email from 2020 (VG/066 – INQ000616789) and one email from 2021 (VG/067 – INQ000616790)</p>
Covid-19 Silver Command Meetings	Initiated July 2021 (monthly)	<p>Chaired/initiated by NCA.</p> <p>Regular work appeared to continue as part of this – not</p>

		<p>just related to Covid-19 response.</p> <p>I have attached four related document and have attached these, in particular order.</p> <p>(VG/068 – INQ000616765; VG/069 – INQ000616793; VG/070 – INQ000616794; VG/071 – INQ000616796).</p>
Voluntary Sector Covid Insight Child Protection	<p>July 2021</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25.05.21 (email and agenda) • 15.04.20 	<p>This was an online call, run by Simon Bailey. Sharing work among voluntary sector.</p> <p>I have attached the relevant three items related to the bullet points opposite</p> <p>(VG/072 – INQ000616855; VG/073 – INQ000616858; VG/074 – INQ000616859)</p>
National Crime Agency International NGO Advisory Group (INGO)	Since 2020	<p>From the Terms of Reference, this group was created to “bring together key international NGO stakeholders who are developing and delivering CSEA capacity and capability activity, to inform the development of CEOP’s</p>

		<p>programme of work with its law enforcement partners and identify opportunities to align/coordinate activity on the ground to enable maximum impact on assisting partner countries in implementing a comprehensive national response.”</p> <p>I have located various documents, from 2020 onwards. I am submitting all these for the inquiry’s consideration. The running total of documents is: I have tried to group these in order of the year.</p> <p>2020</p> <p>INGO Advisory Group ToR v2(VG/075–INQ000616819) INGO Group Minutes 27-05-2020 v.1.0 (VG/076 – INQ000616815) Threat Leadership NGO Working Group ToR v.1.0 (VG/077 – INQ000616849) Threat Leadership NGO Working Group ToR v1.1 (VG/078 – INQ000616850)</p>
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		<p>2021</p> <p>09092021 INGO Working Group Minutes FINAL (VG/079 – INQ000616742)</p> <p>11022021 INGO Group Minutes (VG/080 – INQ000616747)</p> <p>20191014 INGO Working Group – Minutes v1 (VG/081 – INQ000616758)</p> <p>2022</p> <p>08042022 INGO Working Group Minutes (VG/082 – INQ000616743)</p> <p>MCF – STTP Presentation (VG/083 – INQ000616771)</p> <p>IJM – SOH Presentation (VG/084 – INQ000616774)</p> <p>NCA MCF partnership discussion (VG/085– INQ000616842)</p> <p>OFFICIAL Amber Alert – NGO Reporting 0562 CSAE (VG/086 – INQ000616844)</p> <p>2023</p> <p>14 03 04 2023 INGO Working Group Minutes (VG/087 – INQ000616750)</p> <p>14 03 2023 INGO Working Group Agenda (VG/088 – INQ000616751)</p>
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		<p>INGO meeting final slides 14032023 (VG/089 – INQ000616816)</p> <p>INGO meeting main discussion topic (VG/090 – INQ000616817)</p> <p>INGO ToR 2023 (VG/091 – INQ000616818)</p> <p>NAC(23)587 – Under-18s Recorded as Child Sex Offenders (VG/092 – INQ000616841)</p> <p>VG Notes NGO meeting 14 March 2023 (VG/093 – INQ000616854)</p>
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13. Please note that:

- 13.1. CEOP Governance CSA meetings continued, but went online in June 2020. Eventually went back to in-person around September 2021.
- 13.2. Covid-19 Silver Command meetings. These were noted in my diary and were chaired/initiated by NCA (July 2021). They appear to be monthly meetings. Regular work appeared to continue as part of this – not just related to Covid-19 response.
- 13.3. [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges - GOV.UK](#) and HSB support service (MCF & SWGfL – Home Office funded). (Already noted in table above).
- 13.4. Following a Voluntary Sector Sitrep Call with Chief Constable Simon Bailey (National Police Chiefs' Council) on 26th May 2021, research briefing from the University of Nottingham (2021) was shared outlining the impact of Covid-19 on vulnerability and safeguarding children who have experienced criminal exploitation, (including county lines activities). The research briefing (Covid-19, Vulnerability and the Safeguarding of Criminally Exploited Children) is attached for reference (VG/094 – INQ000616795). (The Sitrep call agenda and email were referenced in the table above and are submitted with this statement).

