

Independent assurance review of the effectiveness of multi-agency responses to child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester



Part Two

The review into historic safeguarding
practices in the borough of Oldham

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Chapter 1. Key findings

- 1.1. In November 2019, the then leader of Oldham Council, Sean Fielding, and Henri Giller, the chair of Oldham Safeguarding Partnership, wrote jointly to the Mayor of Greater Manchester and the Greater Manchester Safeguarding Standards Board's independent chair Jane Shuttleworth, to request that a review into safeguarding practices in the borough of Oldham be combined with the independent review team's assurance work.
- 1.2. In summary, our terms of reference required us to provide assurance on the following matters:
 - The risks posed to children from local shisha establishments during 2011–14.
 - The nature and extent to which adults had inappropriate access to children and young people resident in children's homes in Oldham, putting them at risk of harm, during 2011–14.
 - The nature and extent of the use of local taxi services to access children and young people for the purposes of sexual exploitation during 2011–14.
 - Allegations or concerns expressed in relation to specific cases.
 - The review will particularly consider complaints made in a letter by an individual complainant to the Leader of Oldham Council in November 2019, and copied to the Mayor of Greater Manchester, about the handling of her case during 2005/06.
 - The cases of known offenders previously employed within Oldham Council and the extent to which historical actions and employment records have been adequately investigated by the council.

This chapter sets out a summary of our key findings. These are covered in more detail in the respective chapters that form the body of the report.

The development of the Messenger service for children at risk of sexual exploitation in Oldham including the allegation made on social media that the authorities covered up the threat of child sexual exploitation

- 1.3. In Chapter Three we will set out in detail the development by Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police (GMP) of the Messenger service, a multi-agency partnership set up to tackle child sexual exploitation.
- 1.4. We have concluded that we have been provided with no evidence, either through our interviews or documentary review, to suggest that senior managers or councillors sought to cover up either the existence of child sexual exploitation in Oldham or the complexity involved in tackling the perpetrators.
- 1.5. Throughout the period of our review, Oldham Council (with its partners) was consistently attempting to develop best practice in addressing the threat of child sexual exploitation.
- 1.6. Specialist services for child sexual exploitation were strategically ahead of many offers available in other local authorities and demonstrate a significant investment by senior officers and councillors, alongside an aspiration for a high-quality response to child sexual exploitation. This was mirrored by GMP.
- 1.7. Progress was consistently recognised, by Ofsted in 2011 and 2015, and by a Greater Manchester Project Phoenix peer review in 2015, which acknowledged that the approach taken in Oldham was among the best it had observed in the previous 12 months of conducting peer reviews in Greater Manchester.
- 1.8. However, commendable strategic approaches did not always translate into the appropriate level of safeguarding for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation. This was evidenced by Ofsted in 2011 and 2015 and by independent audits undertaken by a consultant in 2014 and 2015.
- 1.9. Our own review of a sample of 10 complex cases of young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation during this period corroborates these findings. The quality of casework was generally very poor and characterised by a failure to appropriately initiate multi-agency child protection procedures

when these children were known to be at risk of significant harm¹. On consideration of our detailed findings, set out in the confidential appendix, Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police have agreed to review the management of these cases and consider whether any further action can now be taken in respect of the men who exploited these children.

- 1.10. We believe the evidence of poor practice we have identified was due to a structural flaw in the design of the Messenger service. For most of the period covered by our review, the Messenger service was primarily a police resource, with only one qualified social worker acting as a conduit between the specialist team and the mainstream childcare social work teams. It was these latter teams that were undertaking the assessments, safeguarding and planning. Our judgement is that these were not always undertaken to the required standard, and managers within the mainstream service were not always giving these cases sufficient oversight and direction. An independent consultant noted that, by 2015, the position in respect of assessment and planning for children at risk of exploitation had significantly improved.
- 1.11. Regular reports on the development of these services went to Oldham Council cabinet committees. The leader, chief executive, cabinet members and the opposition leader had biannual meetings to discuss safeguarding issues, including child sexual exploitation (CSE), and these meetings were also attended by senior officers. All councillors were briefed on progress on services to tackle child sexual exploitation and the council introduced a training module on child sexual exploitation for all councillors to attend as part of their safeguarding training. The local safeguarding board was also well sighted on child sexual exploitation; a subgroup of the committee received regular reports on children missing from home and the volumes of children believed to be at risk of exploitation.
- 1.12. Furthermore, there is significant evidence that the council did everything possible to publicise the threat of child sexual exploitation. The development of the Greater Manchester-based GW Theatre Company production,

¹ In January 2020 Oldham Council commissioned an independent review of 20 cases of children who went missing between 2011 and 2013. It concluded that risks may have reduced during this period in 12 of the 20 cases reviewed. In the remaining eight cases, risks either remained high, or else the information recorded on the case file did not allow the reviewer to reach a judgement. The review concluded that many agencies in Oldham were committed to assisting young people who had been missing from home and were seen to be vulnerable to child sexual exploitation during 2011–13.

Somebody's Sister, Somebody's Daughter, was rolled out to over 3,000 pupils across all schools in Oldham. The national media (ITN and BBC) were invited to film and interview staff in the Messenger service following the Rochdale trial. A publicity campaign was pursued in December 2012, recognising that public confidence could be significantly increased if partners could demonstrate, through successful prosecutions, that they were tackling the issue.

- 1.13. There is no doubt that there were, throughout this period, legitimate concerns on the part of both the council and the police that the high-profile convictions of predominantly Pakistani offenders across the country could be capitalised on by a far-right agenda and lead to the victimisation of the Pakistani community. Social cohesion and far-right activity had been a consistent focus of the public authorities in Oldham since the 2001 riots. However, it is clear from all the evidence we have seen that the council and its partners in no way avoided addressing this, and in fact saw successful disruption and prosecution as the route to winning the confidence of all communities in Oldham.

- 1.14. This is explicitly addressed by Leader A in a public statement he made on his blog in 2014:

“Anyone who shies away from accepting that in Rotherham, Oxford, Rochdale and here in Oldham – and that this particular form of abuse is predominately Pakistani men targeting white girls – is not helping the victims, and nor is it helping the Asian community at large ...

“Our own experience is that when we do see this kind of crime brought in front of the court, very shortly afterwards far right groups will jump on it to try and tar a whole community. That, however, isn't an excuse not to do something – it's actually even more of a reason to ensure that we act. If we don't tackle wrongdoing, we give more oxygen to those who seek to gain politically by accusing those in authority of cover-ups and failures. You can't beat that world view with more cover-ups. You beat it with honesty and by acting responsibly.”

The review team believe this contemporaneous record clearly refutes the suggestion that Leader A had any intention to protect those perpetrators from the Pakistani community who were exploiting children in Oldham. Quite the contrary, this demonstrates his determination to address the issue publicly and head on.

Allegations made on social media about the risks posed to children from local shisha establishments during 2011–14

- 1.15. In Chapter Four, we have set out in detail the approach taken by Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police to the potential threat presented by shisha bars² and unlicensed premises in general in the borough. We have concluded that we have been provided with no evidence either through our interviews or review of documents and emails to suggest that senior managers or councillors sought to cover up either the existence of shisha bars or the potential threat they presented in respect of child sexual exploitation.
- 1.16. Both Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police were aware of the potential threat presented by shisha bars and cafes by the end of 2010. Numerous patrols and intelligence reports had linked the operation of shisha bars with vulnerable young people and, specifically, young women who were known to be at risk of sexual exploitation. These threats continued until mid-2013; however, by the end of that year, most shisha bars had closed and subsequent joint operations in 2014 did not highlight any ongoing concerns in respect of shisha bars.
- 1.17. From 2011 to 2013, both the council and Greater Manchester Police collaborated to disrupt the shisha bar business model and deployed a range of multi-agency operations, including the police, fire safety and environmental health, to achieve this. We believe this model of disruption was advanced for the period and was not without impact. While robust action was taken to close some of the shisha bars, this was not always achievable given the legislation in place at the time³. The council recognised these limitations and took a proactive role in seeking to amend legislation that was passing through Parliament at the time.

² A shisha bar, or a hookah lounge, is a place where customers go to smoke shisha. This flavoured tobacco is smoked through a pipe, and it can be shared by multiple people.

³ There has since been an amendment to the Sexual Offences Act 2003 to enable premises to be closed where there is evidence that they have been used, or are likely to be used, for activities relating to child sex offences.

- 1.18. In early 2013, Chief Inspector A was sufficiently concerned to raise the threat of shisha bars at the Oldham Safeguarding Children Board, explaining that they could potentially be locations for child sexual exploitation. In mid-March 2013, in an emailed response to a query from an Oldham Council executive director, the chief inspector stated in respect of shisha bars that the risks around child sexual exploitation “are massive”. In the email, subsequently leaked to the BBC, Chief Inspector A concluded that the premises posed a significant safeguarding risk. This leak caused significant consternation at the highest levels of the council and Greater Manchester Police, with concern expressed as to the detailed information the journalist had on shisha bars. On 1 July 2013, the Greater Manchester Police press officer informed the Oldham Council press office that a BBC journalist (Journalist A), had approached them and asked for a comment in respect of the “shisha bar story”. On 1 July 2013, the senior communications officer from Greater Manchester Police approached a police sergeant in the Oldham division for an up-to-date position on shisha bars so that they could respond to the BBC. The sergeant replied on 3 July:

“There has been no evidence to support claims of sexual exploitation in Shisha Bars to my knowledge. I did a lot of work around these premises when I had responsibility for the town centre. There was one or two pieces of intelligence in relation to one Shisha bar which suggested that Messenger subjects visited there. On every occasion when we visited these premises the only issue which came to light was smoking inside the premises and health and safety issues. I worked closely with all partner agencies and also worked with [an analyst] from the CRU [central referral unit] at [Oldham Council]. She too reviewed all the evidence in relation to one particular premises as we had a couple of issues in relation to ASB [antisocial behaviour] at one bar, and there were no offences and very little to support ASB. [A sergeant] and myself have visited these premises, time and time again, in order to establish if there were any issues for the Police.

“On most of the occasions I found students (of college age) using these premises to merely socialise and smoke Shisha, which is a matter for Environmental Health.”

The review team believe this provides contemporaneous evidence that the message subsequently released to the BBC was not deliberately ‘spun’ to downplay the threat presented by shisha bars but represented the view of police officers in the district at the time.

- 1.19. A press release by Greater Manchester Police, agreed by Oldham Council, was issued to the BBC in July 2013. This set out a realistic appraisal of the potential risks as follows:

“The main point is the one about CSE [child sexual exploitation] and possible grooming going on at these premises. From the report you’ve seen, you’ll see there are only two pieces of intelligence Greater Manchester Police has ever received about possible sexual exploitation – enforcement action was taken but there was no evidence to substantiate these pieces of intelligence. I would also add there has been no crimes reported to Greater Manchester Police about CSE at these private premises. That is not to say that CSE is not taking place, but rather that we have only two pieces of intelligence to suggest it might have done and nothing to substantiate that being the case.”

- 1.20. We believe this is a proportionate description of what the agencies believed was happening on the ground at that time. While there had been, during the period 2011 to 2012, several intelligence submissions in respect of shisha bars and evidence of young people at risk of child sexual exploitation attending these premises, at the time of the press release the description was a proportionate statement of what was known and the potential risks these premises presented. This position was sustained throughout exchanges with the BBC in the next few months until the story was finally broadcast in February 2014.
- 1.21. We have seen no evidence to suggest the messaging was to protect Oldham Labour Party or that this direction was specifically led by local politicians, including Leader A. Furthermore, we have found no evidence that the individuals running the shisha bars had any connections with Oldham Labour Party. There was, however, a strong belief held at a senior level by both Greater Manchester Police and Oldham officers, also shared by politicians, that the threats presented by shisha bars might be exaggerated by the media and used by far-right interests to promote their agenda. Some of our interviewees have also pointed out that this messaging may also have been motivated by a concern about minimising adverse publicity about the town when its strategy was to attract inward investment and regeneration.
- 1.22. We have found no evidence that Journalist A, or the BBC, colluded with the council in not highlighting the potential threat presented by shisha bars. Quite to the contrary, we have seen clear evidence that Journalist A challenged the position held by both Oldham Council and Greater

Manchester Police, and continued to investigate the story, which was eventually broadcast by the BBC.

- 1.23. In October 2014, Ofsted undertook a thematic inspection of Oldham Council's approach to child sexual exploitation. Ofsted concluded under the 'prevention' theme that this was an area of strength for Oldham. Inspectors found that there was clear strategic leadership by the council at both member and senior manager level, and this was well supported by good partnership working with a range of partners, particularly the police. Under the 'prosecution' theme, Ofsted found evidence that both the police and council actively disrupted the activities of grooming gangs and closed down, or mitigated the risks of, dangerous places – shisha bars, takeaways, etc. There was evidence that perpetrators were caught and prosecuted, although Ofsted picked up concerns about the slowness of prosecutions and lack of local engagement by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). We have not identified any evidence to contradict this assessment.
- 1.24. Nonetheless, we have found that a small number of children who were known to be sexually exploited were visiting shisha bars throughout 2011, 2012 and 2013. For most of this period, the specialist Messenger team set up to tackle child sexual exploitation did not participate in the disruption activities, which fell largely on the council's licensing officers and the Greater Manchester Police town centre 'street safe' team. Furthermore, the intelligence links between these disruption operations and the Messenger team were insufficiently robust. Intelligence items that could have supported the prevention and detection of child sexual exploitation were not always channelled to the officers charged with tackling this. This has been acknowledged by Greater Manchester Police in its own internal review⁴ of its approach to shisha bars at the time. The force's report notes that frequently intelligence logs were not appropriately linked to Operation Messenger when they contained intelligence relating to vulnerable children visiting shisha bars.
- 1.25. The Greater Manchester Police internal review identified that the Messenger team was insufficiently resourced during this period to undertake proactive operations. Nonetheless, we were concerned to note that specific children as young as 13 and 14, who were known to be sexually exploited, were visiting

⁴ Review of Greater Manchester Police's response to allegations of child sexual exploitation in shisha bars in Oldham 2011–2014 and involving private hire drivers employed by Telecars 2008–2010. Greater Manchester Police Major Crime Review Unit, October 2020.

these premises in 2011, and the same children were still visiting them in 2013. This points to a weakness in the multi-agency approach to safeguarding these children.

Allegations made on social media about the nature and extent to which adults had inappropriate access to children and young people resident in children's homes in Oldham, putting them at risk of harm during 2011–14

- 1.26. In Chapter Five, we have set out in detail the approach taken by Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police to the potential threat presented to children and young people in residential care homes in Oldham. We have concluded that we have been provided with no evidence, either through our interviews or documentary review, to suggest that there was widespread exploitation of children in residential settings in Oldham. There is evidence that some children in residential settings were being exposed to child sexual exploitation. Some of these children had suffered this abuse prior to their admission. There is also evidence that some children who had not been exposed to sexual exploitation were drawn into it through the encouragement of other residents. However, the evidence suggests that residential staff worked in a professional and supportive way with these children to win their trust and protect them, as far as possible, from further abuse. In many instances these interventions were successful. On other occasions these attempts were frustrated. We have seen evidence that, in some of these intractable cases, Oldham Council would use secure accommodation to protect the child.
- 1.27. In 2007, Oldham Council introduced an innovative approach by developing a specialist residential care facility, Rivendell House, for young women at risk of child sexual exploitation. Investment was put into this facility with police, health and social care teams providing a multi-agency targeted approach to young people placed at Rivendell House. We have heard from previous managers and staff that this approach worked well in the first 12 months and the residential team was well supported by the police officers in the community and regular meetings with the Messenger service. After 12 months the funding was reduced, and the staff we interviewed believed they became less effective. By 2010, Rivendell was no longer a specialist facility. While there was some agreement that there were some benefits from this

role, its location was not ideal and accommodating several young people who were already involved in child sexual exploitation could attract unwanted attention from abusers. It was decided that Rivendell should revert to a generic registration and accommodate young people across the borough.

