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To: Scrutiny Committee – 21 October 2026

Subject: Group Based Child Sexual Exploitation

Classification: Unrestricted

1. Background and purpose

1.1 The Scrutiny Committee is considering how effectively Kent County Council and partner agencies identify, prevent and respond to group-based child sexual exploitation in Kent, and what further action may be required considering the Casey National Audit.

1.2 Group-based child sexual exploitation, other forms of sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation, trafficking, modern slavery and other types of harm are grouped under the terms of contextual safeguarding, or risk outside the home. Contextual safeguarding is an approach to child protection that recognises children can experience significant harm outside the family home, and it focuses the safeguarding activity on the environments (places and spaces including the online) and social contexts where they spend time.

1.3 This report responds to the five questions identified by Members. Overall, the evidence shows KCC and partners have established statutory, strategic and operational arrangements to identify and respond to exploitation. Kent Children Services, have a comprehensive suite of policies, procedures, training and quality assurance activities to support its duties to safeguard children from harm. The Kent Safeguarding Children Multi-Agency Partnership (KSCMP) is Kent's statutory safeguarding partnership responsible for coordinating multi-agency work to protect children, with its core mission to prevent harm, support recovery, and improve services.

1.4 There are positive external inspection findings and established multi-agency mechanisms for connecting information about children, locations and networks. However, exploitation remains hidden and the available data does not provide a complete measure of prevalence or impact. The report therefore distinguishes between established strengths, areas requiring further assurance and the improvement activity now planned.

2. Responses to Members' questions

Safeguarding Responsibilities and Assurance

2.1 Q1: How is Kent County Council discharging its statutory safeguarding responsibilities in relation to child sexual exploitation (CSE), group-based child sexual abuse, and associated risks such as trafficking and modern slavery, and what assurance can be provided that vulnerable children are being identified and protected effectively?

2.1.1 The available evidence provides assurance Kent County Council (KCC) and partners have established statutory, operational and strategic arrangements to identify and respond to child sexual exploitation and related harms.

2.1.2 Exploitation can be hidden and information may be held across different agencies. Assurance therefore depends on continuing to test how effectively information is brought together, risks are identified early and protective and disruptive action is taken.

Overall assurance

2.1.3 KCC discharges its responsibilities principally through Integrated Children's Services, Education, CONTEST and Serious Organised Crime functions. Further detail of statutory duties is set out in Appendix 1.

Integrated Children's Services

2.1.4 Integrated Children's Services core duties arise from the Children Act 1989, the Children Act 2004 and the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026. These require KCC to support children in need, make enquiries where significant harm is suspected, ensure safeguarding is built into the way all Council functions are planned and delivered and work with Kent Police, the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board and other relevant agencies through the Kent Safeguarding Children Multi-Agency Partnership. The duties apply whether harm occurs within the family or outside the home, including sexual exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery.

2.1.5 Integrated Children's Services combines prevention, early intervention and statutory safeguarding for children assessed to be in need, in need of protection, in care or care leavers. Family Hubs and wider local partnerships provide advice, positive activities and targeted support, helping practitioners identify emerging vulnerability and connect children and families to appropriate community services and help. Early Help coordinates support where needs or exploitation risks are emerging, while Social Work undertakes statutory assessments, enquiries and planning where a child may be in need, in need of protection or a child in care. All work through the wider multi-agency network to connect support for the child and family with action addressing risks in peer groups, locations and networks.

2.1.6 Care Leavers Services also assess and respond to exploitation and trafficking risks affecting eligible and relevant care-experienced young people, including vulnerable young adults, through pathway planning and wider multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

- 2.1.7 Youth Justice contributes to prevention, diversion and statutory intervention for children at risk of, or involved in, offending. Its assessments and plans consider vulnerability alongside offending risk, recognising offending may be linked to grooming, coercion, exploitation, peer networks and harm outside the home. It works through multi-agency arrangements to reduce offending and protect children and victims from further harm.
- 2.1.8 The Government's 2026 Youth Justice White Paper, '**Cutting youth crime, changing young lives**', reinforces the need for earlier intervention and stronger multi-agency responses to the complex needs, exploitation and online harm affecting children in the youth justice system. Kent Youth Justice's use of Contextual Safeguarding approaches and collaboration with other children's services is consistent with this direction and avoids treating offending behaviour in isolation from safeguarding needs.

Education

- 2.1.9 Education supports early identification through schools and settings, provides safeguarding advice and challenge, promotes attendance and inclusion and ensures concerns are referred and shared appropriately. Lack of education attendance or inclusion—including persistent absence, exclusion and being missing from education—is a safeguarding concern and increases vulnerability to grooming and exploitation.
- 2.1.10 The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 strengthens the role of education and childcare agencies in local safeguarding arrangements and provides further safeguards for children not in school. This reinforces the need to connect education information with wider multi-agency assessment and action, including Youth Justice, Early Help and Social Work.

KCC's CONTEST and Serious and Organised Crime

- 2.1.11 CONTEST, the United Kingdom's counter-terrorism strategy, connects concerns about radicalisation with wider safeguarding and vulnerability support. These responsibilities are governed by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, which establishes KCC's Prevent duty and local multi-agency Channel arrangements.
- 2.1.12 KCC's Serious and Organised Crime team supports intelligence-sharing, partnership coordination and disruption activity relating to organised crime, county lines, exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery. Its safeguarding contribution includes the Modern Slavery Supply Chains Working Group and a wider programme of awareness-raising and guidance, helping services to identify vulnerability, share relevant intelligence and coordinate proportionate protective and disruptive action.
- 2.1.13 These functions are underpinned by statutory responsibilities to prevent crime and serious violence, disrupt organised crime and protect victims of trafficking, slavery and exploitation.

Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements

- 2.1.14 The Kent Safeguarding Children Multi-Agency Partnership (KSCMP) is the statutory partnership through which KCC, Kent Police, health and relevant agencies coordinate and scrutinise local safeguarding arrangements, set priorities, respond to emerging risks and ensure learning leads to improvement. Each agency remains accountable for its own statutory functions and agreed actions.
- 2.1.15 KCC operates a multi-agency contextual safeguarding framework through District Contextual Safeguarding Meetings (DCSM) and Complex Adolescent Harm Meetings (CAHM). DCSMs focus on the contexts in which harm occurs, including peer groups, locations and online environments, while CAHMs focus on the contextual risks experienced by a specific child or group of children and align agreed action with each child's existing plan.
- 2.1.16 KCC's exploitation and risk outside the home toolkit also supports practitioners to identify and respond to contextual and group-based risks, including exploitation concerns.

External and internal assurance

- 2.1.17 Kent Children Services' Safeguarding, Professional Standards and Quality Assurance (SPSQA) unit aims to drive Kent's practice framework and the agenda for delivering best practice to children and families in Kent, while ensuring safeguarding practice across the whole of the CYPE directorate is effective. The core purpose of the unit is to provide a quality assurance service and ensure the provision of services for children and young people is compliant with national statutory requirements and professional standards. The SPSQA unit has maintained a focus on keeping children safe outside the home, with activities examining approaches to all types of harm, including Child Sexual Exploitation.
- 2.1.18 The Children's Outcome Analysis (COA) programme is part of our Quality Assurance Framework and is a quality assurance activity completed to understand how practice at child, district and area level affects the lived experiences, safety and wellbeing of children and families. A COA will identify areas of strength so that good practice can be replicated in other parts of the service and areas that require improvement so that prompt action is taken to deliver high quality services to all children in Kent.
- 2.1.19 The COA Activity throughout 2022-2025 examined contextual safeguarding, exploitation processes and responses to extra-familial harm across county-wide children's services. This included multi-agency auditing to ensure that we had a joined-up approach with our partner agencies such as Police, Probation and Education. Findings included strengths when exploitation toolkits were used which included helping practitioners gather and triangulate information, improved understanding of exploitation risk, facilitated referrals to other agencies, expanded support networks around children and supported targeted plans based on lived experience and professional input. It also found that there was a stronger embedding of contextual safeguarding processes

within the Adolescent Services than elsewhere in ICS, and there was a greater use and recording of exploitation toolkits.

- 2.1.20 The Adolescent specific COA found strong joint working and interventions for exploitation, positive feedback from children who had interventions with strong-relationship based practice and effective management oversight of practitioners who demonstrated a strong understanding of extra-familial harm. Within the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children service COA it was identified practitioners recognised risks of trafficking and exploitation, with National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referrals being completed appropriately where concerns were identified.
- 2.1.21 More focus was identified as being needed across District Contextual Safeguarding Meetings (DCSMs) and Contextual Adolescent Harm Meetings (CAHMS) where it was found that some services had limited awareness of these processes outside of Adolescent services and there was an inconsistency in the referral process and recording of exploitation risks across the county. A Communities of Practice was held around Contextual Safeguarding to ensure that practitioners were provided with up to date understanding and training around contextual harm, as well as multiple focused publications within the Practice Bulletin. With regards to the exploitation toolkit, COA findings identified that it was underused and found to be confusing which led to a review of the Exploitation toolkit and it's new launch late in 2025 to enable better identification and management of risk outside of home across children's services.
- 2.1.22 The Leaving Care COA in 2025, and subsequent Ofsted Inspection identified that exploitation concerns within the leaving care service were not always followed up robustly, with missing episodes, gang involvement, financial abuse and radicalisation concerns not consistently being managed. As a result, a task and finish group was developed to specifically target Safeguarding and risk outside the home to enable Personal Advisors across the service to better utilise contextual safeguarding approaches and recognise and reduce risk.
- 2.1.23 Other results from the COAs have included improved data collection and oversight around exploitation data on Liberi and Core Plus with a creation of improved management information and dashboards identifying specific vulnerabilities. There is better operational and strategic oversight, with additional exploitation reporting available for managers and enhanced analysis of exploitation types and prevalence. The CYPE Audit also focuses on children who are on the vulnerability register - this includes children subjected to Child sexual exploitation, and ensures that those most vulnerable children are audited to ensure consistent and strong practice. The CYPE Audit reporting dashboard is currently in development to split the data by exploitation type to allow for better nuanced understanding of practice for this vulnerable group of children.