14. In respect of MCF's direct work during the pandemic period and the data related to this, Covid-19 impacted our ability to offer our usual service modes. Instead, we pivoted our support so that we could still offer care, reassurance and guidance to families who requested our help or were referred to us. Rather than meeting families face-to-face in agreed locations, or for home visits, we needed to move all these engagements online, or via text/phone calls. In reviewing our available records, I believe that summer 2021 was likely the first opportunity to offer in-person support post-pandemic. This related to a case in Basingstoke, affecting a 10-year-old boy. He was contacted on Discord before moving to Snapchat, by someone who he believed was an 11-year-old German girl. The conversation was then diverted from Discord to the Among Us online game, where the boy was groomed. I have attached photocopies of my call notes with the family (two pictures of call notes: VG/095 – INQ000616787 and VG/096 – INQ000616788). I have also attached two email chains (VG/097 – INQ000616808 and VG/098 – INQ000616807). The young boys' own words reflect the pernicious nature of the harm he encountered:

"My heart is broken...happiness taken away."

15. There have been other examples of our direct work with families affected by TACSA because of harmful content on the Discord app. One case from July 2021 involved the discovery of young teenage girls selling photographs of their legs for money on Discord and subsequently one victim being threatened with rape at her home if she did not send more images to the recipient. The victims understood that the person they were sending photos was in Kuwait. In June 2022, we also provided support to a family because of their child being groomed on Discord. Their son, who was 15 years old, has additional needs. He thought he was communicating with a 14-year-old girl.
16. Other apps and sites have also featured within our direct work during the pandemic timeframe. I will outline some examples below, with the limited details we hold on these cases. We responded to a case of a minor selling photos of herself on OnlyFans (February 2021). The victim believed she was in control, making much-needed money and did not realise she was being sexually exploited. A mother contacted us in June 2020 concerned about her older teenage daughter who was caught talking to an adult stranger on Instagram, while only wearing underwear. In September 2020, MCF were approached by a mum seeking support for her eight-year-old daughter. Her daughter had been using the Roblox game but had become increasingly distressed. Her mum

realised she was being threatened by someone who told her they would kill her if she didn't show herself undressing or touching herself. MCF also responded to cases involving TikTok and Fortnite during the pandemic.

17. As I have noted previously, while these apps and sites were the medium for TACSA within the Covid-19 period, I cannot definitively confirm that they were used in harmful ways solely due to the pandemic. At MCF we have seen the use of such technology both before, during and after Covid-19. This seems to indicate the way in which technology is perniciously employed by those who wish to harm children online and is not confined to the primary pandemic timeframe. I believe that Covid-19 drove more children online and normalised this behaviour, it may also have driven offenders to congregate online, to find children to groom and abuse, who were more accessible than before the pandemic. While this is my view, I believe it is important to acknowledge that post-pandemic, there are still many offenders operating online, seeking children to abuse. This leads me to conclude that while Covid-19 may have produced a spike in online harms and risks to children, there are still ongoing risks and harms today suggesting that offender behaviour and technology are important factors driving sexually abusive harms online, which may not directly map onto pandemic factors.

Pre-pandemic: Harms/Trends/Impact/Mitigations, etc.

18. Technology in and of itself does not abuse children. MCF was established in 2011 to meet the growing need for the protective network around a child to understand both the differential impacts of online child abuse, and how to respond in a way that does no further harm. This was based on research undertaken by the founder and CEO at the time, Tink Palmer 'Just One Click'. I attach a copy of this report (VG/099 – INQ000616820). We also commissioned research with Dr. Emma Bond and Stuart Agnew of University Campus Suffolk and Professor Andy Phippen of Plymouth University in 2014: 'The Children's Workforce across England is ill-equipped to meet the needs of child victims of online abuse'. This research highlighted the lack of understanding of and confidence in responding to the issue of technology-assisted abuse, the need for training and development to upskill the workforce, and the types of harms that children were being exposed to at that time. A copy of this report is attached (VG/100 – INQ000616852). What we knew and still know, is that technology has created new ways for those who want to sexually abuse a child to get access and groom and manipulate. The availability and use of technology was increasing, and

children were 'natives' while those around the child, whose role it was to protect, were not. Professionals and carers alike did not know what to do or how to respond. Children were exploring the world around them on platforms and apps that were not safe by design. The shame caused by the taking and distributing images of the abuse, or indeed coerced explicit images created by the child has a big impact on recovery and silences children into not seeking help. Victim blaming is common with a general lack of understanding of 'why children are behaving like this'.