1.28. In 2014, serious allegations were posted on social media by a former residential worker, suggesting that in 2010 Pakistani men would drive round and round waiting for girls to come out from Rivendell children's home. The complainant stated that the staff were *"not allowed to detain the girls"*. The former worker reported passing information to the police and the local safeguarding children board (LSCB) but that nothing was done about it. Oldham Council commissioned an independent consultant, Consultant A, to investigate these allegations. We have reviewed the consultant's report and we have also interviewed the consultant at length. Consultant A concluded that the children's home staff and others who were part of the multi-agency child sexual exploitation plans were active and persistent in supporting the young women and there was no basis for saying that child sexual exploitation was not recognised or dealt with by the police in Oldham during this period. These conclusions agree with our findings. Furthermore, the residential staff and managers we interviewed completely disputed the allegations and asserted that their whole way of working was about confronting these men and discouraging the young people from going with them.

1.29. Ofsted inspected the quality of care provided at Rivendell on 12 occasions between 2009 and 2015. The home was consistently judged to be good and by January 2014 was consistently outstanding.

1.30. In 2014, Oldham Council commissioned another independent consultant, Consultant B, to undertake an audit of cases where the child was at risk of sexual exploitation. This consultant considered 20 cases in total, four of which were children in residential care. In three of these cases, Consultant B concluded that the plan to protect the child was appropriate. In one of these cases, the consultant commented:

"In a situation which is intractable, the police and partners are proactively pursuing all routes to improve her level of safety."

The fourth case related to a child looked after by another local authority. The child did not receive a service from the Messenger team and the consultant expressed concerns that until recently police action against a potential abuser had not been robustly pursued. Two of the cohort of 20 children had

been in residential care but had been discharged as it was perceived that being in residential care had increased the risks to them.

- 1.31. A follow-up audit was undertaken by Consultant B in 2015, this time considering 40 cases. Eight of these children were living in residential settings during the period of the audit. The consultant judged the current plans to protect these eight children to be effective and having an appropriate impact. In many of these cases Consultant B acknowledged the supportive approach of residential care staff and the disruption tactics of the Messenger team.

Allegations made on social media about the nature and extent of the use of local taxi services to access children and young people for the purposes of sexual exploitation during 2011–14

- 1.32. In Chapter Six, we have set out in detail the approach taken by Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police to the potential threat of sexual exploitation presented to children and young people by local taxi services. We have concluded that we have been provided with no evidence, either through our interviews or documentary review, to suggest that senior managers or councillors sought to cover up the potential exploitation of children by local taxi services. We have found evidence that a small number of Oldham taxi drivers had been accused of, or had been found guilty of, sexual offences against children. As we will show, the council licensing panel had previously approved several licences to individuals who had been convicted of serious sexual offences against children. The national guidance at the time was not sufficiently robust to prevent this. This serious weakness was recognised in subsequent years and the national guidance was strengthened.
- 1.33. We have been unable to validate the detailed work that Greater Manchester Police conducted in its review into taxi firm Telecars⁵ and the allegation that this company's drivers were exploiting children at the old Conservative Club.

⁵ Review of Greater Manchester Police's response to allegations of child sexual exploitation in shisha bars in Oldham 2011–2014 and involving private hire drivers employed by Telecars 2008–2010. Greater Manchester Police Major Crime Review Unit, October 2020.

Greater Manchester Police has shared with the review team its report following this investigation, in which it has concluded that there is no evidence to substantiate these allegations. We have not been provided with any evidence that would contradict this finding.

- 1.34. Following national publicity in respect of child exploitation in Rotherham, in September 2014 Oldham Council reviewed all those cases where licence holders had been accused of sexual offences. The council originally identified five drivers who had serious criminal convictions. Of these, only one was taken forward to the licensing panel and had his licence revoked. One of the remaining four went on to commit a sexual assault on a young female passenger in 2015.
- 1.35. In January 2015, a report went to the council's licensing panel. The report explained that following various investigations into child sexual exploitation across the country, the director of adult and children's services had asked for a review of licensed drivers to take place, involving anybody convicted of a sexual offence or where intelligence was held on them. The report listed nine drivers, only one of which had been convicted of offences against children. This was the one driver referred from the September 2014 report. The other eight drivers on this report had not been found guilty by a court. Of the nine cases that were put before the licensing panel, six licences were revoked or ended. One driver whose conviction had been overturned on appeal retained his licence on the same grounds on which he won his appeal. We have not seen the grounds for that appeal and therefore cannot form a judgement as to the appropriateness of that decision. Two cases do, however, give the review team grounds for concern.
 - Driver 3 had been questioned by police in relation to two separate alleged sexual assaults, three years apart, on two young female passengers. In relation to the first of these, Greater Manchester Police had supplied information to the panel that there was sufficient evidence to prosecute but the victim would not support the prosecution. In respect of the second offence, Greater Manchester Police supplied supporting evidence as follows: *"The aggrieved person would not provide a statement and just wanted to inform the police of what had happened. The driver denied any incident occurred and stated there is a cage between him and passengers in the vehicle."* Although the police took no further action, the legal advice to the panel was clear that it should make the judgement on

the 'balance of probabilities'⁶. It is our view that there were sufficient concerns presented to the panel in respect of these allegations for it to revoke Driver 3's licence.

- In the case of Driver 4, the detail of the offence is also concerning. It was alleged that the victim was sexually assaulted in his taxi and subsequently raped. No further information was supplied to the licensing panel other than that the Crown Prosecution Service had taken no further action. Given the serious nature of the offence and the involvement with a paying customer, it would have been helpful for officers to have furnished the panel with more details surrounding the circumstances that led to the allegation.

- 1.36. Although by 2015 the licensing panel was taking a more robust approach to allegations of a sexual nature against taxi drivers, this was by no means a uniform approach and a small number of drivers who had either been convicted or suspected of sexual offences were allowed to continue as licensed drivers. Furthermore, as we have indicated, one driver mentioned in the September 2014 report went on to commit a sexual assault on a young female passenger in 2015. He was subsequently convicted, and the judge queried why a licence had been granted given his previous conviction. This triggered a formal complaint to the council. The chief executive subsequently instructed officers to undertake a further review of all licensed drivers (approximately 1,300 individuals).
- 1.37. The current guidance followed by Oldham Council now recommends that nobody with a sexually related conviction or convicted of an offence against children should hold a licence. This decision can also be made based on intelligence on the balance of probability. Such matters now are delegated to the head of licensing to ensure swift action is taken to refuse such licences if an application is made. They also hold the delegated authority to immediately suspend a licence on being notified of an offence.
- 1.38. The head of licensing in Oldham Council has, in their capacity as chair of Greater Manchester Licensing Network, sought to strengthen the quality of information and intelligence shared by the police with local councils. The head of licensing formally raised the matter with the chief constable of

⁶ The test for the revocation of a driving licence is on the balance of probabilities whereas the test for a criminal conviction is "beyond all reasonable doubt".

Greater Manchester Police in 2018 but did not get a response. On sharing our indicative findings with both Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police, the chief constable of Greater Manchester Police replied to the 2018 letter and informed Oldham Council that they had commissioned a review of the content, application, and senior ownership of the force's policies on disclosure in respect of these matters.

Allegations or concerns expressed in relation to specific cases, including complaints made in a letter by 'Sophie' to the leader of Oldham Council in November 2019

- 1.39. In Chapter Eight we have set out our conclusions on allegations made in 2019 by an individual complainant, 'Sophie', to the leader of Oldham Council and copied to the Mayor of Greater Manchester. On 13 November 2019 'Sophie'⁷ wrote an 'open letter' to Leader B, who was then the leader of Oldham Council. In summary, this letter contained serious allegations that Sophie was subjected to profound sexual exploitation and that Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police failed in their duties to protect her. Sophie also complained that when these shortcomings were raised with both Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police, they failed to investigate them appropriately and denied any failures on their part.
- 1.40. In conclusion, we can confirm in respect of Oldham Council:
- There were significant opportunities missed by children's social care to intervene and put in place appropriate arrangements to protect Sophie. There were two specific incidents where there was evidence that Sophie was at risk of significant harm; this should have led to a multi-agency strategy meeting and joint police and children's social care investigation.
 - Subsequently, the chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee raised Sophie's case with Oldham Council and asked the council to let them know what steps had been taken to protect her. The council's response was inadequate. A senior manager reviewed the case file and stated in an internal email that there was *"very little if anything to*

⁷ This is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the complainant.

support ... allegations of a failures to protect". The reply to the chair of the Home Affairs select Committee stated:

"The social care records have been carefully reviewed by a Senior Officer and legal services and we do not consider that there is evidence to substantiate the claims made in Sophie's complaint. Additionally, the complaint is beyond the bounds of what would reasonably come within the complaints process both in regard to the passage of time and the litigious nature of the outcome sought."

We regard this as poor professional judgement by the senior officer and an unacceptable response to both the MP and to Sophie, given the serious failures to protect Sophie evidenced on the case file. A competent review of Sophie's file would have revealed the numerous warning signs and also that the council and Greater Manchester Police had failed to follow their own procedures in respect of protecting Sophie, who was only 12 years old at the time, from the risk of serious harm. There were at least two occasions when multi-agency child protection procedures should have been initiated and, if they had been, Sophie may have been protected from the predatory males who ended up abusing her. Furthermore, if a strategy discussion, Section 47⁸ investigation and child protection plan had been put in place, the shortcomings of earlier interventions would have been scrutinised appropriately and the decision-making in respect of a serious incident that had occurred at Oldham Police Station reviewed in depth.

- We have found no evidence that this approach was influenced by Leader A, who was the leader of the council at the time, or any other politician. It is clear from the evidence that the response was led by the senior professional responsible for safeguarding at the time, supported by the council's legal department.

1.41. In conclusion, we can confirm in respect of Greater Manchester Police:

- There were serious failures by Greater Manchester Police in its investigation of Offender E, who in 2006 groomed and sexually exploited Sophie when she was 12 years old. In our opinion there was sufficient information available to the officers investigating the series of rapes against Sophie in October 2006 to identify Offender E

⁸ When a child is suspected to be suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm, the local authority is required by Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 to make enquiries, to enable it to decide whether it should take any action to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.

as a potential threat to Sophie. We regard this as a missed opportunity. If further action had been taken it could in all probability have led to the earlier apprehension and conviction of Offender E.

- There were several failures in the subsequent investigation of the multiple rape of Sophie by several offenders in 2006. We believe there were a number of proportionate and reasonable lines of enquiry available based on Sophie's interviews to investigate these offences. While the investigating officer asserts that appropriate enquiries were conducted into the sexual assault of Sophie in a churchyard and her rape by two men, she alleged to have met at the police station, we have seen no evidence to enable us to provide assurance that this was done.
- Furthermore, Sophie also alleged that when she reported the initial crime of sexual assault at the police station she was told to come back with an adult when she was not drunk. If she had received, at that point, the appropriate response required to protect her, she would have been spared the ordeal she was subsequently subjected to. The response to Sophie by staff and police officers on duty at Oldham Police station was not considered at the time and in our view, it should have been. Although this incident and the multiple rapes were reported to Oldham Council, neither Oldham Council nor Greater Manchester Police initiated a strategy discussion that, as we have said earlier, would have ensured these shortcomings were identified and an adequate protection plan put in place around Sophie.
- In our view Greater Manchester Police has compounded these failures by presenting a less than candid approach to an enquiry by the chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee and responses to complaints made by Sophie and her husband by the Greater Manchester Police Professional Standards Branch.
- In May 2007, a man (Offender H) was found guilty and sentenced to six years' imprisonment for the rape of Sophie. During his trial, as part of his mitigation, he named two other men involved with the rapes of Sophie at Address A. This information was not followed up by Greater Manchester Police at the time. We consider this to be a further serious failure and was not considered by the professional standards investigations in 2013 or 2018. When we interviewed Sophie in 2022, she was shocked and dismayed that Greater Manchester Police had not pursued these lines of investigation and had not shared this information with her despite 10 years of her seeking answers.

- The conclusions of the professional standards branch investigation were reported back to Sophie's husband on 16 July 2013. It concluded that: *"After reviewing all the information available to me I am unable to prove that the 2006 investigation contained procedural irregularities, key evidence was ignored, and key lines of enquiry were not followed. This finding is supported by the fact the investigation resulted in a conviction and the opinion of DCI Z who has completed a review of the 2006 investigation and reports no concerns were identified."*
- We have set out in Chapter Eight the several serious failures in the 2006 investigation, and it is disappointing that the professional standards branch investigation did not acknowledge these at the time to both Sophie and her husband, nor the disclosures made by Offender H in his trial. This is all the more troubling as we know that Greater Manchester Police had commenced an internal investigatory review that concluded on 6 March 2014. This identified the serious weaknesses in the original investigation and led to a major police investigation known as Operation Solent. It is therefore clear that in early 2014 Greater Manchester Police was aware of the many serious weaknesses in the original investigation. These weaknesses were not acknowledged to Sophie or her husband at the time.
- In May 2018, the professional standards branch within Greater Manchester Police undertook a further review of complaints submitted by Sophie. We are concerned that the conclusions of both of the internal professional standards branch reviews are significantly at variance with the conclusions of Operation Solent, which candidly recognised the failures within the 2006 investigation and our own assessment of the investigation. Insufficient regard has been given to the failure of Greater Manchester Police and its partners to respond appropriately to the threat of harm presented to Sophie and a failure to follow the child protection procedures in place at the time. This lack of candour in response to Sophie's legitimate complaints is deeply concerning.

1.42. On 19 December 2019 Oldham Council commissioned independent consultants to undertake an independent review of Sophie's file. They concluded their review as follows:

"There were, in my view, missed opportunities to intervene using the child protection procedures throughout this period of intervention. I think that this was particularly the case following the referral from BAC [Brook Advisory Centre] in June 2006 and then again following the referral from the police in

November 2006 ... All of this meant that Sophie's and these escalating and linked concerns were never considered at a strategy discussion where there would almost certainly have been a more explicit pooling of information and intelligence. This would conceivably, perhaps even probably, have led to more protective action being taken."

We would concur with these conclusions and add that the multi-agency procedures are there to protect vulnerable children from sexual exploitation and the failure to follow those procedures meant that the risks to Sophie were insufficiently considered and the approach to them was inadequate. This failure has been compounded by the successive responses from Oldham Council and from Greater Manchester Police to the effect that neither Greater Manchester Police nor Oldham Council could find evidence to substantiate the complaints that Sophie had made.

- 1.43. We believe that the interventions of both the council and Greater Manchester Police fell far short of what was required to protect Sophie at the time, and these failures have been compounded by the denials that have subsequently been issued to Sophie and feed a view that both agencies were more concerned about covering up their failures than acknowledging the harm that had been done to a vulnerable young person.
- 1.44. We recommend that both Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council publicly acknowledge these serious failures and apologise to Sophie.