- 2.1.24 Moving forward, there is a plan for a risk outside of home evaluation to take place within early 2027 to focus on the current practice around contextual safeguarding, and to learn from the findings of the Child Sexual Exploitation multi-agency pilot which has been ongoing in East Kent. Following the identification of the new risk outside of home Child Protection Pathway from the Department for Education, this will allow us to map how best to approach the new pathway, and how to inform service delivery moving forward.
- 2.1.25 External inspection supports this assurance. Ofsted's 2025 inspection identified statutory partners were engaged to positive effect when children were at risk of exploitation and recognised Kent's well-researched and targeted service design and strong joint working with the Police. HM Inspectorate of Probation noted the use of DCSMs to share concerns and develop additional multi-agency responses for children open to Youth Justice. These findings provide external assurance for Kent's contextual safeguarding framework.
- 2.1.26 Kent Police chairs the multi-agency Kent and Medway Child Missing and Exploitation Tactical Delivery Group. It brings together representatives from KCC, Kent Police, Medway Children's Services, health, the Violence Reduction Unit and analytical services. The group reviews the partnership response to missing children and exploitation, considers significant investigations and data quality, identifies trends and opportunities for prevention and disruption, strengthens suspect identification and reduces harm to children.
- 2.1.27 Strategic assurance is provided through the Child Exploitation Oversight Group, which considers exploitation data, emerging themes and progress against the Casey National Audit recommendations. The KSCMP's Scrutiny, Assurance and Audit Sub-group provides challenge through multi-agency audits, thematic reviews and performance scrutiny, while the Learning Improvement Group monitors whether learning is translated into practice and has impact. KCC's internal quality-assurance activity, including case audits reported three times a year, provides additional organisational assurance.
- 2.1.28 These arrangements demonstrate KCC has a broad statutory and operational framework for prevention, early help, assessment, protection and disruption, supported by established multi-agency mechanisms for connecting information about children, locations and networks. Positive Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Probation findings provide external assurance about key aspects of this approach. However, assurance is not absolute: the Casey Audit reinforces the need to continue testing whether hidden and emerging exploitation is identified early, information is connected consistently across organisational boundaries, and action against contextual risks and potential perpetrators is timely and effective.

2.2 Q2. What are the key findings and recommendations from the Casey National Audit that are relevant to local authorities, and what actions has KCC taken, or plans to take, in response?

- 2.2.1 KCC and its safeguarding partners completed a local assessment against the Casey National Audit. It identified established multi-agency arrangements and examples of effective practice, alongside areas requiring further assurance and improvement. The principal actions are to test whether information-sharing works consistently in practice, strengthen analysis of victim and suspect data, improve use of exploitation tools, embed a shared definition of group-based CSE and undertake targeted multi-agency case scrutiny.

Key Casey findings

- 2.2.2 The Casey National Audit found group-based child sexual exploitation is likely to be under-identified and undercounted because national and local data is incomplete, inconsistent and insufficiently connected across agencies. It highlighted recurring weaknesses in recognising exploitation, analysing information about victims and suspected perpetrators, sharing information, exercising professional curiosity and challenge, and connecting children, adults, locations and networks. The Audit also warned children may be wrongly viewed as making choices or offending when they are being groomed, coerced or exploited, and that difficult issues, including ethnicity and culture, must not prevent evidence-based scrutiny or protective action.

Kent's benchmarking

- 2.2.3 Between September and December 2025, the Kent Child Exploitation Oversight Group (CEOG) benchmarked Kent's safeguarding arrangements against the relevant Casey findings and recommendations. This collated and analysed submissions from the three statutory safeguarding partners. CEOG considered the findings in February 2026 and the KSCMP Executive considered them in April 2026.

Recommendations and KCC response

- 2.2.4 **Improve data and analysis:** strengthen the consistent collection and analysis of information about victims and suspects, including ethnicity and nationality, so patterns and cohorts that are over represented can be understood rather than assumed or overlooked.
- 2.2.4.1 KCC and partnership response: KCC records ethnicity information for children identified as victims within its children's systems, while recording the ethnicity of suspects is the duty of Police and other partners (i.e. Probation). CEOG and the Child Missing and Exploitation Tactical Delivery Group provide the partnership route for bringing victim, suspect, location and network information together.
- 2.2.5 **Strengthen information-sharing:** ensure statutory safeguarding partners share relevant information effectively in child sexual abuse and exploitation cases, test whether agreements work in practice and support the introduction of a unique reference number for children
- 2.2.5.1 KCC and partnership response: The statutory safeguarding partners have information-sharing protocols and agreements, including arrangements

supporting the Front Door and the Kent and Medway Care Record. Operational intelligence is also shared through DCSMs, CAHMs and the Child Missing and Exploitation Tactical Delivery Group. The next step is to test the effectiveness and consistency of these arrangements through targeted case scrutiny. KCC and Kent Police are also undertaking preparatory work on a unique reference number and KCC's Liberi system already records NHS numbers.

2.2.6 Interrogate local safeguarding data: examine trends and variation in child sexual abuse and exploitation within children's social care data and test whether recording systems accurately reflect the risks children experience.

2.2.6.1 KCC and partnership response: KCC reviews CSE and child sexual abuse data through Children's Services performance and quality-assurance arrangements and multi-agency reporting to CEOG. The benchmarking found a broadly stable picture in the proportion of Child Protection Plans involving sexual abuse, alongside some variation in completion of exploitation tools. Service-level action plans are addressing those gaps, while further work will test whether definitions, recording and risk flags accurately reflect children's experiences.

2.2.7 Provide effective local assurance: use multi-agency scrutiny, case audit and challenge to establish whether agencies identify exploitation early, understand group-based offending, listen and respond to children and survivors and pursue protective and disruptive action.

2.2.7.1 KCC and partnership response: Kent leads multi-agency audit, thematic review, performance scrutiny and challenge, while the Learning Improvement Group monitors whether learning is implemented and improves frontline practice. The Safeguarding Partnership updated its shared CSE definition to include group-based exploitation and will use targeted multi-agency case scrutiny to test whether exploitation is identified early, children are recognised and heard as victims, information about groups, locations and networks are connected, and safeguarding and disruption activity is timely and effective.