19. Harms are usually discovered rather than disclosed. Typically, harm is discovered by a friend or parent or discovered when the image is found on the internet or on an individual's devices during a police investigation/search. In our work we have seen all the platforms used. For example, Discord is a popular platform for gamers, and children love games. Therefore, it is a popular place to find children. Games with chat functions have also been used, including ROBLOX, Minecraft, not to mention adult only games that children play such as Call of Duty, Grand Theft Auto.
20. The sharing of indecent images is common in file sharing cloud platforms such as Dropbox and iCloud but is also within private online communication channels such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.
21. In 2017 MCF commissioned the University of Suffolk to undertake a survey of professionals in Bedfordshire ('Findings from the online survey with professionals in Bedfordshire - September 2017') to ascertain the degree of need for training among professionals working in Bedfordshire in relation to digital risk assessment and intervention needs of children, and their families, sexually abused and exploited online. 65% of those surveyed said they had encountered children exposed to online risk. I cannot break it down into time and age groups as they were not asked. The exposure to harms were identified as sexting, online harassment, online grooming, online sexual abuse, online bullying, viewing sexual content and viewing violent content. I attach the report for your information (VG/101 – INQ000616786).
22. We feel the Home Office has been very cognisant of these issues. In 2018, MCF was given a Home Office grant to provide education to children as part of their prevention campaign, specifically on IIOC (Indecent Images of Children.). This project was called 'So Socking Simple' aimed at young men 18-24 to navigate the internet more responsibly to protect children. This led to the development of visual and others

- assets, alongside a social media campaign to, including via LadBible. The campaign evaluation report is attached (VG/102 – INQ000616755).
23. We have had very little interaction with the Department for Education but know they do a lot of work with the UK Safer Internet Centre.
- 23.1. Department of Health and Social Care – again, MCF have had little contact.
- 23.2. Department of Culture, Media and Sport have been very active through the UK Centre for Internet Safety and MCF sat on the Resilience Working Group from 2018 right up to and including during the pandemic.
- 23.3. Department of Science, Innovation and Technology – again no contact so no knowledge.
- 23.4. Scottish and Welsh Governments – yes, they were aware, and we delivered Click Path to Protection training across South Wales and areas in Scotland. I also know they worked with SWGfL on these topics.
- 23.5. NI Executive – no engagement, as far as I can recall.
24. In the pre-pandemic period, the predominant trend identified by MCF was the lack of professional knowledge and skills in the area when working with and managing cases where children had been harmed by TACSA.
25. As noted in our 2019-2020 annual report: *“We have identified some key concerns regarding internet harm in children and families. Together with partners we have developed working groups who specifically look at the Dark Web, support for secondary victims of internet crime, and development of guidance for supporting survivors who may speak publicly. We have also developed; a Harm Reduction guidance for parents/carers and professionals in partnership with National Working Group (NWG); an eLearning resource with Central Bedfordshire; and a virtual training resource with London Grid for Learning for use in schools”.*
26. Arrangements were made to carry out three specific workshops entitled *What would you do?* to identify the key issues that needed addressing within each area of concern and to agree a plan of action. Due to the pandemic the workshops did not happen. I have attached a copy of the annual report (VG/103 – INQ000616760).
27. As already mentioned in paragraph 3, research conducted by MCF with Barnardos published in 2015 ‘Digital Dangers’ which identified that young people at risk of harm online may not have any previous vulnerabilities that are often associated with being

victims of sexual abuse. The currently accepted indicators of abuse may not be present, and the first indication may be when police identify images on devices. Certain groups, such as young people with learning difficulties, those with mental health problems and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) young people, appear to be particularly vulnerable to online harm. The impact of easy access to porn and the 'secret' nature of children being on devices without those who should be aware and need to protect them was making safeguarding more difficult. The report is attached (VG/001 – INQ000616805)

28. More and more children had access to devices and the internet which was changing the reality of who was vulnerable to online abuse. Services were seeing children victimised who would not have normally fallen in to the 'vulnerable' category. Increasingly, referrals were for children who come from stable, safe and supportive family environments. As Johnny Gwynne from the NCA stated 'For children who are groomed and abused online, there does not appear to be a clear vulnerability profile for risks.... Recent work on this suggests that some children may have an online risk-taking appetite which does not match a typical vulnerability profile.' There was also concern expressed about these cases being viewed as lower priority.
29. My answers are the same regarding trends known and understood by government departments and devolved governments as I already outlined regarding harms.
30. MCF did not undertake or participate in any research examining the impact on children of time spent online and/or exposure to harms, including impact on children's psychosocial development.
31. In terms of whether the impact of harms were understood by government, my answers are the same as offered under paragraph 18 above. We are unable to offer more detail on this and have only been able to outline some of our engagement with the various departments and governments.
32. I refer you to my answer under paragraph 31. I cannot comment further on any relevant government or departmental mitigations.
33. I have already outlined the work of MCF, including our pre-pandemic work (paragraphs 10-12).