The cases of known offenders previously employed within Oldham Council and the extent to which the historical actions and employment records have been adequately investigated by the Council.

Offender A

- 1.45. Offender A worked for Oldham Council between 1988 and 2006. He was employed as a welfare rights officer in the welfare rights unit of the council seconded to the Oldham Pakistani Community Centre. In May 2012 he was found guilty of two rapes, aiding and abetting rape, sexual assault and trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, and sentenced to 19 years' imprisonment. In June 2012 he was found guilty of a further 30 rape charges

and was jailed for an additional 22 years. Offender A lived in Oldham and was a member of the Oldham Labour Party. We believe there were serious failings in how both the council and Greater Manchester Police investigated concerns in respect of Offender A. To avoid the risk of identifying victims of sexual offences through 'jigsaw identification' we have been unable to set out the full details of his case, but they are contained in the confidential Appendix E. However, we have set out below, in summary form, the serious failures we have identified in how the statutory agencies dealt with the allegations against Offender A. We emphasise that any conclusion that these investigations were flawed should not be taken to imply any view on the part of the review team about the guilt of Offender A in matters not already considered by the courts.

In summary, these failings were as follows:

- 1.46. In 2005, Greater Manchester Police was notified of a serious allegation of child sexual abuse perpetrated by Offender A. While the victim was an adult when she was seen by the police, the force was made aware that Offender A also potentially had contact with a young child who lived outside of Oldham. A crime report should have been submitted and updated by the responding officer in parallel with the family support investigation. We have interviewed this detective, who explained to the review team that the working practices at the time did not require her to submit a crime report. Greater Manchester Police has confirmed that this was in accordance with their policies at the time, rather than a failure on her part. Notwithstanding this explanation, the National Crime Recording Standard in place at the time required a crime to be recorded. Greater Manchester Police also failed to notify the responsible local authority for the child and to notify Oldham Council as Offender A's employer. As there had been a disclosure that Offender A potentially presented a serious risk to children, a full assessment should have been undertaken of the risks to the identified child and to any other children Offender A might have contact with. A referral to the responsible local authority should have been made, followed by a strategy discussion and Section 47 investigation. Furthermore, it was known by the police that Offender A was a council employee and insufficient enquiries were made into whether his role gave him access to vulnerable adults and children. As a welfare rights officer he would potentially have had contact with a range of vulnerable adults and their children. This matter should therefore have been referred to Oldham Council as his employer. If this had happened, it may have potentially avoided the tragic abuse of other children, set out later in this section.

- 1.47. In February 2008, Offender A was arrested for sexual assault on a child and in July of the same year was arrested on suspicion of the abduction of two other children. Neither of the two children made any complaint. No crime was recorded, and no further action taken. Oldham Council was unable to find any record of being notified of these allegations by Greater Manchester Police. The failure to record a crime does appear to be a further breach of the National Crime Recording Standard in place at the time. Furthermore, there is no evidence that Greater Manchester Police notified Oldham Council of these allegations so that it could undertake an assessment of the risks Offender A might potentially present to any children he may have contact with.
- 1.48. Rochdale Borough Council and Greater Manchester Police held a strategy discussion in August 2008 in respect of the 2008 allegations and noted the allegations of 2005. There is no indication that Rochdale Borough Council or Greater Manchester Police notified Oldham Council of this meeting. There is also no evidence that the strategy discussion considered the safeguarding of any child Offender A may still have had contact with.
- 1.49. At the end of September 2008, the Probation Service notified Oldham Council that Offender A had been charged with sexual assault. No action was taken by Oldham Council to undertake a safeguarding assessment of Offender A following this information or to liaise with colleagues in Greater Manchester Police.
- 1.50. An allegations management strategy meeting was held in Rochdale in December 2010. Oldham Council was not invited to this meeting and was not notified of the meeting until January 2011. No subsequent action was taken by Oldham Council to assess the risks that Offender A may present to any children he may have had contact with.
- 1.51. On 22 March 2011, Offender A was charged with the rape of the child first brought to the attention of Greater Manchester Police in 2005 and was remanded into custody. On 1 April, Oldham Council received a notification from the Probation Service in respect of the offences committed against this child. Given the profound child sexual abuse, this should have been a further opportunity to initiate a full assessment of Offender A's circumstances, but there is no evidence of this having occurred.

- 1.52. Later the same month, Greater Manchester Police requested copies of the files in respect of Offender A and his family. The email informed Oldham Council of the second child, first identified in 2005 and living outside the Oldham area, with whom Offender A may have had close contact. Although Offender A was now on remand in custody, this significant information should have prompted Oldham Council to commence a multi-agency strategy discussion and an assessment of the risks presented to any other children and young people Offender A had previously had close contact with. Oldham Council has been unable to locate any record to explain why this never occurred.
- 1.53. In 2012, another young woman disclosed that she had been abused by Offender A. Oldham Council was notified of these allegations by Greater Manchester Police. However, children's social care inexplicably closed the case within a few days without undertaking any assessment. Oldham Council, despite extensive searches, has been unable to locate anything further on this child and there is no evidence of any strategy discussion or assessment of either her allegations or her vulnerability. The alleged offence on this child had occurred when Offender A was employed as a welfare rights officer, although it is not known if he had been involved with the victim's family in a professional capacity. If the strategy meeting had been held, it would have presented yet another opportunity to trigger a referral to the local authority designated officer⁹ (LADO) and undertake a detailed review of Offender A's conduct during his employment. The review team have been informed that the case was discontinued by Greater Manchester Police on the basis that there was "*no realistic prospect of conviction*". This was a police decision, and the case was never discussed with the Crown Prosecution Service. Neither Greater Manchester Police nor Oldham Council was able to provide the review team with any assurance that the child's allegations and vulnerability were appropriately dealt with.
- 1.54. The review team conclude that there were serious multiple failures by both Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council to follow the procedures in place to investigate the threat Offender A presented to children. If these procedures had been followed, his offending behaviour could have been addressed at an earlier stage and potentially the abuse of his subsequent victims may have been prevented.

⁹ The LADO (local authority designated officer) is responsible for coordinating the response to concerns that an adult who works with children may have caused them, or could cause them, harm.

Offender B

- 1.55. Offender B was a co-accused of Offender A and received a nine-year prison sentence. He was not an employee of Oldham Council, but we have reviewed the response of the council to the threat he presented to children as a comparison with the approach the council took to Offender A.
- 1.56. The police alerted Oldham Council of the serious charges in respect of Offender B and requested a strategy meeting due to the children living in his household. We have seen no record of this strategy discussion, but a single-agency assessment was completed by children's social care. This was not in line with the child protection procedures at the time, which required that a Section 47 child protection investigation should have been initiated. The assessment was very limited in its content and did not consult other professionals involved with the children. This approved supervised contact between Offender B and his children. We believe the assessment should have led to a child protection conference and a child protection plan that would have monitored the welfare of Offender B's children until the conclusion of his trial.
- 1.57. We have found the assessments following Offender B's discharge to be more robust, but these also should have been placed within the multi-agency child protection framework.
- 1.58. In conclusion, while there was no evidence that Offender B ever presented a risk to his own children, the approach by the local authority should have been more rigorous and located within the child protection procedures that were in place at the time.

Offender C

- 1.59. In February 2011, Offender C was dismissed from his role as a library officer for downloading sexual images on his computer, including pictures of 'pre-teens', during working time. Oldham Council failed to make a referral to the LADO following this discovery, which would have been prudent given his role with vulnerable adults and children. Nonetheless, the information was shared with Greater Manchester Police. Greater Manchester Police declined to take

further action on the basis that the images viewed, while concerning, were not illegal.

- 1.60. As soon as Oldham Council became aware that Offender C was planning to adopt a child, they appropriately notified senior managers at the adoption agency, Bury Council. A subsequent child protection investigation undertaken by Bury Council led to Offender C being convicted for accessing serious images of child pornography.
- 1.61. Although our judgement is that it would have been prudent for Oldham Council to have notified the LADO at the time of the first incident, the review team believe that subsequent actions were appropriate.

Offender D

- 1.62. Offender D was not an employee of Oldham Council, but he was elected to the Oldham Youth Council in 2012. In 2015, he was charged with serious sexual offences and sentenced to two years in youth custody.
- 1.63. We have concluded that the required strategy discussion was delayed until March 2015, some three months after the original disclosure. We believe this was an error, and should have been followed up by a referral to the LADO, given the position of influence and trust held by Offender D. We have also identified some serious irregularities within the original police investigation that we are unable to detail here for legal reasons. Greater Manchester Police informed the review team in August 2021 it intends to address these issues. We emphasise that this should not be taken to imply any view on the part of the team about the guilt of Offender D in respect of matters not already considered by the courts.

Councillor Y

- 1.64. Councillor Y was questioned by the police in June 2007 on allegations of the rape of a young woman. The case was presented to the Crown Prosecution Service, which decided not to charge Councillor Y. Councillor Y has consistently denied the offence. We emphasise that any conclusion that the

subsequent safeguarding investigations were flawed should not be taken to imply any view on the part of the team about the guilt of Councillor Y.

- 1.65. On 10 April 2008, senior service managers in children's social care met to discuss a way forward. This had been triggered by a referral from the police the previous day. We have been unable to establish what precipitated this referral so long after the original incident as the alleged offences had been known to both the council and Greater Manchester Police for some time. On 11 April 2008, Service Manager A met with a council solicitor to consider how to proceed with an assessment of Councillor Y and the possible risk that he might pose to his own children. The child protection procedures in place at the time were not followed. A strategy meeting was not held for over 10 months and did not include all those professionals with a knowledge of Councillor Y and his family. The exclusion of the schools from the child protection process was a serious failing given that Councillor Y had children and was also a school governor. The procedures for the management of allegations against people who work with children were not followed and this was another serious failing.
- 1.66. Oldham Council has explained to the review team that the LADO processes were just being introduced across the country in 2007. However, the version of *Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children* in operation at the time was explicit in respect of the procedures that needed to be followed. Furthermore, guidance had been issued by the Government in January 2007, setting out the role of the LADO in respect of allegations of abuse made against a teacher or other member of staff or volunteer in an educational setting. Councillor Y was a school governor at the time of his arrest and concerns in respect of his treatment of a 16-year-old should have led to a full investigation of his role as a governor. This does not appear to have been done and it is concerning that neither the schools his children attended nor the ones where he was a governor were included in the assessment. Furthermore, by the conclusion of the investigation in mid-2008, there was a LADO in place, but management of allegations procedures were not initiated. We regard this as a serious failing.
- 1.67. The subsequent Section 47 assessment lacked the rigour required as it excluded key professionals and its findings were only known to a very select group of senior officers in both GMP and Oldham Council. We conclude that the concern to maintain the confidentiality of the investigation, given Councillor Y's prominent position in the council, overrode the prudent

requirement to ensure those who knew the children best were included in the assessment and could monitor any future concerns.

- 1.68. As the alleged sexual offence did not occur in Councillor Y's capacity as an elected councillor, no referral could be made to the council's standards committee in respect of the allegations against him. Councillor W advised the review team that, as a direct result of the allegation, steps were taken to remove the Labour Party whip from Councillor Y. Councillor Y resigned as a Labour councillor in March 2008 and unsuccessfully applied to be reselected as a Labour candidate in December 2009.

Councillor T

- 1.69. In September 2015, allegations were brought to Leader A, Councillor W and Chief Executive B in respect of Councillor T. These allegations were brought forward by a fellow councillor, Councillor Z. Councillor T has consistently and emphatically denied these allegations, which have been investigated by Greater Manchester Police on two occasions. The first investigation was conducted in 2015. The investigation was reopened in 2020 following a safeguarding referral from the Labour Party. Given the shortcomings in the first investigation, Greater Manchester Police conducted a second investigation. Both investigations by Greater Manchester Police resulted in a decision to take no further police action against Councillor T.
- 1.70. We have looked in detail at the allegations made to the council in 2015 and we have reviewed copies of emails between the responsible detective inspector and the chief executive. We have interviewed senior officers in Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police about the first investigation they undertook in 2015.
- 1.71. We believe there were failings in how both the council and Greater Manchester Police investigated this allegation in 2015. For legal reasons we have been unable to set out the details of these failures, but they are contained in the confidential Appendix E.
- 1.72. We have found no evidence that the failures by Greater Manchester Police and the council were politically motivated with the intention of protecting a

senior councillor from being appropriately investigated for serious allegations. Nonetheless, the failures in responding to the allegations against Councillor T contrast with the robust action taken by the council in respect of Councillor Z, who first brought the allegations to the attention of the council. He was formally advised of his safeguarding duties in writing on two separate occasions, first by the chief executive and subsequently by the executive director responsible for safeguarding. Greater Manchester Police provided the council with detailed information in respect of his complaints, which we could not see as justified nor necessary. There is also evidence that the investigating officer focused on Councillor Z as being potentially the primary instigator of these issues rather than taking further steps to investigate the allegations themselves. For these reasons, we conclude that the investigations by Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council into allegations against Councillor T fell short of what was required by the procedures in place at the time. We emphasise that our conclusion that these investigations were flawed should not be taken to imply any view on the part of the authors about the guilt of Councillor T.

The alleged victimisation of Councillor V

- 1.73. Councillor V received an email written by Chief Inspector A on the threat of shisha bars in Oldham and shared this with the chair of a charity working with young people. It has been suggested on social media that the councillor was victimised for this action. In Chapter Seven we set out our findings about this alleged victimisation.
- 1.74. Our terms of reference do not include providing assurance on the handling of standards complaints or any disciplinary action taken by the Labour Party. Nonetheless, we did seek assurance that none of the actions taken were designed to cover up the issue of child sexual exploitation or unreasonably punish any individual who had legitimately raised concerns. We have interviewed Leader A, Councillor V, the chief executive and the council monitoring officer. We also received written answers from the Police and Crime Commissioner at the time. We have reviewed the report produced by an independent law firm concerning the conduct of Councillor V as well as reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications concerning this investigation held on the various council systems between 1 January 2011 and 31 December 2014.

- 1.75. We conclude that there was a legitimate concern by both Leader A and the Police and Crime Commissioner that sensitive and confidential information had been inappropriately shared with a third party by Councillor V. We also agree with the independent investigator that had Councillor V believed the information needed to be shared with the charity then the councillor should have sought the permission of the author of the letter before doing this. We do not therefore believe that there are grounds to support the allegation that Councillor V had been victimised.

The allegation that Councillor Z was punished for being a whistle-blower

- 1.76. We have considered in detail the allegations brought forward by Councillor Z in respect of Councillor T in the confidential appendices E and F. We believe that there were failings in how both the council and Greater Manchester Police investigated that complaint. We have emphasised that any conclusion that these investigations were flawed should not be taken to imply any view on the part of the review team about the guilt of Councillor T. We have also concluded in the appendices that we have been provided with no evidence that the failures within the investigation were influenced by Leader A or any other councillor in Oldham.
- 1.77. As mentioned above, our terms of reference do not include providing assurance on the handling of standards complaints or any disciplinary action taken by the Labour Party. Nonetheless, we did seek assurance that none of the actions taken were designed to cover up the issue of child sexual exploitation or unreasonably punish any individual who had legitimately raised concerns. We have interviewed Leader A, Councillor Z, Chief Executive B and the council's monitoring officer. We have reviewed the independent report produced by an independent law firm into its investigation of two complaints that members breached the Oldham Council code of conduct. These concerned a complaint by Councillor Z about Councillor T and a complaint by Councillor T about Councillor Z. We have also reviewed all reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications concerning this investigation held on the various council systems between 20 September 2015 and 2017. We have not been provided with any evidence that either Leader A or Chief Executive B promoted the complaint submitted by Councillor T against Councillor Z.