How Kent will oversee, test and improve its response

Governance and oversight

2.2.8 KCC, Kent Police and the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board are the statutory safeguarding partners within the Kent Safeguarding Children Multi-Agency Partnership. Child exploitation is a Partnership priority and the Child Exploitation Oversight Group coordinates the strategic response. This governance provided the route through which the Partnership assessed the Casey findings, agreed improvement activity and will monitor delivery.

2.2.9 CEOG provides strategic oversight of child exploitation by bringing together senior professionals to assess emerging risks and trends, monitor performance, coordinate the partnership response, identify barriers and

escalate concerns. For the purposes of the Casey Audit, the ambition of CEOG is to ensure intelligence about victims, suspected perpetrators, peer groups, locations and networks is brought together across agencies, analysed for patterns and translated into coordinated safeguarding and disruption activity. Operational intelligence is planned to reach CEOG through the Kent and Medway Child Missing and Exploitation Tactical Delivery Group, DCSMs and CAHMs- although the group is still developing the mechanisms and structures to achieve this. Mapping of tactical groups across Police, Health, Education and other agencies is in progress and is intended to reduce duplication and strengthen the completeness and consistency of information reaching CEOG.

2.2.10 External inspection provides supporting assurance about the wider partnership approach. Ofsted's 2025 inspection identified statutory partners were engaged to positive effect when children were at risk of exploitation and recognised Kent's strong joint working with the Police. HM Inspectorate of Probation's 2021 inspection rated Kent Youth Justice partnership and service arrangements as good and specifically noted the use of DCSMs to share concerns and develop additional multi-agency responses. These findings support the value of Kent's contextual safeguarding approach, while not removing the need to test its consistency and impact through the Casey benchmarking actions.

Assurance and learning

2.2.11 The Scrutiny, Assurance and Audit Sub-group tests whether safeguarding arrangements are effective in practice through audit, thematic review and performance scrutiny. The Learning Improvement Group then oversees whether findings and recommendations are implemented and lead to changes in frontline practice. Together, they provide a route from independent challenge to demonstrable improvement.

Practice support and intelligence-sharing

2.2.12 The KSCMP supports consistent practice through the child exploitation identification tool and multi-agency procedures developed with Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership, the Kent Police intelligence portal, practitioner training and guidance covering CSE, gangs and youth violence, trafficking, modern slavery and missing children.^{[3][4]} These arrangements support recognition, referral, intelligence-sharing and coordinated intervention regardless of which agency first identifies a concern. The Partnership also responds to national policy and learning, including the proposed statutory Independent Inquiry into Grooming Gangs. Their effectiveness will continue to be tested through audit and case scrutiny.

Planned improvements

2.2.13 During 2026/27, the KSCMP will develop a multi-agency Child Exploitation Strategy and action plan; review relevant policies, procedures and definitions; strengthen responses to online exploitation and children missing from home or care; improve consistency in exploitation assessment and recording; and address adultification and victim-blaming language.

2.2.14 The Child Exploitation Oversight Group will coordinate delivery, the KSCMP Scrutiny, Assurance and Audit Sub-group will provide scrutiny and challenge, and the KSCMP Executive will oversee progress and evidence of impact. Targeted multi-agency case scrutiny will test whether information is shared effectively, children are recognised as victims, risks involving locations and networks are connected and safeguarding and disruption activity is timely.

2.3 Q3. How effectively is KCC working with Kent Police, health partners, schools, district councils, and other agencies to prevent child sexual exploitation and disrupt offending networks?

What is working

2.3.1 The evidence indicates KCC has established an active partnership arrangements with Kent Police, health, education, district and borough councils and other agencies. These arrangements connect strategic oversight through CEOG with operational intelligence and action through the Child Missing and Exploitation Tactical Delivery Group, DCSMs, CAHMs and individual children's plans. External inspection findings provide supporting assurance about effective multi-agency working, whilst also identifying KCC's internal assurance mechanisms are informative and supporting of best practice. However, the Casey benchmarking also identifies areas where effectiveness requires further testing, particularly whether information-sharing agreements work consistently in practice, whether victim and suspect data is sufficiently connected and analysed, and whether disruption activity can be evidenced as timely and effective.

What still needs testing

2.3.2 The detailed Casey benchmarking findings and KCC responses are set out under Q2. Together with the partnership arrangements described above, they provide the evidence base for assessing effectiveness under Q3: whether information is connected and analysed, intelligence-sharing works consistently, children are recognised and heard as victims and safeguarding and disruption activity is timely and effective.

2.4 Q4. What is KCC's assessment of the prevalence, patterns and risk factors associated with child sexual exploitation and group-based offending in Kent, and what emerging trends are being monitored?

Overall assessment

2.4.1 KCC's assessment is that child sexual exploitation remains a significant but incompletely measured safeguarding risk affecting a relatively small and highly vulnerable cohort. Recorded referrals, missing episodes, known

investigations and risk flags provide an indication on the cohort of children known or suspected to be sexually exploited rather than true prevalence; they should not be treated as a complete or directly additive count because exploitation is frequently hidden, may not be disclosed or recognised and is recorded differently by different organisations.

How prevalence and risk are assessed

- 2.4.2 KCC's understanding of prevalence, patterns and risk is informed by Children's Services information, including information concerning missing children; contextual safeguarding reporting; multi-agency discussions through the Kent and Medway Child Missing and Exploitation Tactical Delivery Group; strategic oversight through the Child Exploitation Oversight Group; relevant police intelligence and investigative information shared through partnership arrangements; and developing analysis of National Referral Mechanism referrals relating to trafficking and modern slavery.