34. I am including a couple of other references within our submission, which may be helpful to the inquiry team.
- 34.1. Presentation to Home Office (Sept 2019) by Tink Palmer (CEO at that time) entitled ‘ ‘Strategies to reduce online sexual abuse and exploitation of children’. This was also delivered to partners in Manila in 2019. I have attached a copy of the powerpoint (VG/105 – INQ000616824)
- 34.2. IWF 2022 report, attached via weblink (VG/106 – INQ000516511) outlining their data on the increasing risks to girls online.

Pandemic: Harms/Trends/Impact/Mitigations, etc.

35. With the onset of the pandemic and the announcement of the lockdown arrangements, life changed for many people who found themselves living in their homes with little freedom to mix “face to face” and in person with their extended family, friends and work colleagues. This was an unprecedented time and one that we feared would bring greater risks to the lives of vulnerable people including children. Due to lockdown, children were spending the major part of their day within their family homes and the pandemic abruptly pushed children’s daily lives online. Whilst increased online activity supported children’s learning, socialisation and play, it also put them at heightened risk from online sexual exploitation – including being the subject of abusive imagery, cyberbullying, online risk-taking behaviour, potentially harmful content and inappropriate collection, use and sharing of data.
36. Fears and concerns centred around:
- 36.1. The likelihood that increased levels of boredom could lead to increased risk-taking by children.
- 36.2. Decrease in the level of self-reporting/disclosure/discovery until children return to education or have further interactions with support workers.
- 36.3. Those who wish to harm children having increased access to children either towards children they lived with or children found online.
- 36.4. The IWF – with the help of its industry partners –successfully blocked and filtered at least 8.8 million attempts by UK internet users to access videos and images of children suffering sexual abuse during a one-month period while the UK was in locked down (IWF Annual Report, 2022. This was already

referenced under VG/106 – INQ000516511, paragraph 34.2. I have not included a second reference to this in the exhibit table.).

37. Harms were identified through partnership sharing in strategic groups and through direct referrals for help, by parents. I have already referenced examples of these earlier in this document, particularly in the table under paragraph 12 and also within paragraph 13. The increasing use of End-to-End Encryption (E2EE) was causing concern with the fear that it could give perpetrators of abuse a place to hide. As previously, we worked with the Home Office and other partners to highlight the risks of E2EE to the general public and directly challenge Meta, with a letter to Mark Zuckerberg. This led to a meeting with David Miles (Director of Safety Policy, Europe, Middle East and Africa, Meta) to discuss our concerns.
38. Another concern was children would be lured into E2E encrypted spaces to prevent those around them from observing what was happening. For example, children being groomed on Discord, with the conversation being moved to WhatsApp, to facilitate ongoing, but concealed grooming.
39. We are members of WeProtect Global Alliance, who in their Threat Assessment (2021) highlighted how the threat to children online was growing. I have attached this for your review (VG/107 – INQ000616810). They noted (p6):

“The COVID-19 pandemic is undeniably one contributory factor behind the spike in child sexual exploitation and abuse online (see Theme Chapter: COVID-19). The rise in child ‘self-generated’ sexual material is another trend that challenges the existing response.”
40. Furthermore, (p22):

“While lockdowns may have accelerated pathways into offending, the longer-term impacts of the pandemic threaten to reinforce commercial drivers of abuse.”
41. The entire report is worthwhile, and we commend it to the Inquiry team for an understanding of trends and harms affected by the pandemic. We have already referenced other research outputs we were involved with or commissioned early in this submission [Paragraphs 11, 12, 17 and 19).