1.78. However, we believe there were some inconsistencies and false assumptions in the independent report produced by the independent law firm. The law firm's independent investigator concluded that the conduct complained about in respect of Councillor Z occurred as part of the councillor's official duties. Official capacity is defined in the members' code of conduct and covers whenever a councillor conducts the business of the council, including the office to which the member is elected or appointed, or when they "*act, claim to act or give the impression [they] are acting as a representative of the Council*". The investigator concluded that Councillor Z was acting as a representative of the council and set out four reasons for taking this view. Having considered these reasons, set out in the confidential Appendix F, the review team are not persuaded that any of these arguments are compelling evidence that Councillor Z was acting in an official capacity. We put our concerns about these conclusions to Oldham Council, which presented them to the independent law firm. The independent law firm pointed out that there was a recognised legal uncertainty determining when the code of conduct applied¹⁰.

1.79. We sought independent legal advice from counsel on this matter and have concluded that while we remain unconvinced of the arguments put forward by the independent investigator and are surprised that they concluded that

¹⁰ The independent law firm cited the case of *R (on the application of Mullaney) v Adjudication Panel for England* [2009] EWHC 72 (Admin). <https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2009/72.html>

"We ... refer to paragraph 82 of the judgment of Charles J in the Mullaney case which recognises that in the context of determining whether the Code applies, 'there is the potential for two decision makers, both taking the correct approach, to reach different decisions'.

"Charles J goes on to state that 'In the context of judicial review this brings into play or reinforces the points that if the statutory decision makers have taken the correct approach in law their experience and knowledge as the persons chosen to be the decision makers is relevant to the irrationality argument (and indeed to arguments that they are wrong).'

"Proportionality is also likely of relevance, so an assessment whether the decision was proportionate to the aim it was seeking to achieve might be included. In this respect we again refer to paragraph 9 of the judgment of His Honour Judge McKenna in the Calver case as referred to above.

"As can be seen from [the independent investigator's] report, she provided a careful and detailed review of the information and reached a view taking the ordinary meaning of the words of the code into account. She also states that having carefully considered all of the information available to her at that time, the matter was finely balanced. This we would suggest acknowledges that there are competing views and arguments, and that the decision could have been different.

"[The review team] is of course fully entitled to reach a different view as to whether the Code applied, however that does not mean that [the investigator's] view was unreasonable in a public law sense. As per Mullaney, two decision makers can quite properly reach a different decision based on the same facts."

Councillor Z was acting in an official capacity, there are no grounds in public law to suggest this conclusion was unreasonable.

- 1.80. We have also considered, in the light of the concerns we have expressed about the conclusions of this report, whether the council could reasonably have been expected to have intervened in the process at this point. The relevant procedures are set out in the council's standards arrangements¹¹.
- 1.81. It is clear from the council's standards arrangements that the monitoring officer was obliged under the council's process, if no local resolution could be reached, to submit the investigation report to the council standards committee for consideration at that stage. It was not within the monitoring officer's remit or discretion to take a decision, in advance of the hearing, that the report might contain either inconsistencies or false assumptions, nor could a view be taken by the monitoring officer at that stage as to whether Councillor Z was acting in their official capacity, as the findings of the report suggested. This was a determination for only the standards committee to

¹¹ Oldham Council's standards arrangements state:

"6.4. At the end of their investigation, the investigating officer will produce a draft report and will send copies of that draft report to the complainant and to the subject Member, for comments. The investigating officer will take such comments into account before issuing their final report to the Monitoring Officer.

"8. Investigating Officer finding of sufficient evidence of failure to comply with the Code of Conduct Where the Investigating Officer's report finds that the Subject Member has failed to comply with the Code of Conduct, the Monitoring Officer will review the Investigating Officer's report and will then having consulted the Independent Person either send the matter for local hearing before the hearing panel or seek local resolution.

"8.1 Local Resolution

If the Monitoring Officer considers that the matter can reasonably be resolved without the need for a hearing, they will consult with the Independent Person and the Complainant and seek to agree a fair resolution. Such resolution may include the Subject Member accepting that their conduct was unacceptable and offering an apology, and/or other remedial action. If the Subject Member accepts the suggested resolution, the Monitoring Officer will report the outcome to the Standards Committee and the Clerk to the Parish Council (if appropriate) for information but will take no further action. If the Complainant or the Subject Member refuses local resolution in principle or to engage with the agreed outcome, the Monitoring Officer will refer the matter for a local hearing without further reference to the Complainant or the Subject Member.

"8.2 Local Hearing

Where, in the opinion of the Monitoring Officer, local resolution is not appropriate or the Complainant and/or Subject Member refuses to accept local resolution, then the Monitoring Officer will report the Investigating Officer's findings to the Hearing Panel which will conduct a local hearing before deciding whether the Member has failed to comply with a Code of Conduct and, if so, what action (if any) to take in respect of the Member."

make at a local hearing, based on the evidence and advice available at the hearing. The council has also pointed out to the review team that any other decision by the monitoring officer to intervene would have been ultra vires, and in breach of the council's procedures.

- 1.82. We have concluded that, while we do not agree with the conclusions arrived at in the independent report, the council was not responsible for the content of the independent investigation report, had not approved or endorsed it in any way, and was in any case not in any position to require the independent investigator to reconsider or amend their view.

Chapter 2.

Context and methodology

- 2.1. In July 2017, the BBC broadcast *The Betrayed Girls*, a documentary about child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester. In September 2017, we were commissioned by Andy Burnham, the Police and Crime Commissioner for Greater Manchester, to undertake an independent assurance exercise to explore the current and potential future delivery model of child sexual exploitation (CSE) across Greater Manchester. As part of the first workstream, a review of the decision to close down Operation Augusta (an investigation into CSE in South Manchester in 2004/05), we were required to access personal and sensitive data held by Greater Manchester Police and Manchester City Council. We were given access to the information held by Greater Manchester Police in January 2018, and to all the relevant information held by Manchester City Council in October 2018. In January 2020, GMCA published part one of our independent report, *An assurance review of Operation Augusta*.
- 2.2. In November 2019, as explained in Chapter One, the then leader of Oldham Council, Sean Fielding, and Henri Giller, the chair of Oldham Safeguarding Partnership, wrote jointly to the Mayor of Greater Manchester and the Greater Manchester Safeguarding Standards Board's independent chair, Jane Shuttleworth, to request that a review into safeguarding practices in the borough of Oldham be combined into the independent review team's assurance work.
- 2.3. The first draft of the terms of reference for the Oldham workstream was put forward on 28 November 2019. The review team met with Oldham Council on 6 December 2019 and discussed amendments, and on 9 December received additional comments from GMCA that were also accommodated. Further amendments were requested by Greater Manchester Police in January 2020 and the final version of the terms of reference was agreed by the steering group chaired by Baroness Hughes on 24 February 2020.

2.4. Our terms of reference, which are set out in full in Appendix A, required us to provide assurance on the following matters:

- The risks posed to children from local shisha establishments during 2011–14
- The nature and extent to which adults had inappropriate access to children and young people resident in children’s homes in Oldham, putting them at risk of harm, during 2011–14
- The nature and extent of the use of local taxi services to access children and young people for the purposes of sexual exploitation during 2011–14
- Allegations or concerns expressed in relation to specific cases. The review will in particular consider complaints made in a letter by an individual complainant to the leader of Oldham Council in November 2019 and copied to the Mayor of Greater Manchester about the handling of her case during 2005/06
- The cases of known offenders previously employed within Oldham Council and the extent to which historical actions and employment records have been adequately investigated by the council.

2.5. The mayor and the steering group confirmed that our review was not limited to only these aspects and that the review would follow the evidence in respect of child sexual exploitation as required. We can confirm that Oldham Council has always facilitated any additional lines of enquiry. This has included our review of the approach taken to allegations against individuals who, though not employees, held positions of authority within the council. We have also considered in detail the protection of specific children outside the core period of 2011 to 2014.

2.6. We began our review by considering the allegations made on social media. A particular website sets out a range of documentary evidence considered, which we also considered.

2.7. There are several allegations made on social media that fall outside our terms of reference and are not therefore covered in this report.

2.8. These issues include:

- The allegation of any potential links between Oldham Council and organised crime
- The allegation of safeguarding arrangements in place for mosques and madrassah teachers
- The allegation that there was impropriety by the council in the sale of property and land
- The allegation that politicians in Oldham have been complicit in postal voter fraud.

2.9. On 21 January 2020 we sent a request to Oldham Council to approach the individual who had been instrumental in posting the allegations on his website. The council contacted him on 12 February 2020. He informed Oldham Council that he would not agree to his personal data being shared with the review team. He then later posted on Facebook the following:

"If Andy Burnham's Review Team want to contact me, they can do so directly here. I am more than happy to give testimony providing 1. They contact me on Facebook and publicly address concerns regarding their so-called independence including clarifying their terms of reference 2. They agree to me providing my testimony in the Council Chambers and the exchange be available to members of the public who are allowed to attend and also live streamed to those who cannot attend I have absolutely nothing to hide and I sure as hell don't fear any paedophile protecting politicians or their Council stooges. Let's see who has been telling the bare faced lies. You know where to find me."

2.10. These conditions meant that given the confidential and sensitive nature of the information we were required to consider, the review team could not proceed to interview the individual concerned. Furthermore, none of the other individuals who had posted concerns on social media engaged with Oldham Council in respect of our review.

2.11. On 8 January 2020, the review team made their first data request to Oldham Council. This was primarily in respect of information that was already in the public domain. We received the first volume of documents on 20 January 2020 and between January and the end of March 2020 received an additional 11 volumes of data. A data processing agreement was required to facilitate the sharing of confidential and sensitive data between Oldham

Council, Greater Manchester Police and the independent review team. The agreement with Oldham Council was signed on 20 April 2020. On 2 June 2020, the review team sent a second detailed document request to Oldham Council. This was followed up on 16 June with a third document request. To demonstrate that the council had made a full disclosure, and that the review has considered all available information in respect of both its key lines of enquiry and some specific allegations (made either by interviewees or on social media), we used a typical freedom of information (Fol) request, namely: *“All reports, minutes of meetings, emails, and communications whether in electronic format or hard copy held on the various Council’s systems in respect of the following [name of subject or issue].”*

- 2.12. These additional requests were informed by the first set of interviews held by the review team. Subsequent data releases by the council raised a number of issues for the review team:
- Some of the key information had been redacted by Oldham Council, impacting on its usefulness to the review team.
 - Oldham Council informed the review team it could not release some information without the consent of the third parties concerned.
 - We were not able to consider some information as it was the subject of a live police investigation.
- 2.13. In October 2020, Oldham Council was subject to a focused visit inspection by Ofsted. We agreed a pause in the data sharing requirements for a one-month period in recognition of the demands this placed on the council’s children’s services. Further discussions were necessary with the council in relation to confidential personal information about individuals that the council brought forward to the review team. These issues were not resolved until December 2020, when we were able to give the council assurances on data protection concerns in a revised data sharing agreement. We recognise the subsequent openness and transparency of the council’s approach to the review in bringing forward any information or historic cases it had identified as relevant to the review.
- 2.14. A further complexity is that some critical information in respect of two perpetrators, Offender A and Offender B, who lived in the Oldham area, was held by Rochdale Borough Council. In March 2021, we asked Oldham for copies of this information. Oldham Council confirmed that it had no record of this information being shared with it. Oldham Council therefore

approached Rochdale Borough Council requesting this information be shared with it. In May 2021, we approached Rochdale Borough Council ourselves for this information and we informed Rochdale of our agreement to a specific data processing agreement in that regard. The review team were provided with the information Rochdale Borough Council was able to locate, towards the end of August 2021.

- 2.15. A complete list of the documentary evidence the review team considered is set out in Appendix C.
- 2.16. In total, the review team identified 72 individuals they wished to interview. These included current and former employees or councillors of Oldham Council, former and current officers from Greater Manchester Police, employees of other professional groups and a small number of individuals who had posted concerns on social media. Interviews were commenced by the review team in March 2020. The interviews were initially conducted face to face at GMCA headquarters. These arrangements were disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequently the review team conducted their interviews virtually, using Microsoft Teams video conferencing, and provided each interviewee with a set of indicative questions in advance. These arrangements worked well. The interviews were usually very lengthy, lasting between 2.5 and 3.5 hours. GMCA provided senior administrative support to take a written record of the meetings. These were then amended and validated by the interviewees before they became a part of the formal review record. A list of our respondents is set out in Appendix B. Several current and former officers of Greater Manchester Police elected to provide written evidence. A small number of former Oldham Council employees were either not contactable or declined to respond.
- 2.17. In the first six months of 2021, there was a significantly improved flow of information from Oldham Council covering the review team's requests of 2 June and 16 July 2020. Not surprisingly, on analysing the data, the review team made a small number of additional requests, which were primarily for additional specific information. Most of the information requested by the review team was received by the end of May 2021, and by the end of June 2021 the decision was taken to proceed with drafting the final report in the absence of a data processing agreement with Greater Manchester Police and the information required from Rochdale Borough Council. The review team received the final data set and the source documentation on the children's cases we wished to review in detail in July and the information from Rochdale Borough Council in August. Our report was drafted in August

2021 and provided to GMCA, Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council in early September 2021.

- 2.18. Despite considerable legal discussions, primarily in respect of the review team's work on the Rochdale workstream, it had not been possible to agree with Greater Manchester Police a data processing agreement that gave the review team access to police data that was commensurate with the access given to us on the Operation Augusta stream of work. In July 2021, on receiving our indicative findings, Greater Manchester Police did share copies of emails setting out additional evidence for the review team. Nonetheless, we were not able to review the source information held by Greater Manchester Police, and this impacted on some of the conclusions the review team were able to reach in respect of the work of Greater Manchester Police over this period and the assurance the review team could offer the mayor. On considering our emerging findings, the mayor and chief constable asked the review team to undertake a further specific assurance exercise in respect of Greater Manchester Police's investigation into potential offences committed by Offender A and the police response to potential offences reported by 'Sophie'. A data processing agreement to support this additional piece of work was agreed on 22 November 2021.
- 2.19. In November 2021, following consideration of our draft report, Oldham Council raised a concern that the publication of certain sections of the report could open Oldham Council, GMCA and the review team to legal action. Publication was delayed while GMCA took legal advice on these matters. This issue was finally resolved in January 2022 and GMCA then proceeded to issue the 'fair process' letters¹² to individuals mentioned within the report in January 2022.
- 2.20. On receipt of her fair process letter, the subject of Chapter Eight, 'Sophie', made representations in January 2022 that she had not been approached for interview by the review team. Following an initial meeting in February 2022 to establish how she wished to take the matter further, Sophie was interviewed by the review team in March 2022. In addition, she supplied a significant amount of documentary information she asked the review team to consider prior to finalising this section of the report. Sophie was supported in

¹² In advance of publication, Greater Manchester Combined Authority notified those individuals who might potentially be subject to criticism, controversy or conjecture on the publication of the report to give them the opportunity to comment on extracts of the report that were pertinent to their role.

this process by Maggie Oliver of The Maggie Oliver Foundation, which is dedicated to the support of victims and survivors, and we would recommend that Greater Manchester Police continues to develop effective links with this and other such organisations to ensure that the voices of survivors leads improvements in practice. We completed a review of all the available records held by Greater Manchester Police into the offences against Sophie in April and May 2022. We also concluded our review of the work undertaken by Greater Manchester Police on Offender A.