Risk factors and emerging trends

- 2.4.3 Emerging themes monitored by KCC and its partners include exploitation risks affecting some children in care who are not unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, some children in care who are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care-experienced young people; online-facilitated exploitation; repeat missing episodes; movement across district and county boundaries; and overlap between sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, trafficking, modern slavery and organised criminality. These vulnerabilities reinforce the importance of early identification, effective information-sharing and coordinated safeguarding and disruption activity.
- 2.4.4 Risk factors and indicators may include repeat missing episodes, care experience, previous abuse or neglect, family vulnerability, social isolation, online grooming, concerning peer or adult associations, criminal exploitation, trafficking and modern slavery concerns. These factors do not in themselves establish exploitation is taking place, but they may indicate increased vulnerability and the need for further professional assessment and information-sharing.
- 2.4.5 It is also important to recognise the overlap between sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, trafficking, modern slavery and organised criminality. Kent's approach therefore increasingly considers exploitation through a broader contextual safeguarding and harm-outside-the-home framework, recognising that different forms of abuse overlap.
- 2.4.6 The Casey Audit concluded national data is limited and inconsistent with limitations in available datasets likely to result in group-based offending being undercounted. Kent's benchmarking work similarly identifies the need to examine definitions, recording practices, victim and suspect information, ethnicity and nationality data, missing children, known associations, patterns of offending and survivor-informed evidence.

Headline data

- 2.4.7 In the 12 months to September 2025, KCC management information recorded 1,143 children open to Early Help with one or more extra-familial risk flags, including 648 with child sexual exploitation risks and 85 with radicalisation risks. A further 1,061 children open to Social Work had one or more extra-familial risk flags, including 505 child sexual exploitation, 366 criminal exploitation, 326 trafficking, 155 gang, 51 slavery and 39 radicalisation risks. These figures relate only to children open to the relevant KCC services during this period who had risks recorded on the respective case-management systems. They measure recorded risk flags rather than confirmed exploitation, referrals, incidents or overall prevalence. Categories overlap and must not be added together as a count of unique children. The figures also exclude Youth Justice prevention and diversion activity recorded on CorePlus, although there is likely to be substantial overlap with children open to Social Work. Most children with a recorded risk were aged 15–17. Recorded child sexual exploitation risk was higher among females, while criminal exploitation, gang and radicalisation risks were more frequently recorded among males.
- 2.4.8 Kent Police data for Kent and Medway recorded 2,030 non-familial child sexual abuse or exploitation offences in the same period, 38% of which had an online-related element. Within this total, 123 were recorded as CSE-related offences and 40% of those had an online-related element. The reported charge rate was 18% across all non-familial offences and 33% for CSE-related offences, with higher rates for online-related offences. These figures also require caution because the relationship field is non-mandatory, depends on officer or staff recording, and the non-familial category includes cases where the relationship is unknown.

Safeguarding risk and criminal evidence

- 2.4.9 Safeguarding action does not require proof that a criminal offence occurred. Practitioners assess indicators, patterns and information from different sources to decide whether a child may be at risk and what protective action is needed. This assessment may identify a credible risk of exploitation without establishing whether the harm is sexual, criminal or both, whether it involves one person or a group, or who is responsible.
- 2.4.10 A criminal investigation applies a different evidential test. Intelligence and safeguarding concerns may justify enquiries, protection and disruption, but a prosecution requires admissible evidence capable of proving a specific offence against an identified defendant beyond reasonable doubt. The absence of that level of evidence does not mean no safeguarding risk exists or agencies should take no action.
- 2.4.11 An illustrative case example:

A teenager is repeatedly missing from home and school, returns late at night intoxicated, has expensive clothing they cannot explain and is seen travelling in vehicles unknown to their parents or carers. No single indicator proves exploitation, but together they would create a significant concern the child may be being groomed, coerced or exploited. This would warrant prompt assessment, information-sharing and protective action.

The indicators would not, by themselves, establish whether the exploitation was sexual, criminal or both; whether it involved one person or a wider network; or whether there was sufficient evidence to prove a criminal offence. Agencies would therefore safeguard the child while developing a fuller understanding through the child's account, information from family and professionals, peer and location mapping, digital or financial information, partner intelligence and, where appropriate, criminal investigation.

In Kent, concerns about the wider context could be considered through a District Contextual Safeguarding Meeting. Partners would share intelligence, map relevant peer groups, locations and networks and coordinate proportionate prevention and disruption activity. At the same time, the child would receive an individual assessment and safeguarding response, with agreed actions recorded in and aligned with their existing plan. If the contextual risks were particularly complex or affected an identified group of children, a Complex Adolescent Harm Meeting could also be considered.

Remaining evidence gaps

2.4.12 KCC and its partners have established mechanisms for monitoring risk, but the overall prevalence picture remains developing. Continued improvement is required in intelligence submissions, recording, the monitoring of National Referral Mechanism information, data quality and multi-agency analysis so emerging patterns affecting children, suspected perpetrators, locations and networks can be identified at the earliest opportunity.

2.5 Q5. Has the UK's departure from the European Union had any impact on safeguarding, intelligence-sharing, or partnership arrangements relevant to tackling child sexual exploitation and trafficking, and if so, how have these challenges been mitigated locally?