42. We have nothing further to add beyond what we have already shared about harms as understood by government and departments in the pre-pandemic period, under paragraph 21.
43. The WeProtect Global Threat Assessment report (2021), (already mentioned), includes a good high-level overview of the trends observed during the pandemic timeframe. We also refer to our annual report (2021), (VG/108 – INQ000616838). This outlines the work of MCF within this time period and how Covid affected our work (p2):
- “The period reported has been dominated by the coronavirus pandemic. Whilst this inevitably curtailed some of our activities, work continued apace as the organisation adapted to lockdown restrictions, took activity online and responded to the potential for increased vulnerability of children and young people during the pandemic. Arrangements were made to enable staff to work from home, with equipment and technology provided to facilitate this. Weekly team meetings were established via video conferencing to monitor staff welfare and enable communication.”*
44. We have already referenced other research outputs we were involved with or commissioned early in this submission (paragraphs: 11, 12, 17, 19).
45. We have nothing further to add beyond what we have already shared about trends as understood by government and departments in the pre-pandemic period, under paragraphs 22 and 23.
46. One of the most significant impacts was that safeguarding professionals were not around children physically, in order to appropriately pick-up on concerns, signs and indicators of abuse and harm. Professionals were also not available, for children to be able to seek help from them. Social distancing, coupled with school closures and loss of extracurricular activities left children without any formal contact with adults who may have been able to intervene or provide support for children.
47. It is well established by academic research that the majority of children who are sexually abused experience abuse within their own home, by family members. The prolonged experience of being at home during the pandemic likely meant that some

children experienced increased abuse during the pandemic. This was a period of isolation and no oversight for many children, where intervention from safe adults who could provide support or care was no longer available in the same way as before the pandemic.

48. The pandemic was a period of intense fear for people, and we expect this also affected children. We suspect that being online, connecting with people assumed to be peers, may have appealed to children as a way to counteract the unusual situation and the general fear about the pandemic, to bring a sense of normality to children. Unfortunately, this also likely provoked increased risks to children.
49. We are aware that some children were provided with technology (i.e. laptops) by their schools, so that they could complete remote school tasks. We are not sure what safeguards or guidance was given to families on how to use devices safely and to limit potential online risks. With children likely logging on via home Wi-Fi networks, these devices would not have been subject to the typical school safeguarding and filtering arrangements. We recommend the following article by Allkins (2021) 'Online safety: The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on children in the UK' (VG/109 – INQ000616785) to the inquiry team to understand more of the ways in which Covid-19 impacted children's online safety.
50. We understand the Scottish government provided guidance to schools on mitigating risks online, called 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reducing the risks in schools' (VG/110 – INQ000530385). This can be viewed via the weblink in the exhibited documents table attached to this submission.
51. Schools were encouraged to provide equitable access to technology during this time. We are not sure whether this included robust advice on using technology safely and many parents do not feel well equipped on how to adopt safety measures for device use.
52. We understand that the DfE put out guidance for schools 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): safeguarding in schools, colleges and other providers' (VG/111 – INQ000513535). We have included the weblink within the exhibit table attached herewith.

53. The risks of harm to children facilitated by technology were already known pre-pandemic. With the focus on providing technology to children who previously did not have access outside schools, the real concern was that the likelihood of children being harmed online would increase significantly, unless the proper safeguards were put in place.
54. MCF have no evidence that children were not adequately considered when decisions about the response to harms were made by central governments across the UK.
55. We have already outlined any interactions MCF had with relevant departments and stakeholders earlier within our submission and we have nothing further to add here. (For example: paragraphs 12, 22 and 23).

Post-pandemic: Harms/Trends/Impact/Mitigations, etc.

56. The internet and technology, whilst offering great opportunities for fun, communication and learning also opens children and young people up to inappropriate contact, engaging in activities that are leading to them being criminalised and/or exposing them to inappropriate content and influence. Technology has made possible a whole new world of contact, content and opportunity for perpetrators to prey on children and young people. The online sexual abuse of children continues to grow at an alarming rate.
57. Online spaces also present other potential harms, such as exposure to pornography that may also include violent material, which at a young age can influence some children to display harmful sexual behaviour. The Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP) outlined in 2024 that 52% of police-reported child sexual abuse reports relate to children aged 10 to 17 years-old offending against other children. I have included a weblink to a summary of the report (VG/112 – INQ000643782)
58. This provides new challenges to the protective network around the child, with professionals and carers struggling to respond in a way that protects and promotes the recovery of the child. The NSPCC (2024) shared a briefing about the data and statistics evidencing the issue (We do not have this briefing to share, but could be sought from the NSPCC):