- 2.21. We provided a copy of our final report to GMCA, Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council at the end of May and after a second round of fair process letters the mayor published the report in June 2022.

Chapter 3.

The development of the Messenger service for children at risk of sexual exploitation in Oldham, including the allegation made on social media that the authorities covered up the threat of child sexual exploitation

Summary and conclusions

- 3.1. In this chapter we have considered the development of the specialist Messenger service for children at risk of sexual exploitation, how effective it was and the allegation that the authorities covered up the threat. Our key findings are set out in Chapter One. In summary:
- We have been provided with no evidence that senior managers or councillors sought to cover up either the existence of child sexual exploitation in Oldham or the complexity involved in tackling the perpetrators.
 - Oldham Council, with its partners, was consistently attempting to develop best practice in addressing the threat of child sexual exploitation. Specialist services for child sexual exploitation were ahead of many offers available in other authorities and evidence a significant investment.
 - Commendable strategic approaches did not always translate into the appropriate level of safeguarding for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation. This was evidenced by Ofsted in 2011 and 2015 and independent audits that were undertaken by a consultant in 2014 and 2015.
 - Our own review of a sample of 10 complex cases of young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation during this period corroborates these findings. The quality of casework by both the police and social care was generally very poor and characterised by a failure to appropriately initiate multi-agency child protection procedures when

these children were known to be at risk of significant harm. We believe the evidence of poor practice we have identified was due to a structural flaw in the design of the Messenger service.

- The council leadership, the opposition leader and all councillors were briefed on progress on services to tackle child sexual exploitation and the council introduced a training module on child sexual exploitation for all councillors to attend as part of their safeguarding training. The local safeguarding board was also well sighted on child sexual exploitation.
- There is significant evidence that the council did everything possible to publicise the threat of child sexual exploitation. There were also, throughout this period, legitimate concerns by both the council and the police that the high-profile convictions of predominantly Pakistani offenders across the country could be capitalised on by a far-right agenda and lead to the victimisation of the Pakistani community. However, it is clear from all the evidence we have seen that the council and its partners in no way avoided addressing this, and in fact saw successful disruption and prosecution as the route to winning the confidence of all communities in Oldham. This is explicitly addressed by Leader A in public statements made in their blog in 2014 and 2015. The review team believe these contemporaneous records refute the suggestion that Leader A had any intention to protect those perpetrators from the Pakistani community who were exploiting children in Oldham and, quite the contrary, demonstrates their determination to address the issue publicly and head on.

Detailed findings on the development of the Messenger service

- 3.2. In 2003/04 staff in the public protection unit at Oldham Council started to track children reported missing from local care homes under the name of Operation Helena. This was because of information received about missing children found in similar locations together with the names of adults repeatedly harbouring them. Staff in the public protection unit made a visit to the specialist team set up at Blackpool Police Station following the tragic disappearance and presumed murder of Charlene Downs, aged 14, in 2003.

- 3.3. In July 2006, Operation Helena 2 was launched. This was following concerns about the potential sexual exploitation of children attending Hathershaw School. The work of Helena 2, which was a joint Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police initiative, was managed through an executive group, which was a subgroup of the local safeguarding children board (LSCB). This was chaired by the chair of the LSCB and included representatives from children's social care, Greater Manchester Police and Hathershaw School. By November 2006, three men had been charged with rape and two with child abduction.
- 3.4. In December 2006, the council issued a press release announcing the development of the project that became known as Operation Messenger. The executive director for young people and families was quoted as saying:
- “Unless you scratch below the surface you do not realise the enormity of the problem. We are not talking about teenage relationships. These are men in their 20s, 30s and beyond. Each time there has been activity in these areas by ourselves, the problem appears to go away. As we get better, we realise how big the issue is. Now the council, police, Primary Care Trust, and charity Barnardo's have established a team, based in Chadderton, to target child sex offenders. The new unit has three permanently deployed officers, with a view to getting one more, as well as a social worker, support staff and a part-time project manager.”*
- 3.5. In January 2007, an application was made to the then regulator (the Commission for Social Care Inspection) to amend the statement of purpose to set up Rivendell House residential care home as a specialist resource for young people at risk of exploitation (see Chapter Five). In July 2007, the Oldham Council cabinet approved the additional finance to support victims of child sexual exploitation. This included the opening of a six-place specialist resource for girls at risk of child sexual exploitation, and the development of a specialist team at the home, with additional security. Also approved was funding to develop services with the national children's charity Barnardo's.
- 3.6. During 2007, through the Operation Messenger partnership, upwards of 30 local young people between the ages of 12 and 16 had been identified as being involved in sexual exploitation. A number of these children already had significant involvement with the local authority and some were 'looked after' children. It was recognised that it was not possible to gauge with accuracy the exact number of children involved in sexual exploitation in Oldham due to the considerable reluctance of victims to reveal information and the hidden nature

of the activities of perpetrators. Several prosecutions were undertaken. The Crown Prosecution Service provided a dedicated solicitor to Operation Messenger and care was taken to provide a high degree of consistency in the legal personnel involved. To assist with the level of demand, Greater Manchester Police provided the Messenger service with a detective inspector, detective sergeant, and four detective constables for 12 months.

- 3.7. In 2007, Oldham's Messenger partnership won the Greater Manchester Police annual Chief Constable's Excellence Award for partnership working.
- 3.8. In 2008, the council publicised these achievements. By this time there had been five Messenger court cases and six convictions. Oldham's community safety unit was also credited with having succeeded in getting lifetime ASBOs¹³ against two men convicted of child abduction. An article in the *Oldham Chronicle* on 6 March 2008 quoted a Barnardo's manager:
- "Operation Messenger is a unique partnership. There are services across the country, but none of them offers this level of working with the local authority and the police. Operation Messenger has been nominated for awards, and Oldham is heading a North-West confederation of authorities dealing with child sexual exploitation. With Blackburn-with-Darwen, Oldham is also organising a conference for 22 authorities for regional protocols for tackling the problem."*
- 3.9. In late 2009, the council commenced the corporate safeguarding accountability board. Director of Children's Services A informed the review team:
- "I also set up the Corporate Safeguarding and Accountability meeting in Oldham shortly after I arrived which consisted of the council leaders and lead member, chief executive, assistant director of social care and frontline staff meeting to discuss a number of issues. These meetings had a very clear set of terms of reference. I had first set this up in Stockport as a result of learning from Baby P and established this in Oldham to ensure the political leaders and the chief executive were well informed about the challenges Oldham council was facing. They received regular data and met with frontline staff across all services to hear what it was like working on the ground including CSE."*

¹³ Antisocial behaviour orders.

3.10. Associate Assistant Director A also informed the review team:

“The bi-annual corporate safeguarding accountability meeting came about during the need to make substantial savings. It was important that the risks around this were known by the chief executive officer and council members. It only met a couple of times a year. It was also an opportunity for frontline staff to meet the most influential people in the council.”

3.11. In August 2009, the temporary post of senior social work practitioner within the Messenger team was made permanent. Although Operation Messenger had been running from 2006 it was not until August 2009 that a dedicated facility to forward any relevant intelligence on the operational policing unit system (OPUS) was created for the operation. The system for tagging intelligence reports by the intelligence hub for Operation Messenger was a subjective one. The officer submitting the intelligence could recognise that the intelligence was relevant to Messenger or, on review, the intelligence officer could create the link. In its own internal review in 2020, Greater Manchester Police noted that there were 'grey areas' in this process. One detective commented that *“we were a small unit and didn’t have the capacity to deal with all of these types of vulnerable girls”* and therefore did not expect all intelligence that mentioned young girls visiting shisha premises to be linked to Operation Messenger.

3.12. It is reported that between 9 September 2009 and 9 July 2010 there were 164 Greater Manchester Police family support investigations, 30 arrests and 30 abduction notices served as a result of the Operation Messenger partnership. Most offenders were identified as British Asian¹⁴ men, but Eastern European, Middle Eastern and White British men also featured.

3.13. The funding for the original Messenger project, which had had a great deal of investment from all participants, was reduced in 2010. This meant that funding was not as readily available for a vehicle and higher staffing ratios for the Rivendell House children's home, and for trips and outings to interrupt the young people's participation in child sexual exploitation.

¹⁴ We have replicated the term 'Asian', which was used to describe individuals in the records at the time. However, references to individuals described as 'Asian' are likely to generally relate to British people of Pakistani and/or Bangladeshi heritage.

- 3.14. The specialist role of Rivendell House was reviewed in about 2010. There is some agreement that, while there were some gains from this role, the location was not ideal and having several young people who were already involved in child sexual exploitation as residents could attract unwanted attention from abusers. It was decided to revert to a generic registration for the home and accommodate young people across the borough.
- 3.15. The close links between the police and the children's home began to reduce, as the police were less of a presence in the home and the immediate area. Links between the Messenger team and the home were maintained by the senior social work practitioner. The children's home staff found the (brief) time when two plain-clothes police officers were attached to the home very helpful. Training had been offered to the children's home (among others) by Barnardo's and the Messenger senior social worker.
- 3.16. In August 2010, 29 young people were referred into Operation Messenger for the staff and partners to provide safeguarding. The detective sergeant deployed to Messenger at this time felt that the team's core business was towards this cohort and therefore he only wanted intelligence that was connected to them. The 2020 Greater Manchester Police report noted that another detective sergeant subsequently attached to the service took a different view, believing that *"any piece of intelligence that had a sniff of CSE should be sent through to us (Operation Messenger) for us to make the decision on whether it was relevant or not"*.
- 3.17. The British National Party (BNP) held a demonstration in Oldham town centre on Saturday 8 January 2011. It also launched an election leaflet titled *Our Children are not Halal Meat*.
- 3.18. On 17 January 2011, a meeting was held on the community impact of publicity around sexual exploitation of young girls by Asian men. It was attended by officers from Greater Manchester Police and the council and by representatives of the faith communities. This meeting openly discussed the assertion that there was a view that the police and social services were suppressing this issue because of political correctness. The minutes clearly articulate the complexity of the issues the council and Greater Manchester Police were grappling with:
- "Sexual exploitation is a real issue, and we need to be addressing it. People feel strongly about this issue and there is the potential for it to escalate."*

There is the perception that there is a conspiracy of silence due to political correctness and that some areas are not dealing with the issue. The far right argue that it is religiously motivated and that there is a justification for this in the Quran. They stereotype Muslim men in general and portray it as a cultural issue. They allege that Muslim men have negative attitudes towards women in general and that they perceive many white girls to be 'sluts'. There is a need to continue to protect children and bring the perpetrators to justice and continue to provide support to the Messenger team. Further cases in Oldham might bring wider media interest and further exploitation of the issue by the BNP and English Defence League. There is therefore a risk of further demonstrations and the risk of increased hate crimes. There is a need to consider the impact of this issue on Muslim communities, as they are feeling demonised."

- 3.19. The review team view this as clear and contemporaneous evidence that the partners were determined to tackle child sexual exploitation while recognising that there was also an opportunity for far-right racist elements to capitalise politically on this.
- 3.20. In March 2011, the Oldham Safeguarding Children Board, in partnership with the Oldham Mosques Council, Oldham Interfaith Forum and Oldham Council, produced guidance on safeguarding in madrassahs and supplementary schools. This stated:

"The aim is to offer comprehensive guidance to mosques and madrassah teachers, Imams, and management committees with regards to their responsibilities and obligations. At a time when the spotlight is on the Muslim community it is essential that mosque and madrassah teachers, Imams and management committees' members make full use of this document to ensure safeguarding of children with confidence."
- 3.21. In April 2011, a high-level meeting chaired by Superintendent A discussed the partners' response to the threat of child sexual exploitation in the borough. A detective sergeant gave an overview from the police perspective and provided detail that the team was working with approximately 33 victims. The detective sergeant went on to explain that although initially the Crown Prosecution Service was very involved with the Messenger service and a judge had sat on the steering group, this had since fallen by the wayside. The meeting minutes also record that Chief Inspector A expressed concern that the prevention arm of Messenger had "fizzled out".

- 3.22. The meeting agreed to set up a proactive team. The decision was made for a sergeant to head the team, working alongside one detective constable and two police constables. It was agreed that the prevention, enforcement and intelligence responsibilities within the proactive arm of the Messenger team would sit with Chief Inspector A (responsible for prevention) and a lead officer was agreed for enforcement and intelligence.

On 6 July 2011, Superintendent A produced a six-point gold strategy on investigating child sexual exploitation that stated the need to:

- *“Work with key stakeholders to capture all possible intelligence relating to victims, offenders and locations connected with Child Sex Exploitation, ensuring that it is collated, disseminated and prioritized for action as appropriate.*
- *“Work with the OMBC Social Services, Barnardo’s and other key stakeholders to ensure that all appropriate opportunities to support and protect victims of child sex exploitation are identified and taken.*
- *“Secure and preserve evidence relating to child sex exploitation using all appropriate techniques. This may include the deployment of proactive covert assets.*
- *“Seek to disrupt the activities of individuals engaged in the sexual exploitation of children by using a multi-agency approach. This will include, and is not restricted to, the following agencies: HMRC, UK Borders Agency, OMBC, DWP, Housing Agencies, Trading Standards.*
- *“Ensure that a comprehensive factual media strategy is in place, having cognizance of the potential for this subject to attract the attention of far-right interest groups.*
- *“Effectively manage any reputational issues for the force arising out of this investigation.”*

- 3.23. The review team believe this was a comprehensive strategy, capturing the role of investigation, intelligence and disruption within a multi-agency context. It also demonstrates the sensitivities in respect of not fuelling the agenda of far-right interest groups.

- 3.24. In July 2011, the LSCB established a CSE and missing from home group, chaired by the Children’s Society. This group went on to develop the CSE and missing strategy.