Overall assessment

2.5.1 The available evidence does not indicate significant disruption to Kent's principal local safeguarding and partnership arrangements following the UK's departure from the European Union. It does, however, identify limitations in some international information-sharing routes. KCC cannot make a comprehensive assessment of changes to cross-border law-enforcement or

immigration arrangements and its Serious Organised Crime Team does not have a directly comparable pre- and post-Brexit baseline. The evidence therefore supports a cautious conclusion: domestic safeguarding arrangements remain in place, while some international information-sharing has become more limited and fragmented.

- 2.5.2 Local intelligence-reporting processes continued to be reviewed and refreshed, including replacement of the previous KSCMP and Kent Police CSE and CCE reporting portal with a new intelligence-reporting form intended to improve the quality and relevance of exploitation-related intelligence.

Identified impact

- 2.5.3 There is, however, evidence from KCC's Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children's Service that some aspects of international information-sharing have become less integrated and slower. Before the UK left the EU, information held on Eurodac, the EU biometric database, could be requested through the Home Office's Third Country Unit. Where received, this information could assist age-assessment decisions and related proceedings. Following the UK's departure, new Eurodac requests can no longer be made through the previous route. KCC may instead approach European immigration authorities or embassies directly, but responses are reportedly limited and there is no basis upon which KCC can require them to respond.
- 2.5.4 This does not establish a direct increase in CSE or trafficking risk attributable to Brexit, but it demonstrates some international information-gathering routes have become more limited. In certain circumstances, this may reduce access to information relevant to understanding the identity, age, movement and vulnerability of unaccompanied children.

Local mitigation and monitoring

- 2.5.5 Local mitigation centred on maintaining strong domestic partnership working, using established safeguarding and intelligence routes, documenting limitations where overseas information cannot be obtained and continuing liaison with Kent Police, the Home Office, immigration services and other relevant agencies. KCC and its partners will continue to monitor changes in trafficking routes, victim profiles, international information flows and cross-border arrangements that may affect the identification and safeguarding of vulnerable children.

Questions primarily for Kent Police

- 2.6 **Q1: What is Kent Police's current assessment of the extent, nature and impact of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse in Kent?**

- 2.6.1 Kent Police treats all child sexual exploitation (CSE) as serious crime. We have dedicated Missing Child Teams and a specialist CSE Taskforce, bringing together safeguarding, investigation, intelligence and analysis to identify exploitation, protect children and pursue offenders. This includes cases involving connected or organised offending, multiple victims, or multiple suspects.
- 2.6.2 Recorded offences alone do not show the full scale of group-based CSE. A consistent national definition and distinct classification have only recently been introduced, meaning older cases may be recorded under sexual offences, safeguarding, intelligence or missing-person records. Kent Police therefore uses specialist case reviews and analytical support to identify relevant reports and investigations.
- 2.6.3 Kent Police has reviewed all CSE cases identified as potentially meeting the nationally agreed definition. Cases assessed as group-based CSE receive independent specialist oversight and governance. There are currently thirteen active group-based CSE cases. A further four cases have resulted in criminal charges and remain subject to ongoing police activity.
- 2.6.4 The CSE Taskforce and analysts bring together information about children at risk, suspected offenders, locations, and connected incidents. This helps Kent Police and its partners identify links that may not be apparent when reports are considered separately. This information is then used to assess the threat and risk and develop a multi-agency response.
- 2.6.5 The impact of CSE cannot be underestimated. Children do not always disclose exploitation directly. Warning signs can include going missing, changes in behaviour, substance use, offending, unexplained gifts, online contact or associations with concerning adults or locations. Grooming, coercion, fear, dependency, and trauma can affect how a child understands the abuse or engages with services. Returning to an offender, withdrawing an account or declining support does not make the risk less serious. That is why Kent Police work with partners to develop a shared understanding of the extent of CSE, this work is led by the Kent Safeguarding Children's Multi-Agency Partnership.

2.7 Q2. How is Kent Police identifying, investigating and disrupting group-based child sexual exploitation, and what outcomes have been achieved for victims and communities?

- 2.7.1 The CSE Taskforce provides specialist support to police teams and partner agencies. It brings together investigation, intelligence and analysis to identify connections between children, suspected offenders, locations, vehicles, online accounts, and incidents.

- 2.7.2 Analysts check recording accuracy and identify repeated names, locations, and links across reports. Investigators use this information to decide the appropriate safeguarding, investigative or disruption response. The Taskforce also oversees active group-based CSE investigations and draws on external expertise where needed.
- 2.7.3 In its 2025 thematic inspection, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) identified Kent as an example of good practice. It highlighted the CSE Taskforce, Kent's correct use of the group-based definition, and the value of dedicated exploitation teams in supporting investigators and improving investigations.
- 2.7.4 This builds on the force's earlier child protection improvement work, including the introduction of the CSE Taskforce, revised child exploitation procedures, improved recording guidance, specialist training, a partnership intelligence portal and strengthened governance.
- 2.7.5 Investigations are child-centred and offender-focused. Officers keep an open mind, test assumptions, pursue reasonable lines of enquiry, speak with the child and relevant witnesses, consider evidence-led investigations, and use police powers or civil orders to prevent further harm.
- 2.7.6 Where the pattern, scale or harm indicates organised or connected offending, Kent Police uses serious and organised crime processes. These provide structured assessment, specialist oversight, intelligence development, cross-force working and proactive disruption.
- 2.7.7 The response is not limited to prosecution. Safeguarding measures, civil orders, warning notices, action against locations and activity targeting those who facilitate offending may all be used to reduce risk. Police and partners consider whether the child is safer, whether support is in place and whether action has reduced the opportunity for further offending.
- 2.7.8 Operation Makesafe is an established example of Kent's preventative and partnership approach. Kent led the model for several years, working with hotels and other businesses to improve their ability to recognise and report exploitation. The national CSE Taskforce later assumed responsibility and relaunched Operation Makesafe as a national disruption approach. Kent continues to use it locally through joint work involving Public Protection, Strategic Prevention, community safety, licensing, trading standards, and businesses.
- 2.7.9 This preventative work also includes the development of a diversionary programme and Child Centred Policing Team (CCPT) workbooks that educate young people who have demonstrated harmful sexual behaviour. These provide practical tools to support consistent intervention and reduce the risk of further harm.