- 58.1. 19% of children, aged 10-15-years-old, exchanged messages with someone online who they never met before in the last year.
 - 58.2. Over 9,000 child sexual abuse offences involved an online element in 2022/23
 - 58.3. Around a sixth of people that experienced online harassment offences were under 18-years-old
 - 58.4. Under 18-year-olds were the subject of around a quarter of reported offences of online blackmail in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
59. Child sexual abuse, by its very nature, is often silenced. Silenced by society, silenced by perpetrators and silenced by victims. Those we work with have been silenced by the fact there is a permanent record of their abuse, silenced by the fact that they are blamed for their abuse and often do not realise that they are victims.
60. We know that the sooner the abuse is discovered, the sooner the recovery journey can start. We work to identify the barriers to the discovery of the abuse and seek new and innovative ways to break them down with the support of our partners and our Lived Experience Group.
61. The impact of child sexual abuse involving imagery can be severe and lifelong, with the potential for children to be revictimised each time images are viewed. They may feel guilt, shame and self-blame, and be vulnerable to further sexual abuse. However, with the right support, they can go on to live safe and fulfilling lives.
62. Many of the harms which existed pre and during the pandemic have continued unabated. We remain concerned about the use and extension of E2EE as a means to conceal abusive activity towards children online.
63. MCF participated in CESAGRAM, which was a European project exploring grooming and those who go missing. This also included some research, amplifying the voices and experiences of victims. I have attached 'The Voice' report (VG/119 – INQ000616809) for your reference.
64. We have witnessed increasing government efforts to address online harms to children in recent years. This includes the development and enactment of the Online Safety Act 2023, supported by the work of the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology. We are also well aware of the development of the regulatory regime by Ofcom to deliver aspects of the Online Safety Act. Generally, we have welcomed all these efforts, while also seeking to see improvements to the legislative and regulatory

landscape, where we feel this is needed. Our approach at MCF is to work with government and key stakeholders as much as we can, to try and deliver better outcomes for TACSA victims.

65. We have also noted the strong recommendations contained in the final report on the Inquiry into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse (2022) and we have worked with other partners to see these recommendations be advanced and realised by government. This was part of the IICSA Changemakers stakeholder group. The Home Office has attempted to bring these recommendations to actualisation through the Crime and Policing Bill. Currently making its way through parliament. We were particularly pleased to see the Home Secretary recommending that grooming should be considered an aggravating factor during sentencing. Furthermore, we were encouraged to see the clauses in the bill around use of AI technologies and AI manuals to produce and proliferate child sexual abuse material. We have welcomed any relevant endeavours by government, while also analysing and offering additional suggestions, if appropriate.
66. In 2024, the IWF acted to remove images or videos of children suffering sexual abuse, or links to that content, on 291,270 webpages. Each page can contain at least one, if not hundreds or thousands, of images and videos. This is the most child sexual abuse webpages the IWF has ever discovered in its 29-year history and is a five per cent increase on the 275,650 webpages identified in 2023. This data can be accessed directly from the IWF. At MCF, we also believe there has been an increase in the use of Artificial Intelligence in recent years as a means to sexually offend against children, including to generate AI-Child Sexual Abuse Material.
67. We have already provided our assessment of the impact of the pandemic elsewhere in our submission (see paragraphs 4, 5, 6, 10 and 11).
68. We have already provided details of our response to supporting children, including during the pandemic. Our responses can be found in paragraphs 3, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 11.
69. MCF have no evidence that children were not adequately considered when decisions about the response to harms were made by central governments across the UK. We have already outlined areas of interaction between MCF, government and other stakeholders involved in protecting children from online harms.