- 3.25. By August 2011, the Messenger team was providing services to approximately 60 young people at risk of sexual exploitation.
- 3.26. In February 2012, Ofsted inspected children's social care in Oldham and judged the services to be good. It reported that since 2009, and the appointment of a new chief executive and director of children's services for the local authority, there had been an ambitious programme to significantly improve services for children, young people and their families in Oldham. Ofsted stated this had been supported by the introduction of robust financial and performance management systems. In respect of services for children at risk of sexual exploitation, Ofsted noted:
- "There is strongly integrated strategic and operational practice between the messenger partnership, working with children and young people who are at risk of child sexual exploitation, and the missing children group who oversee work with children and young people missing from home and care. Protocols are well written and robust.*
- "There are good linkages between staff responsible for monitoring children missing from school and children and young people educated at home. This ensures a good sharing of intelligence within Oldham and with neighbouring authorities."*
- 3.27. In April 2012, the Oldham community cohesion strategic risks register recognised both the risks of child sexual exploitation and the threat to cohesion presented by far-right groups' focus on the issue:
- "There is an ongoing problem of sexual exploitation of young women who are groomed by older men. The Messenger Partnership, involving Children's Services, GM Police and Barnardo's has been working on this issue for more than 5 years, and has supported many vulnerable young women and secured a number of convictions against offenders.*
- "The potential harm to young people is very high, including the worst-case risk that a young person could be killed. Over a number of years, this issue has attracted significant attention from far-right groups. There is currently a particular focus on the outcome of the current Operation Span trial which involves defendants from Rochdale and Oldham.*
- "There is a risk that publicity around this issue in Oldham could make the Borough a focus for far-right attention."*

- 3.28. In May 2012, the associate assistant director gave a report to the council's leadership group, a meeting of senior officers and cabinet members. This noted:

"Recent national publicity around child sexual exploitation has highlighted the extent of sexual exploitation. The recent convictions for CSE and sexual offences following criminal proceedings at Liverpool Crown Court has involved perpetrators from Oldham and Rochdale and has drawn intense media attention. Recently, reporters from ITN and BBC attended and filmed the Messenger operational meeting and interviewed members. The Partnership has been constantly aware of the potential impact on Community cohesion as a result of the negative media attention on the profile of offenders as in this recent case."

The review team see this as further evidence that at the time there was no intention to cover up the council's response to the threat of child sexual exploitation, even given the potential impact on community cohesion.

- 3.29. In May 2012, the Rochdale grooming gang members on trial at Liverpool Crown Court were convicted.

- 3.30. In June 2012, the Messenger team held a week of action against child sexual exploitation. An operation was conducted by two officers in the Messenger team to get more intelligence on where the 'Messenger girls' were going and who they were associating with. In an email one officer noted:

"There is no op order and there is currently an intelligence gap with some of our subjects that needs filling when they go missing from home. We are going to attend several known hot spots to see if we can disrupt and hopefully get some arrests."

- 3.31. In July 2012, the associate assistant director produced a briefing report on child sexual exploitation for the council Labour group. It reported that, between 9 September 2009 and 9 July 2010, there had been 164 Greater Manchester Police family support investigations, 30 arrests and 30 abduction notices served as a result of the Messenger partnership. It stated that the majority of offenders were British Asian men, but Eastern European, Middle Eastern and White British men also featured. The briefing noted:

"While there are problems with Child Sexual Exploitation in all communities, the ethnic profile of offenders has been highlighted by far-right groups. In particular, the British National Party (BNP) has campaigned on the issue

since 2001. They have argued that there is a conspiracy of silence on the issue, and that there is a specific problem with 'Muslim sex gangs'. A BNP demonstration about the issue was held in Oldham in January 2011 using the slogan 'Our children are not halal meat'. Following the recent convictions involving Rochdale and Oldham offenders there have been further demonstrations held in Rochdale. The potential for this to be replicated in Oldham are high."

- 3.32. Project Phoenix was set up in July 2012, aiming to standardise and improve the response to child sexual exploitation across the Greater Manchester area.
- 3.33. In the same month it was reported to Oldham Safeguarding Children Board that:
- 38 children had been identified by children's social care as being at risk of CSE
 - Five were in residential care, two in supported lodgings
 - Five were 13 years old and five were 14 years old
 - There were 11 abduction notices in place – four had been served that quarter
 - 18 suspects had been arrested and were all presented to the Crown Prosecution Service – seven of them received a charging decision.
- 3.34. Also in 2012, the GW Theatre Company was commissioned by Oldham Council to research, develop and produce a new theatre production specifically designed to provoke thinking, debate and learning on child sexual exploitation with young people aged 14 upwards. This evolved into a partnership with Barnardo's, the Oxford Foundation interfaith educational charity, Rochdale Borough Council and Oxfordshire County Council. The aim of the work was to raise awareness and knowledge levels among young people and to signpost key support and help for young people, and in doing so make a serious contribution to multi-agency efforts to reduce and stop child sexual exploitation. This process culminated in the development of *Somebody's Sister, Somebody's Daughter*, a play about child sexual exploitation with a particular emphasis on organised child sexual exploitation (known as 'street grooming'), 'sexting' and social media vulnerability. The play was piloted in the summer of 2013 and toured schools and colleges in

Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Bolton, Manchester, Calderdale, Bradford, Oxford and East Cheshire. An evaluation report stated:

“The play is proving to be highly effective at fulfilling and exceeding its brief. Since it began touring almost 50 young people have come forward to either disclose or to seek specialist help and support. Additionally, in the results of the pre and post-performance student surveys we are seeing some huge positive percentage changes which prove the play is having a serious impact in schools across many geographical areas to children from all social backgrounds, faiths, classes and ethnicities. For instance, after seeing the play, the number of children agreeing with the statement, ‘I feel I know enough about sexual exploitation to be as safe as I can be’ increased from 56 to 95 percent.”

- 3.35. In November 2012, the Messenger service developed revised protocols and procedures. These described the service as a strategic partnership between Oldham Council, Greater Manchester Police (Oldham division), Oldham Primary Care Trust (PCT) and Barnardo's. The aim of the revised protocol was to reinforce that young people who are sexually exploited should be treated as victims of child abuse and that language forms an important part of the general understanding of the needs of, and responses to, young people who are being sexually exploited. The protocol stated:

“Identifiers such as prostitute, pimp, street-worker, punter etc are associated with the world of adults, not children and tend to denote choice rather than coercion. The sexual exploitation of children is a form of child sexual abuse and requires therefore a language that underlies both the criminal and victim dimensions. Prefixing prostitution and prostitute with ‘Child’ has not enabled professionals to engage without fear of stigmatising and labelling, and more importantly it has not encouraged children towards an understanding of their abuse. Rather it has enhanced their denial and exacerbated their isolation. In addition, ‘sexual exploitation’ defines a broader context of abuse than ‘prostitution’, including as it does, pornography and abuse through the internet. For these reasons the terms sexually exploited and sexual exploitation will be used as the language of practice.

“Girls and boys under the age of 16 years cannot by law consent to any form of sexual activity. Anyone engaging in sexual activity, whether for money or not, with a girl or boy under 16 (whether perpetrator is male or female) is committing an offence.”

The protocol went on to state the guiding principles of the work of the Messenger service:

1. *“All children involved in sexual exploitation have been and are being sexually exploited and are sexually, physically and emotionally at risk, both in the short and long term.*
2. *“These children do not make informed choices to enter or remain in sexual exploitation, but do so from coercion, enticement, manipulation or desperation, because they can see no alternative. In law, children under 16 cannot consent to sexual activity, whether ‘voluntary’ or not.*
3. *“The law should treat these children as victims of abuse, not as offenders. Children under 16 will always be dealt with as actual or potential victims.*
4. *“In order to successfully protect sexually exploited children there must be a robust, multi-agency approach to the identification of risk, intervention planning and prosecution. Oldham’s protocol is a multi-agency document under-pinned by a multi-agency commitment to responding to sexually exploited children through co-ordinated inter-agency work.*
5. *“All sexually exploited children are children in need of services under the Children Act 1989. They are also children in need of safeguarding. Normally, however, the use of the formal Child Protection Procedures will not be appropriate, unless:*
 - *“The child is at immediate risk of significant harm and has other additional vulnerabilities*
 - *“There is concern that the sexual exploitation is being facilitated by the child’s parent/carer*
 - *“There is concern that the sexual exploitation is facilitated by the child’s parent failing to protect*
 - *“There is concern that a related or unrelated adult in a position of trust or responsibility to the child is organizing or encouraging the sexual exploitation. The younger the child, the more likely it is that the use of Child Protection Procedures will be appropriate.”*

3.36. The protocol then set out the procedures relating to child sexual exploitation conferences and reviews. This protocol and the procedures, alongside the multi-agency response to child sexual exploitation and the clear evidence of multi-agency disruption work, are commendably advanced and would have put Oldham ahead of many other councils at the time. We will explain later in this chapter how effective they were in practice.

3.37. In December 2012, the Messenger partnership also agreed a media strategy. The strategy articulated a concern that there could be assumptions in the media and the public at large that child sexual exploitation was carried out by men from ethnic minorities against White girls, which could create community tensions, and that Oldham's Asian community could feel it was disproportionately associated with child sexual exploitation. It also noted that the proactive confirmation of ethnicity could provide ammunition for far-right groups that might attempt to focus additional attention on Oldham regarding this issue. Alongside this it is stated that *"confidence could be significantly increased if we can demonstrate, through successful prosecutions, that we are tackling the issue"*.

3.38. The media strategy set out the following key messages:

- *"CSE¹⁵ is a form of abuse that must be tackled. Children are being sexually exploited in all communities across the UK, regardless of ethnicity, culture, class or gender. Furthermore, children from loving and secure homes can be abused, as well as children with pre-existing vulnerabilities."*
- *"CSE is something that parents and carers everywhere should be aware of. This type of offending is about adults taking advantage of vulnerable young people for their own sexual gratification."*
- *"Victims of CSE often do not recognise that they are being exploited and sometimes confuse what is exploitation and what is genuine affection. The characteristics common to all victims are not their age, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation, rather their powerlessness and vulnerability."*
- *"All partner organisations take this type of crime incredibly seriously and are committed to dealing with the issue, through the Messenger service."*
- *"Greater Manchester Police, Oldham council, Barnardo's and Pennine Care work closely together on behalf of Oldham's Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) to address the specific issues of CSE and adults befriending and grooming younger people for sex."*
- *"Messenger is a multi-agency approach in Oldham to dealing with the problem of CSE."*

¹⁵ Child sexual exploitation.

- *“If you have any concerns about a child or young person you should call Greater Manchester Police on 101 (999 in emergencies) or Oldham council’s Children’s Services Safeguarding Team on 0161 770 3790. ChildLine provide free and confidential advice for children and young people on 0800 1111.*
- *“Oldham has a loud and clear message to perpetrators of CSE: we will find them and they will be brought to justice for the abuse they have inflicted on such vulnerable young people.”*

3.39. It is clear from this strategy that Oldham Council and the Messenger partnership had no hesitation in ensuring the public were warned about the threat of child sexual exploitation, and that they wished to build confidence through disruption and prosecution but were also mindful of the opportunity for this to be exploited by far-right extremists.

3.40. In April 2013, a missing from home and child sexual exploitation multi-agency strategy was agreed by the LSCB for 2013/14. It noted that data about children and young people who went missing from home or care was included in regular reports to council members, especially to the lead member for children’s services, and in reports to the LSCB. The action plan appended to the strategy for the year 2013/14 contained the following aims:

- To go live with the risk of sexual exploitation (ROSE) service and to have an established mechanism for those young people deemed at risk of CSE before they meet the threshold for social care
- To go live with a multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and to review and monitor the effectiveness of early help
- To establish a regional dataset in relation to perpetrators
- To develop regular problem profiles of young people who went missing from home and were at risk of CSE.

3.41. In June 2013, a report was prepared by the acting associate assistant director on Oldham’s response to the serious case review undertaken by Rochdale Council following the Rochdale grooming gang trial. This was taken to the council’s executive management board and subsequently to the LSCB in July. The report listed the 16 recommendations made by the serious case review and set out how Oldham had responded. The sixth recommendation of the Rochdale report was: *“That the Council enables both Executive and Scrutiny Members, including those Members on the*

Corporate Parents Forum, to continue to take a greater role in the general CSC¹⁶ and CSE improvement programmes.”

The Oldham report noted that the council leader, chief executive and lead member all attended twice-yearly meetings of the corporate safeguarding accountability board, when child sexual exploitation was a standing item on the agenda. This covered data on the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation within Oldham. Furthermore, the overview and scrutiny committee were said to regularly ask for reports and to request officers to attend to answer to their questions on performance or topical issues. It was also stated in the report that it had been identified that councillors should attend specific training in relation to child sexual exploitation as part of wider safeguarding training over the next six months.

- 3.42. In July 2013, a new detective sergeant, who was an experienced child protection detective, became responsible for the Messenger service. The sergeant had previously worked under Operation Helena and conducted the original scoping exercise for Operation Messenger and, as part of it, had visited the Blackpool police to see how they were responding to child sexual exploitation with a view to starting a similar unit in Oldham. The detective sergeant recognised that more staff were required to enable the team to run more proactive operations. The detective sergeant felt that prior to their arrival there had been an emphasis on only dealing with intelligence that related to the Operation Messenger cohort, and they believed that the remit should be wider and deal with child sexual exploitation borough-wide.
- 3.43. By 2014, the Messenger service comprised the following staff:
- one detective sergeant
 - two detective constables
 - two police constables
 - one senior social work practitioner
 - one coordinator for young people missing from home
 - two Barnardo's project workers
 - one Barnardo's team manager
 - one 'safe and well' worker.

¹⁶ Children's Social Care.

- 3.44. The Messenger service was said to have good links with other services. A fortnightly operational meeting brought together practitioners from a range of organisations to look at progress in relation to specific young people and abusers. This meeting was an important element of the work of Messenger, enabling it to bring together a local profile about individual victims and abusers.
- 3.45. In December 2013, Operation Waterloo was initiated, a proactive operation to disrupt hotspots and shisha bars. This was followed in 2014 by Operations Citrus, Ovid and Patina, all led by the Messenger service. We cover these in more detail in Chapter Four.
- 3.46. Also in December 2013, the ROSE project was set up. This initiative, developed by Chief Inspector A using underspends within the community safety budget, was designed to provide a preventive service to children on the threshold of child sexual exploitation. It employed an independent sexual violence coordinator and worked with young people, primarily between the ages of 14 and 15, who did not meet the threshold for Operation Messenger. In the first six months it averaged 13 new referrals a month, although this tapered off in later months. The project was not universally welcomed. Officers in the Messenger service informed the review team that the money would have been better invested in providing a preventive service integrated within Messenger, and it is clear that some referrals did bounce between the two services. A detective sergeant informed the review team in interview:
- “We were never involved in the planning of ROSE. It kind of happened and got launched and we learnt about it at the same time as everyone else. That caused some consternation because as you can imagine you have a project which is saying they are an ‘at risk of CSE team’ and we were saying how did this fit with Messenger as we were a sexual exploitation team and we didn’t know what their terms of reference were, what their cohort were, what experience the team had. It caused a lot of confusion.”*
- 3.47. An independent audit, completed by Consultant B later in the year, echoed these comments:
- “I saw evidence of some very good early-stage work done by the practitioner, particularly using CEOP [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre] materials. As a project, it was not clearly articulated as part of the safeguarding continuum, although the LSCB was sighted on the work through regular updates to the subgroup. During the course of the audit many stakeholders commented on a lack of clarity about who responded at*

different points to CSE issues. Stakeholders talked of a disconnection between the ROSE and Messenger approaches. A decision that, for safeguarding requirements, all cases would require a Phoenix–Messenger screen has resolved any potential disconnect. The ROSE project has been appropriately mainstreamed into the broader Early Help offer. There is, however, a backlog of outstanding screens, including delays of several weeks, and this is an unacceptable resourcing shortfall.”