2.7.10 Kent Police has developed a communications campaign to raise awareness among children and young people. It is informed by youth engagement groups and themes identified in current group-based CSE investigations. The campaign will run on social media platforms identified as being used to enable exploitation.

2.7.11 Kent has also invested in workforce capability. The Robin and Molly immersive training product was developed with the University of Kent to help officers and staff recognise exploitation, understand the effects of trauma and apply a child-centred, suspect-focused response. It forms part of the force's continuing professional development programme and Public Protection improvement work. A condensed e-learning package also provides awareness training for staff outside specialist teams.

2.7.12 As a result of these strengthened arrangements, Kent Police has secured positive investigative, safeguarding and criminal justice outcomes in serious and complex group-based CSE cases.

2.8 Q3: What action has Kent Police taken in response to the Casey National Audit, and what changes have been made to strengthen the identification, investigation and prosecution of group-based child sexual exploitation?

2.8.1 Kent Police reviewed its position against the Casey National Audit and the subsequent national policing recommendations. This work builds on an established programme of improvement rather than representing a new starting point.

2.8.2 Before the Casey Audit, Kent had already introduced the CSE Taskforce, revised its child exploitation standard operating procedures, strengthened data-quality assurance, adopted the nationally agreed group-based definition and developed intelligence and partnership arrangements to improve the identification of connected offending. The history and governance of this work are recorded through the Kent Police governance and accountability framework.

2.8.3 Kent has reviewed all cases identified as potentially meeting the nationally agreed definition, considering the recorded circumstances and available intelligence rather than relying solely on historic classifications. Cases meeting the definition receive specialist oversight and are progressed through appropriate investigative and safeguarding arrangements. The CSE Taskforce and analysts check recording requirements and oversee active group-based investigations. The force also uses the Hydrant CSE problem-profile template, case reviews, crime data, intelligence, and partner information to assess the local threat.

2.8.4 Kent Police has introduced a dedicated victim and survivor strategy that complements the national strategy. It sets clear expectations for trauma-informed contact, informed choice, access to support and transparent

decision-making. Officers and staff must challenge adultification, victim-blaming and any suggestion that an exploited child has made a free or informed lifestyle choice. Kent Police has also commissioned a bespoke support service for victims and survivors.

- 2.8.5 The Casey findings reinforced the need to treat group-based CSE as serious and organised crime where the pattern, scale, risk or harm meets the relevant threshold. Kent Police uses the Hydrant Programme CSE problem-profile template, case reviews, crime data, intelligence, and partner information to assess the local threat.
- 2.8.6 Kent's operational arrangements connect specialist CSE oversight with established intelligence, tasking, investigation, and disruption processes. Kent has also contributed to national practice: its data-quality work was shared with the Hydrant Programme, and the force has supported other forces by sharing its approach. The national thematic inspection identified Kent's case-review arrangements and use of the agreed definition as good practice.
- 2.8.7 Operation Makesafe provides a clear example of local practice shaping the national response. Kent chaired the national working group which developed the model before responsibility passed to the national CSE Taskforce. The approach has since been relaunched nationally with common materials and expectations for police and business partners.
- 2.8.8 Kent has made a similar contribution to the policing response to online child sexual abuse. The Kent Internet Risk Assessment Tool (KIRAT) was developed to identify suspects involved in indecent image offending who are most likely also to present a risk of contact sexual offending against children. It supports the prioritisation of investigative activity and the effective use of specialist resources. Research has supported its wider application, including international use.
- 2.8.9 KIRAT remains part of the national policing response. The 2026 HMICFRS spotlight report recommended that all forces use KIRAT alongside the national prioritisation tool when assessing referrals involving adult and child suspects. Kent applies KIRAT within its online child sexual abuse procedures, supported by specialist oversight and professional judgement.
- 2.8.10 Training and professional development have been strengthened through Robin and Molly, CSE continuing professional development events, specialist investigative guidance, and the application of investigative habits. These arrangements reinforce the need to hear the child's voice, pursue witnesses and evidence, consider evidence-led prosecutions and use disruption powers to prevent further harm.
- 2.8.11 Kent Police is promoting the national 'I Am Ready' campaign, which enables victims and survivors to ask for previously closed cases to be reopened. Bespoke guidance has been developed for relevant police departments, setting out clear referral and signposting routes.

2.8.12 Kent's approach has been positively recognised through both the national child protection improvement activity and the HMICFRS group-based CSE thematic inspection. The force continues to support national improvement while maintaining a clear focus on local delivery: recognising exploitation early, bringing information together, safeguarding children and directing investigative and disruption activity towards those responsible for the harm.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Overall, the available evidence provides reasonable assurance KCC and its partners established statutory, strategic and operational arrangements to identify and respond to child sexual exploitation, group-based child sexual abuse, serious organised crime, trafficking and modern slavery. This is particularly so in relation to matters brought to the multi agencies' knowledge. These arrangements include prevention and early intervention, statutory assessment and planning, contextual safeguarding forums, operational and strategic oversight, practitioner tools, training and intelligence-sharing. Positive inspection findings support key aspects of the approach.