Further thoughts on the post-pandemic time period

70. MCF believe the pandemic acted as a key driver towards normalising children being online and using technology from a younger age. Given that primary and post-primary children were expected to be schooled at home using laptops, phones and PCs, this likely created increasing technological adeptness in children, as well as setting a new paradigm for the frequency of time spent online. I also sense that the issue of social connectivity was promoted through technology to children during the pandemic period. In an effort to help children remain connected to friends and to counteract the public health enforcement of social distancing and multiple lockdowns, there were avenues for children to connect with friends (and others) in online spheres. I am aware from discussions with the MCF staff team that apps such as House Party and Marco Polo were quite popular during the pandemic, amongst children and adults, and I expect these may have increased the normative experience of children being online. I am aware there were many more apps in use than just these two, but I recollect these growing in popularity during Covid-19. MCF believe this aspect of the pandemic may have contributed to a new and higher baseline of children being online. We do not feel it is the only driver, however.
71. As I have indicated, I sense that the pandemic has contributed to a new baseline around the frequency and normality of children being online. This may have altered the paradigm of childhood, to some extent, setting it more firmly within an online social context, rather than offline. If this is the case, it alters children's potential exposure to harm and risk too, situating these harms and risks online (though not exclusively).
72. I am concerned by the regular release of data and research which seems to indicate that TACSA is increasing. This suggests to me that the current frameworks for mitigating risks are not proving effective or agile enough to offer timely and responsive actions to online harms. Efforts have been made to improve the online eco-system via the Online Safety Act 2023 (OSA), with enforcement from Ofcom as the regulator. I am also aware of the various legislative attempts to close gaps around the creation of CSAM and AI-CSAM (e.g. the upcoming Crime and Policing Bill), as well as proposals around adding grooming as an aggravating factor for sentencing purposes. This is all to be welcomed, but research indicates that it may not yet be enough to counteract the ease at which people offend online against children. Although we are generally supportive of the OSA and its purpose, (and there is definitely a need for it to have time to 'bed-in'), we are also increasingly aware of areas where there is a clear need

for improvement, too. This may even extend to the need to amend the Act in the short to mid-term and may be of specific importance to mitigate any risks/harms that could transpire in the event of a future pandemic. We collaborate with the Online Safety Act Network, and we generally agree with their assessment on gaps in the Act and regulatory regime, as noted in their progress review in February 2025 (VG/120 - INQ000650674)

73. There is a clear need to improve upon the meaning of “safety by design” in the Act, as we sense that Ofcom have taken a very shallow approach to this. Specifically, we would like to see the removal of the “technically feasible” clause in the Online Safety Act, Schedule 4, 2(c) and the corresponding removal of the carve-out on this that Ofcom constructed in the Illegal Harms Codes (ICU C2). You will see from our general analysis of the Illegal Harms Codes why this is particularly concerning for those of us working to improve online safety for children. This public analysis from December 2024 is included as a link, via our exhibit schedule (VG/121 – INQ000650672). We have also included an example of the potential impact of such a carve-out around End-to-End Encryption in our public comment in March 2025 (VG/122 – INQ000650673). We were also signatory to an open statement, led by the Online Safety Act Network in January 2025, which outlined our concerns around the Act and Ofcom (VG/123 – INQ000650675). We have continued to reiterate our concerns to Ofcom about the issue of “technically feasible” approaches to taking down illegal content. The general enforcement of the OSA by the statutory regulator, Ofcom has been of some concern to us. The OSA affords latitude to the regulator in how they interpret and enforce aspects of the Act. We sense that Ofcom leans towards a very narrow, risk-averse interpretation of the OSA. This may undermine the overall ambition of the OSA and the delivery of the UK being the safest place for children online. Again, this could be an area that warrants improvement to counteract any potential future risks/harms if a new civil emergency were to occur. However, MCF remains committed to working and engaging with the regulator, to encourage and suggest improvements to the regulation of industry, underpinned by the Online Safety Act, so that the whole digital environment becomes safer for children.
74. I feel a whole-system approach would be needed to appropriately address online risks in the event of a future pandemic. This would need to be a cross-cutting Government-led strategy that offers robust action and guidance for all statutory safeguarding partners. The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill includes a proposal to add Education as the fourth statutory safeguarding partner. I agree with this generally and it will be essential to ensure a cohesive strategy to cope with a future pandemic. While

Education did adapt to offer some solutions for schooling during the pandemic, I am not sure it included enough proactive awareness-raising and mitigations around the potential for children being educated online to be exposed to harm as a result. This should be scoped out and planned for in the event of a future need to move schooling online temporarily. I feel another significant missing piece during Covid-19 was direct government advice to parents in how to keep their children safe online. While others, like ourselves, entered this space to try and fill this knowledge-void, it is important that the voice of government speaks to these issues and addresses parents directly, so they are equipped in keeping their children safe. This should include appropriate signposting to expert services who can help where TACSA or other harms have occurred.