- 3.48. By September 2014, given that further funding had not been secured, the service was eventually migrated to the mainstream service. We will look at the quality of work undertaken by the ROSE project later in this chapter.
- 3.49. In January 2014, Greater Manchester Police produced its first CSE problem profile. This stated that the *“vast majority of non-familial contact sexual abuse of children in Oldham is committed by lone white offenders, there is no evidence of organised networks of Asian males targeting vulnerable white female children”*.
- 3.50. Oldham Phoenix was formally launched in April 2014 and was effectively a rebadging of the Oldham Messenger service. It benefited from greater resources than the Messenger service. In practical terms, the change saw two social workers, a family support worker and a manager assigned to the project. The staffing also increased to two detectives, two police constables, a police development officer, an officer from the integrated neighbourhood policing team (INPT) and one from the response team on a six-month attachment.
- 3.51. In June 2014, the Phoenix service was supporting 71 children; three of them were male and 16 were children in the care of Oldham Council.
- 3.52. In the light of the national concerns in respect of the abuse of children in Rotherham, in September 2014 Leader A’s blog was devoted to the subject of child sexual exploitation, and specifically addressed the issue of White girls being exploited by Pakistani men:

“On the particular issue of grooming covered in Rotherham and other places we need to be honest. There are clear characteristics to that kind of abuse and sexual exploitation. It’s a pattern of abuse which identifies vulnerable girls, grooms them in a very calculated and systemic way and then brings

them into a circle of abusers where they are used as sex objects for the gratification of men with a sickening view of women.

“Anyone who shies away from accepting that in Rotherham, Oxford, Rochdale and here in Oldham – and that this particular form of abuse is predominantly Pakistani men targeting white girls – is not helping the victims, and nor is it helping the Asian community at large.”

- 3.53. The blog went on to set out the specific concerns within Oldham:

“It is fact of life that some of our residents will seek to harm and abuse. That can’t really be news to anyone. And is there a problem of abuse here which has the same characteristics as highlighted in Rochdale, Oxford and Rotherham? ... In terms of the particular form of abuse I’m discussing on the blog, I can tell you that we are currently supporting a total of 70 young people identified as potential victims with plans in place to protect and assist them with a range of partner organisations. Of those, 45 are seen as low-risk, 9 as medium risk and 16 as high risk. These are people who, without support and intervention could potentially become victims – and that could be because of the social groups they mix in or their friendships. But these figures and the levels of risk individuals are at can also change from day to day, so whatever data we give is simply a snapshot of one moment of time.”

- 3.54. Finally, the blog addressed the issue of covering up these crimes and the impact that publicity might have on feeding a far-right agenda.

“Do we have a culture in Oldham of hiding from the truth or are we fearful of upsetting people with it? No. But that isn’t to say we are careless either and I hope this blog has given an honest assessment to tackle head on some of the issues local people have raised. We are mindful of the impact that what we do can have on community relations, of course. But we want to bring criminals to book and in doing so we also want to make sure that those who are innocent aren’t tarred with the same brush. Our own experience is that when we do see this kind of crime brought in front of the court, very shortly afterwards far right groups will jump on it to try and tar a whole community. That, however, isn’t an excuse not to do something – it’s actually even more of a reason to ensure that we act. If we don’t tackle wrongdoing, we give more oxygen to those who seek to gain politically by accusing those in authority of cover-ups and failures. You can’t beat that world view with more cover ups. You beat it with honesty and by acting responsibly.”

- 3.55. The review team believe this contemporaneous record clearly refutes the suggestion that Leader A had any intention to protect those perpetrators from the Pakistani community who were exploiting children in Oldham and, quite the contrary, demonstrates Leader A's determination to address the issue publicly and head on.
- 3.56. On 16 September 2014, the director of children's services sent a briefing on child sexual exploitation to all councillors in Oldham. This briefing set out how Oldham had developed the multi-agency Messenger service over many years and supplemented it with a range of preventive services such as the GW Theatre and ROSE projects. The briefing explicitly stated that child sexual exploitation happens in all communities, including Oldham, and that most sexual exploitation happens within families and broader family and friend networks:
- "A majority of perpetrators in recent high-profile cases are of Pakistani heritage; other communities are also represented. Nationally, most perpetrators of child sexual exploitation are of White British origin."*
- 3.57. The review team see this as an accurate and fair representation and is further evidence that Oldham as a council was not in any way shying away from addressing the threat of child sexual exploitation across all communities.
- 3.58. In September 2014, Oldham Safeguarding Children Board agreed to the appointment of an external independent consultant, Consultant B, to assess Oldham's performance in respect of meeting the challenge of addressing child sexual exploitation within the borough. The audit tested the service performance across the Messenger partnership alongside the lessons from the Rotherham inquiry. Consultant B's report was produced in December 2014. It noted that there was a level of misunderstanding about the Phoenix–Messenger service and that this could lead to practitioners having unrealistic expectations of what the service could provide:
- "Messenger is primarily a policing response and an information sharing hub, with limited social work capacity to support victims. Although a small proportion, at the high end, are worked with by Barnardo's, it cannot be assumed that all needs are met by inclusion in the project."*
- 3.59. Nonetheless, Consultant B commented that the police enforcement element of Messenger was effective and that the investigation and prosecution of

perpetrators appeared to be strong within the confines of its capacity. There was also good disruption work, and prevention work by Barnardo's was seen as being delivered by highly skilled staff.

- 3.60. The quality of casework was, however, variable. Consultant B reviewed 20 cases; 10 from Messenger and 10 from the ROSE project. In four cases from the Messenger service, the current child sexual exploitation plan was not judged to be appropriate and in some instances the child was not judged to be safe. In respect of the 10 cases held by ROSE, in eight cases the intervention and plan were judged by Consultant B to be appropriate. In two cases, Consultant B judged the plan not to be appropriate, one of these concerned a child placed by another authority.
- 3.61. In the autumn of 2014, following the publication of the Alexis Jay report into Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and other agencies, Ofsted undertook a thematic inspection of child sexual exploitation services across nine authorities, one of which was Oldham. The inspection covered three areas – prevention, protection and prosecution. The published report did not single out individual authorities or provide any judgements. It did, however, refer to two areas of good practice in Oldham: the GW Theatre production and KOGS (Keeping Our Girls Safe), a voluntary group running programmes to inform young people about sensitive subjects such as exploitation. The review team have been shown a summary provided by Oldham Council of the private feedback Ofsted gave it at the end of the inspection. In this summary, Ofsted described prevention as an area of strength for Oldham. Ofsted found clear strategic leadership by the council at member and officer level, and this was well supported by partners, particularly the police. In terms of protection, while much of the safeguarding was of a good standard, this was sometimes variable. In some cases, child protection plans were not sharp enough and there was a lack of recorded oversight. In terms of prosecution, Ofsted found evidence that both the police and council actively disrupted the activities of grooming gangs and closed down or mitigated the risks of dangerous places, including shisha bars and takeaways. There was evidence that perpetrators were caught and prosecuted, although Ofsted picked up concerns about the lack of local engagement by the Crown Prosecution Service. Ofsted commended the use of information sharing between public authorities.
- 3.62. On 19 November 2014, the Ofsted findings were reported to the council's corporate safeguarding accountability board. At the same time, the associate assistant director reported that the Phoenix service was supporting 29 young

people and the ROSE project 27. In March 2015, Leader A published a further blog focusing on child sexual exploitation. This blog set out the range of activities within the borough to tackle child sexual exploitation, including:

- The transition from Operation Messenger to the Oldham Phoenix team, with additional investment from Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council
- Two senior social workers and one additional family support worker in the team working with children and young people at an early preventive stage and with those subject to a CSE protection plan
- Child protection and CSE briefings to staff to raise awareness and give clear messages about how and when to report their concerns
- Carrying out extra patrols and enforcement across the borough, plus raising awareness of CSE via posters and promotional material for the CSE reporting website
- Working with taxi firms to offer training and advice on keeping children and young people safe
- Social workers from Oldham Phoenix linking into Oldham's schools, offering advice on CSE and young people missing education, as schools continued to be a focus for the council's prevention work
- Highlighting the prevention work with GW Theatre delivered via the play *Somebody's Sister, Somebody's Daughter*. This play had already been seen by around 3,500 young people, and there were plans to roll it out again for a further 4,000 pupils.

3.63. Leader A's blog continued:

"Please remember that if we ever stop being open about these difficult issues, we run the risk of failing to tackle it and that means – worst of all – we let down those who need us to speak up most: the victims."

3.64. The review team believe this further indicates that Leader A was using a public platform to tackle openly the issue of child sexual exploitation within the borough, and we find any suggestion Leader A was deliberately covering up these concerns highly implausible. In May 2015, Ofsted undertook a further inspection in Oldham and judged that the children's social care services required improvement. The report, which was published in August 2015, was very positive about the work of the council to raise awareness and prevent child sexual exploitation, stating:

“The long-established Phoenix team tackling child sexual exploitation includes specialist police and social workers and is effective. The team has recently been strengthened with additional social care capacity and further expansion is planned. There are good awareness-raising activities such as the ‘week of action’, which included visits to all the hotels in Oldham. It also included distribution of leaflets, wristbands being given out in schools and colleges, all secondary schools having two performances of a specialist play, bespoke sessions held for minority ethnic women’s groups, and one teacher from every school attending a ‘training the trainers’ session. In total, over 10,000 children and young people have attended awareness-raising events in schools. Sixty imams have attended and more awareness-raising across all communities in Oldham is planned.”

- 3.65. The inspection team found that the direct work with children was more variable and, out of eight cases sampled, in five instances the response was insufficiently robust, with weaker assessments, planning and interventions. The report noted:

“Overall, the response from children’s services to child sexual exploitation lacks consistency with some risks taking too long to identify and respond to.”

- 3.66. In October 2015, Oldham Phoenix was the subject of a peer review by Greater Manchester Phoenix. The final report stated that the panel felt that the approach taken by Oldham Phoenix in dealing with child sexual exploitation was among the best that it had observed in 12 months of conducting peer reviews in Greater Manchester.

- 3.67. In December 2015, Consultant B returned to undertake a follow-up audit of cases involving child sexual exploitation. This time Consultant B considered a total of 40 cases. Consultant B acknowledged that there was a higher quality response overall within the sample, but there remained a high level of variability in the quality of the response in individual cases. While the average standard was higher, there was a need to achieve greater consistency. The audit noted that management oversight was prominently evident within the Phoenix team but sparse or absent in the mainstream social work team. Of the 40 cases, Consultant B rated the intervention in 33 cases as appropriate and in seven cases not to have appropriately safeguarding the child.

- 3.68. In September 2016, a further peer review was undertaken on the Oldham Phoenix team. The review report summarised the position as follows:

“Every member of the Oldham Phoenix team had a thorough knowledge of all the cases and demonstrated genuine care for all the children we discussed. Oldham Phoenix clearly has a desire to continue to learn and develop and it was evident throughout the review that the work being undertaken in Oldham in relation to child sexual exploitation and children who go missing from home or care is of a very high standard.”

- 3.69. However, these commendable strategic approaches did not always translate into the appropriate level of safeguarding for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation¹⁷. As shown, this was evidenced by Ofsted in 2011 and 2015, and by independent audits undertaken by a consultant in 2014 and 2015.

- 3.70. We reviewed a selection of 10 children who we understood to have been at risk of serious child sexual exploitation during the period covered by our report (2011–14). These were either children we identified as being known to frequent shisha bars or children who were drawn to our attention by interviewees. They were without exception complex cases. To avoid the identification of the individuals concerned, our detailed findings have been included in the confidential appendix. In summary, our main findings were as follows:

Strengths

- We found clear examples where the council invested in providing specialist services to young people. There were a range of resources provided by Barnardo's, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and other voluntary organisations, tailored to meet their needs. Children became 'looked after' with the intention of reducing risk, and where appropriate, young people were provided with placements outside of Oldham and some were in high-cost specialist or therapeutic settings.

¹⁷ In January 2020, Oldham Council commissioned an independent review of 20 cases of children who went missing between 2011 and 2013. It concluded that risks may have reduced during this period in 12 of the 20 cases reviewed. In the remaining eight cases, risks either remained high, or else the information recorded on the case file did not allow the reviewer to reach a judgement. The review concluded that many agencies in Oldham were committed to assisting young people who had been missing from home and were seen to be vulnerable to child sexual exploitation during 2011–13.

- Residential staff in Oldham care homes were assertive in attempting to prevent young people from being exploited. They would on occasion follow young people and directly confront their abusers. They relayed relevant and sometimes detailed information to social workers and Messenger service police officers, which would have ensured these men could be identified.
- Child sexual exploitation plans were regularly put in place for children deemed to be at risk, and these were regularly reviewed by an independent reviewing officer

Areas requiring improvement

- Despite these strengths, out of the 10 cases we considered, none were protected from child sexual exploitation. The plans in place were generally weak and unspecific; there was little evidence that the allocated social workers spent time building a significant relationship with the young person, and much of the activity by professionals was devoted to monitoring what was known about the exploitation rather than putting in place an assertive plan to prevent and disrupt its occurrence.
- Statutory child protection procedures in place at the time were on many occasions not being followed. This was particularly the case when it was alleged that the young person had experienced significant harm through physical or sexual abuse or had been found in a situation of considerable risk. While on occasion the police would interview the young person, in many instances a strategy discussion was not held to agree a multi-agency response and only very rarely was the meeting followed up by a Section 47¹⁸ child protection investigation as required.
- There was strong emphasis on the young people not taking responsibility for protecting themselves. Phrases such as *“putting herself at risk”* were regularly used within the minutes of meetings set up to protect the young person. This was despite the evidence that the children were being drugged or made senseless on vodka and then subjected to violent rapes, often by several men in succession, and to serious physical assaults, coercion and threats.

¹⁸ When a child is suspected to be suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm, the local authority is required by Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 to make enquiries, to enable it to decide whether it should take any action to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.

- There was an overreliance by the police on requiring the young person to cooperate in pressing charges against their offenders, even though the coercive and threatening relationship with these people was clearly evidenced. This was even the case when there were witnesses and forensic evidence that might have supported a prosecution. As one Messenger officer commented at a core group, *“without Child F making a statement nothing could be done”*.
- There is very limited evidence in the social care files as to how these offences were dealt with, and, in the absence of an agreed data processing agreement with Greater Manchester Police when we completed this aspect of the assurance review, we were unable to review the actions of police officers. Nonetheless, it is clear from the social care records that there was a significant amount of information known about the men who were exploiting these children and some of the men appear on the records of several children. From the social care records, it does appear as if some of these men could exploit these children with relative impunity due to the failure to disrupt and target their activities.
- Some of our sample were specifically chosen because we had seen reports that they had been seen in shisha bars by street patrols. Clearly, shisha bars were a magnet for young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and it is also clear that children were being exploited on the premises. One child was seen having sex at a well-known shisha bar and also disclosed that she went to another shisha bar to *“sleep with lads”*.

3.71. On consideration of our detailed findings, Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police have agreed to review the management of these cases and consider whether any further action can be taken in respect of the men who exploited these children.

Chapter 4.

Allegations made on social media about the risks posed to children from local shisha establishments during 2011–14

4.1. In this chapter we have considered the risks posed to children from local shisha establishments during 2011–14. Our key findings are set out in Chapter One. We analysed these allegations by initially reviewing all the documents referred to on social media. In addition, we have collated the following additional evidence:

- We have interviewed a range of officers in Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police who served throughout the period of our review. We have also interviewed several current and retired councillors and the former leader of Oldham Council. The full list of our interviewees is set out in Appendix B.
- We asked the council to undertake a thorough search of all information and provide all reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications, whether in electronic format or hard copy, held on the various council systems in respect of shisha bars, between 1 January 2011 and 31 December 2014.
- In addition, we requested the council provide all communications between the BBC journalist referred to on social media and council officers and/or members from 1 January 2013 to 31 January 2014. It was requested that these were unredacted to show all recipients.
- We also asked the council to provide all reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications, whether in electronic format or hard copy, held on the various council systems between 1 January 2011 and 31 December 2014 concerning an investigation into allegations that a specific councillor shared confidential information with a third party.