3.2 Kent's experience is consistent with the national picture of exploitation often being hidden and the prevalence and impact cannot yet measured comprehensively. The Casey benchmarking identifies areas where information-sharing, recording, analysis and disruption activity require further testing. The National Inquiry into Grooming Gangs will inform Working Together to Safeguard Children (WTSC) 2028, but in the meantime the WTSC 2027 is due to be published by around December 2026 which is likely to indicate more robust data collation and practice guidance in working with risks outside the home, exploitation. Kent will respond to WTSC 2027 to ensure data points and practice are updated accordingly.

3.3 KCC and its safeguarding partners will implement the Casey actions, develop the multi-agency Child Exploitation Strategy and action plan, and strengthen the evidence used to assess the effectiveness and impact of the local response.

4. Recommendation:

4.1 Members are asked to note the assurance provided by the established statutory, operational and partnership arrangements; note the limitations in current prevalence and impact data; and endorse continued oversight of the Casey benchmarking actions, the multi-agency Child Exploitation Strategy and action plan, and targeted case scrutiny through the KSCMP governance structure.

5. Appendices

Appendix 1: Statutory safeguarding frameworks

5.1 The principal statutory safeguarding responsibilities relevant to this report are summarised below.

- 5.1.1 **Children Act 1989, section 17 — children in need.** KCC must safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need within its area and, so far as consistent with that duty, promote their upbringing by their families by providing services appropriate to assessed needs.
- 5.1.2 **Children Act 1989, section 47 — enquiries concerning significant harm.** Where KCC has reasonable cause to suspect a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, it must make, or cause to be made, the enquiries necessary to decide whether action is required to safeguard or promote the child's welfare.
- 5.1.3 **Children Act 2004, section 11 — safeguarding in the exercise of functions.** KCC must make arrangements to ensure its functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.
- 5.1.4 **Children Act 2004, sections 16E–16K — local safeguarding partnership arrangements.** KCC, Kent Police and the Kent and Medway Integrated Care Board are the statutory safeguarding partners. They must make and publish arrangements to work together, with relevant agencies, to safeguard and promote children's welfare, identify and respond to children's needs, scrutinise the effectiveness of local arrangements, and arrange reviews of serious child safeguarding cases where appropriate.
- 5.1.5 **Working Together to Safeguard Children.** This statutory guidance explains how safeguarding partners and relevant agencies should work together, including strategic leadership, information-sharing, multi-agency practice, independent scrutiny, serious incident notification and learning from reviews.
- 5.1.6 **Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, sections 26 and 36–38 — Prevent and Channel.** Section 26 requires KCC, when exercising its functions, to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism. Sections 36–38 provide for local multi-agency Channel arrangements to assess vulnerability, decide whether voluntary support should be offered, coordinate an appropriate support plan and keep progress under review. Prevent is the safeguarding programme concerned with identifying and supporting people who may be susceptible to radicalisation; Channel is the voluntary multi-agency process through which individual needs and risks are assessed and tailored support may be agreed.
- 5.1.7 **Crime and Disorder Act 1998, section 17 — prevention of crime and disorder.** KCC must exercise its functions with due regard to their likely effect on crime and disorder, substance misuse, reoffending and serious violence, and do all it reasonably can to prevent these harms.

- 5.1.8 **Serious Crime Act 2015 — organised crime and child exploitation.** The Act provides powers and measures supporting the prevention and disruption of serious and organised crime, including activity connected with child sexual exploitation and organised criminal networks.
- 5.1.9 **Modern Slavery Act 2015 — slavery, trafficking and exploitation.** The Act establishes offences and protective and preventative measures concerning slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour and human trafficking. It also provides the statutory framework for identifying and notifying potential victims and supporting coordinated safeguarding and disruption activity.

Appendix 2 References and resources

5.2 ^[1] See [Partnership Priorities and Strategic Plan - Kent Safeguarding Children Multi-Agency Partnership](#)

5.3 ^[2] 'It was Hard to Escape' was a review which examined serious incidents involving adolescents who had died or been seriously harmed where criminal exploitation was a feature, including county lines activity. The national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel concluded that children involved in criminal exploitation were primarily victims of abuse and exploitation, even when they appeared to be involved in offending behaviour. For a link to the full report, click [here](#).

5.4 ^[3] For more information, please click [here](#).

5.5 ^[4] E-learning materials are free to use and can be accessed [here](#). Training and events are [here](#) and factsheets can be accessed [here](#).

6. Key sources:

- 6.1 Children Act 1989;
- 6.2 Children Act 2004;
- 6.3 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015;
- 6.4 Crime and Disorder Act 1998;
- 6.5 Serious Crime Act 2015;
- 6.6 Modern Slavery Act 2015;
- 6.7 *Working Together to Safeguard Children*;
- 6.8 Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026;
- 6.9 Youth Justice White Paper, *Cutting youth crime, changing young lives*;
- 6.10 Ofsted inspection of Kent children's services 2025;
- 6.11 HM Inspectorate of Probation inspection of Kent Youth Justice 2021;

- 6.12 Casey National Audit on group-based child sexual exploitation;
- 6.13 KCC management information to September 2025; and
- 6.14 Kent Police data for Kent and Medway to September 2025.