75. It is important to reflect on the fact that not all children were safe at home. Some were potentially living with their abusers during this time period. It was also an intense period for those children who had no outdoor space at home, or who found the learning and education arrangements particularly challenging and inaccessible for their learning style and needs. The safety net of protective adults was compromised due to lockdown arrangements. Should another crisis of this nature occur, MCF suggests that a specific reporting and guidance mechanism is needed for children, funded by government and facilitated by a trusted partner. A public awareness-raising campaign about this facility would be needed, but particularly targeted to children, with information shared with children via school comms and also through social media, to children themselves. This would be an avenue for intervention and support for children who may be experiencing harm at home, or online. Schools should also identify any particularly vulnerable children and share this information with safeguarding partners. This should provoke risk assessments and development of safety plans for these children. It may necessitate regular check-ins with children by professionals during a lockdown. These could be online calls or house calls (at the door), or a mix of both. Educational delays during a public crisis may be inevitable, but government should have contingency planning for this within the curriculum, including specific arrangements for this within any necessary homeschooling periods in the future. In preparation for any future pandemics, children and young people need appropriate and robust Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), which includes education around online harms and pornography. Relatedly, parents need to be better equipped with non-judgmental education on digital literacy and online harms. The government should consider additional financial support and consolidation for trusted NGOs in this space, who can help deliver this support (for example: Internet Matters, South West

Grid for Learning and Childnet). There should have been more consideration by government on the impact of daily Covid-19 news briefings, which children were exposed to at home. It would be worth exploring how to better deliver key crisis messages to an audience of children and young people, reducing unnecessarily scary messaging and communicated in a more reassuring way. It would also be worthwhile to plan how to uplift key response teams during a crisis period. Organisations like ours (MCF), along with NAPAC, Childline, Lucy Faithfull Foundation and Women's Aid could all offer additional support to key groups during a crisis, if properly funded by government, to aid additional capacity and provision of services, including helplines.

76. I believe that CSA, including TACSA, are not particularly well understood at political level and this impacts the response to these forms of harm, whether occurring during a pandemic period or not. At the Marie Collins Foundation we advocate for a prevention approach, within a public health lens. Some of our recent work, which was collaborative in nature, has outlined the need for this approach and I believe it would be worthwhile to consider our 'Closer to home' report to understand why prevention represents a proactive and vital approach to harms, both online and offline. I have attached this report for your reference (VG/113 – INQ000616792). Additionally, I generally support the lessons learned and key recommendations noted by Salter and Wong (2021) *The impact of COVID-19 on the risk of online child sexual exploitation and the implications for child protection and policing* (attached to this submission, p6) (VG/114 – INQ000616845). This was an important piece of research in highlighting the deft behaviour of offenders during the pandemic whereby they sought to harness the conditions to access, groom and abuse more children online. Salter and Wong (2021) revealed that offenders were increasing their activity with one another on the dark web, to upskill one another in how to find and abuse children online, when so many children were spending much more time at home and online (pp40-41). For the future, it would be important for police to be more aware of this and to actively target investigations to locate offenders on the dark web, as well as open web. A recent blog post by Professor Elena Martellozzo and Paula Bradbury (06.03.25) called 'The intersection of AI and CSAM: a reflection on the UK's Online Safety Act' is helpful in outlining some of the challenges with AI and CSAM, especially around enforcement of legislation and could be instructive for the inquiry in thinking through risks and how they might be tackled in future (VG/115 – INQ000643784) I have provided a link to the blogpost within the exhibit schedule.

Learning from the pandemic

77. The Marie Collins Foundation did not undertake any specific 'lessons learned' exercises following Covid-19. As previously shared, our work has not fundamentally altered as a direct result of the pandemic. While we remain extremely busy, we are also highly focused on supporting recovery from TACSA. This has been the case pre/during/post-pandemic. We are a very small team and we consider our work and voice to be very valuable in this space of responding to TACSA, at all levels. Post-pandemic, we sought to continue and grow our work, and did not feel that there was a specific need for us to engage in any type of formal review of the impact of Covid-19. We are committed to our vision that every child harmed by technology-assisted child sexual abuse will be guided and helped throughout their recovery journey. They have the right to suffer no further harm. We continued our efforts in bringing this to reality post-pandemic.
78. As I have shared previously, I recognise that things could be done differently if there were ever a future pandemic event or civil emergency. I would reiterate that a cohesive, whole-system approach, led by government, that is truly cross-departmental, could produce a stronger and more protective response for children.
79. In addition to the exhibits already mentioned and furnished with this submission, I have included three further MCF annual reports, which may be of interest to the inquiry team.

Document	Date (if available)
MCF Annual report (VG/116 – INQ000616831)	2019
MCF Annual Report (VG/117 – INQ000616830)	2023
MCF Annual Report (VG/118 – INQ000616832)	2024

80. I hope that my submission has been helpful to the inquiry. I have nothing further to add.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings 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 of its truth.

SIGNED:

Personal Data

DATED: 29 July 2025