- We also requested a copy of a confidential internal investigation¹⁹ produced by Greater Manchester Police on its Operation Hexagon, which considered the information held by Greater Manchester Police on the threat presented by shisha bars during this period.

Summary and conclusions on shisha bars

Summary

- 4.2. We have been provided with no evidence, from either our interviews or our review of documents and emails, to suggest that senior managers or councillors sought to cover up either the existence of shisha bars or the potential threat they presented in respect of child sexual exploitation
- 4.3. Both Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police were aware of the potential threat presented by shisha bars and cafes by the end of 2010. These threats continued until mid-2013. However, by the end of that year most shisha bars had closed, and subsequent joint operations in 2014 did not highlight any ongoing concerns in respect of shisha bars.
- 4.4. From 2011 to 2013, both the council and Greater Manchester Police collaborated to disrupt the shisha bar business model and deployed a range of multi-agency operations, including the police, fire safety and environmental health, to achieve this. While robust action was taken to close some of the shisha bars, this was not always achievable given the legislation in place at the time. The council recognised these limitations and took a proactive role in seeking to amend legislation (the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill) that was passing through Parliament at the time.
- 4.5. In 2013, Chief Inspector A, in an email subsequently leaked to the BBC, concluded that shisha bar premises posed a significant safeguarding risk.

¹⁹ Review of Greater Manchester Police's response to allegations of child sexual exploitation in shisha bars in Oldham 2011–2014 and involving private hire drivers employed by Telecars 2008–2010. Greater Manchester Police Major Crime Review Unit, October 2020. Greater Manchester Police commissioned its own internal review following concerns expressed on social media.

This leak caused significant consternation at the highest levels of the council and Greater Manchester Police, with concern expressed as to the detailed information the BBC journalist had on shisha bars.

- 4.6. On 1 July 2013, the Greater Manchester Police press officer informed the Oldham Council press office that a BBC journalist, Journalist A, had approached the force and asked for a comment in respect of the “*shisha bar story*”.
- 4.7. In July, a press release was issued to the BBC by Greater Manchester Police and agreed by Oldham Council. In our view, this release clearly set out a realistic appraisal of the potential risks as follows: “*The main point is the one about CSE and possible grooming going on at these premises. From the report you’ve seen, you’ll see there are only two pieces of intelligence Greater Manchester Police has ever received about possible sexual exploitation – enforcement action was taken but there was no evidence to substantiate these pieces of intelligence. I would also add there has been no crimes reported to Greater Manchester Police about CSE at these private premises. That is not to say that CSE is not taking place, but rather that we have only two pieces of intelligence to suggest it might have done and nothing to substantiate that being the case.*”
- 4.8. We believe this is a proportionate description of what the agencies believed was happening on the ground at that time. While there had been, during the period 2011 to 2012, several intelligence submissions in respect of shisha bars and evidence of young people at risk of child sexual exploitation attending these premises, at the time of the press release the description was a proportionate statement of what was known, and the potential risks these premises presented. This position was sustained throughout the exchanges between Journalist A and the council’s press office in the next few months until the story was finally broadcast in February 2014.
- 4.9. We have seen no evidence to suggest the messaging was to protect Oldham Labour Party or that this direction was specifically led by local politicians, including Leader A. Furthermore, we have found no evidence that the individuals running the shisha bars had any connections with the Oldham Labour Party. There was, however, a strong belief held at a senior level by both Greater Manchester Police and Oldham officers, also shared by politicians, that the threats presented by shisha bars might be exaggerated by the media and used by far-right interests to promote their agenda. Some

of our interviewees have also pointed out that this may also have been motivated by a concern about minimising adverse publicity about the town when its strategy was to attract inward investment and regeneration.

- 4.10. We have found no evidence that Journalist A nor the BBC, colluded with the council in not highlighting the potential threat presented by shisha bars. Quite to the contrary, we have seen clear evidence that Journalist A challenged the position held by both Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police and continued to investigate the story, which was eventually broadcast by the BBC.
- 4.11. Nonetheless, we have found that a small number of children who were known to be sexually exploited were visiting shisha bars throughout 2011, 2012 and 2013. The specialist Messenger team set up to tackle child sexual exploitation did not for most of this period participate in disruption activities, which fell largely to the council's licensing officers and the Greater Manchester Police town centre 'street safe' team.
- 4.12. The Greater Manchester Police 2020 internal review identified that the Messenger team was insufficiently resourced during this period to undertake proactive operations. Nonetheless, we were concerned to note that specific children as young as 13 and 14, known to be sexually exploited, were visiting these premises in 2011, and yet the same children were still visiting them in 2013. This points to a weakness in the multi-agency approach to safeguarding these children.

Detailed findings on shisha bars

- 4.13. By late 2010, both Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police were aware of the emerging threat presented by shisha bars and the potential they presented for child sexual exploitation. As early as November 2010, an intelligence report had been submitted by a detective constable in the

specialist Messenger team²⁰ stating that four young ‘Messenger girls’²¹ were frequenting the Café Mist shisha bar.

- 4.14. Chief Inspector A was a police officer seconded to work for the council with a remit including crime and disorder, violence against women, partnership working and supporting the local safeguarding children board (LSCB). The work covered shisha bars and child sexual exploitation. Chief Inspector A explained to the review team that shisha bars had formerly been traditional pubs open to the public:

“In Oldham Town Centre these derelict pubs were bought and seemed to be sublet to often young Asian men who tried to run them to generate income. In their community they generally could not be seen drinking alcohol and from a legal point of view they could not operate as an open public space which allowed indoor smoking so they operated behind locked doors with access only granted by knocking on and being recognised and allowed entry. They promoted these operations on social media mirroring what a conventional business would do ie 2 shisha’s for 1 offers, advertising rooms within the premises for hire for party use etc.

“It was this pseudo business front but operating outside any sort of licensing structure and targeting and trying to entice young people to the premises which I was concerned about and targeted.”

- 4.15. In December 2010, a joint visit made to Café Mist by the Oldham licensing officer and Greater Manchester Police city centre officers found 25 young men and women aged 16–25 there. On entry, the licensing officer noted a strong smell of cannabis and evidence that alcohol had been consumed. Two further visits were made in January 2011, and in the reports of those visits it was noted that four young women known to be vulnerable to sexual exploitation were present, as were two young men linked to drug dealing. The reports stated:

“Upon leaving a number of known Glodwick boys with links to drugs were hanging about near to the bar seeing what the police attention was all about, namely [redacted and redacted]. It is believed that several of the op

²⁰ The specialist Messenger team had been set up by Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council to tackle child sexual exploitation in Oldham.

²¹ The term ‘Messenger girl’ was regularly used in reports we have seen by both Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council. It refers to those young people being supported by the specialist Messenger team.

messenger girls are frequenting "cafe mist" shisha cafe, where they are associating with older Asian males and using cannabis. [Child 1] and, [Child 2] have been frequenting [name of shisha bar redacted] so there are grave concerns as to why [ages redacted] old girls are frequenting this cafe. [Child 3] and [Child 4] have also stated that they go there."

These children were in their early teens at the time. We have established that two of these children were known to still be frequenting shisha bars some 18 months later, in the summer of 2012.

- 4.16. In April 2011, a licensed taxi driver met a child, who was under 16 at the time, in a shisha bar. He was subsequently charged with r an offence of rape of this child, which was said to have occurred in July 2011. He was subsequently found not guilty, but he admitted to meeting the child in a shisha bar, and to using his taxi for the purpose of sexual activity with the child after taking her for food and purchasing items for her from a supermarket.
- 4.17. The next recorded official visit to a shisha bar was not until November 2011. This was termed Operation Takeaway and included a visit to the Oasis Café bar. While we have not seen any report of this operation it appears to have included fire, environmental health, licensing and immigration officers. A further visit was undertaken by the Messenger team to Oasis Café.
- 4.18. Prior to our review being commissioned, Greater Manchester Police undertook an internal review of the force's response to shisha bars and taxi companies. The Greater Manchester Police 2020 internal report established that in 2011 there were 22 separate intelligence submissions in respect of shisha bars and a further 22 in 2012. These intelligence reports were not always being linked to the specialist Messenger team.
- 4.19. In our own analysis of intelligence reports and the reports of visits made to shisha bars by Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council, we have identified 18 named children who were thought to be frequenting shisha bars and were known to be at risk of child sexual exploitation.
- 4.20. There was mounting evidence throughout 2012 that shisha bars continued to present an opportunity for sexual exploitation. In the first quarter there were visits by street safe patrols in January to Fusion and Kloudz, both recognised

as shisha bars. It was reported that two teenage girls, Child 11 and Child 15, had spent the night at a shisha bar and had been having sex.

- 4.21. In February 2012, a multi-agency meeting was called by a sergeant in the Greater Manchester Police Oldham division to consider the increasing concerns in respect of Fusion and AYCE another shisha bar. A subsequent multi-agency visit to Fusion led to environmental health officers seizing a number of shisha pipes and tobacco.
- 4.22. During street safe duties on Friday 15 June 2012, a police constable, in the company of a police sergeant and two council officials, entered a building to the rear of Kloudz. The reason for entering the premises was that the constable had seen an unknown female, later identified as Child 5, leaving the building upset and crying. Two rooms were occupied by four Asian men in their early 20s. A further search of the second floor discovered Child 6, who had alcohol in her possession. Child 6's parents were called, and she was collected. She was with Child 7 and Child 8, who had also entered the premises.
- 4.23. The following evening, 16 June 2012, the same police constable reported seeing a man (aged 17) dragging Child 9 (in her early teens) into the rear of a shisha bar. The constable intervened and took hold of the man. Child 9 ran away and hid inside the premises, where she was later discovered hiding in the toilets on the second floor. Child 9 was with her friend, Child 10, who was also found near the rear of the premises and stated that she was looking for Child 9. Child 9 disclosed that she had been in the premises a week earlier. The police constable recorded that social services were informed²². Oldham Council has confirmed that a referral was not received from Greater Manchester Police. This account is verified by Greater Manchester Police, which was unable to locate a copy of the referral and therefore, despite the concerns expressed, Child 9 continued to be unknown to children's social care. Greater Manchester Police, in its report on shisha bars, has acknowledged that this incident was not appropriately followed up and will

²² On 7 June 2021, Greater Manchester Police officers confirmed to Oldham Council that they had checked all accessible systems and were able to locate the same report but unable to identify any public protection investigation (PPI) or referral sent to children's social care (CSC) or the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH).

need further enquiries; these had not been completed at the time our report went to publication.

- 4.24. On 21 July 2012, Greater Manchester Police made a visit to the Oasis Café and issued three fixed penalty notices following a report by a parent that her teenage daughter had been smoking shisha there with older Asian men. Although numerous intelligence reports of Asian males and young girls visiting these premises were raised, and although these girls were thought to be vulnerable, the intelligence reports were not forwarded to the Messenger team as they were not known 'Messenger subjects'. We believe this is a key weakness in the Greater Manchester Police response to shisha bars at the time and a significant missed opportunity to quantify the scale of the threats presented to children.
- 4.25. In June 2012, Oldham young people's charity Positive Steps reported that Child 2 was still visiting shisha bars. She was aged 14 at the time. The report listed numerous concerns, including heavy drinking every night (half a litre of vodka) with older peers, including her older sister (Child 1).
- 4.26. On 9 July 2012, another child (Child 11) supported by the Messenger team was located at Kloudz shisha bar:
- "[Child 11] has been at Kloudz bar in Oldham (Shisha bar that Police are monitoring heavily, and Oldham council are trying to close down). It is concerning that this bar has private rooms to rent upstairs also and is reportedly alcohol free with smoking bongs."*
- 4.27. As concerns in respect of Kloudz mounted, a further meeting was held between officers from the council and Greater Manchester Police. The notes of the meeting stated:
- "There are serious concerns about the sexual activity going on in the rooms and the potential links to child sexual exploitation. The meeting concluded that action would be taken to seek a premises closure order due to it being a serious and persistent nuisance."*
- However, on 29 June 2012, the council's solicitor advised that the case for seeking the closure of Kloudz was not likely to be successful in the courts. The solicitor suggested that others working in the area were witnessing more than they reported to the police and therefore completion of diary sheets might be something to encourage. The solicitor said:

"I share the concerns that there could be something more sinister occurring at these premises but as things stand, I believe that even if all allegations we are able to make are proven there are insufficient specific allegations to proceed."

- 4.28. In October 2012, an intelligence report on Kloudz stated:

"There is an unoccupied/ boarded up property on Yorkshire street, Oldham which is in fact a "smoking den" where Asian males are "grooming" young ladies. (sic). Where the bar used to be in the building there is now an ice cream parlour and that there are young girls of about 12/13 years of age inside. It is believed that [Child 12] is again in a relationship with [name of suspect] which is worth considering if attempting to locate her whilst she is missing from home. They are believed to be going to Kloudz bar on Yorkshire street where there are rooms available upstairs."

- 4.29. Senior councillors and officers in both Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council were increasingly aware of such concerns in 2012. In April, Councillor W raised a concern with officers that children were attending shisha bars during the day, although neither the councillor's concern nor the response by senior officers referred to the threat of sexual exploitation. In July, Chief Inspector A met with Councillor W and Chief Superintendent A. Chief Inspector A sent a subsequent email seeking additional information from a council official:

"I was at a meeting to discuss premises which are often termed as 'shisha bars' but are not public facing but operate behind closed doors. There is a suspicion that they may be linked to organised crime, child sexual exploitation etc. [Cllr W]and [Chief Superintendent A] asked that a document be produced which identified who owns the premises, how it was purchased, who operates it, council/business tax."

- 4.30. It is evident, therefore, that the threat presented by shisha bars was understood at a senior level by both the council and Greater Manchester Police, and equally clear that they were attempting to address these concerns.

- 4.31. We have seen evidence of at least 12 visits to shisha premises in 2012 made by Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council and increasing concerns that these premises presented a safeguarding risk to vulnerable children. Positive Steps sent several reports that specified that children

supported by the Messenger team were frequenting shisha bars. While officers in Greater Manchester Police were concerned about these threats, it is apparent to us that the response throughout 2011 and 2012 was having very little impact on the operation of shisha bars and the threat they presented to vulnerable young people.

- 4.32. In around 2011 to 2012, the local church set up a volunteer scheme known as Street Angels. These volunteers would patrol the town centre on a Saturday night and intervene if they identified that children were vulnerable. We interviewed two of the volunteers. They explained that they had good connections with the town centre police team, who would brief them each evening on any potential concerns that might arise. They were informed of the concerns in respect of shisha bars and explained to the review team that the police were clearly determined to address these issues.

“Okay so we did see many young girls going in and that’s when for me personally I was a moth to a flame. I wanted to go in and see what these girls were doing. They often looked too young and being a mum, I would say, you, you, you, you, go. You know and I’m big enough and ugly enough to be able to handle myself so that’s why I think I became the bane of whoever owned that place because I didn’t feel it was appropriate and I didn’t feel it was right and I would ask them to leave. There was one time when I was in Oldham on Yorkshire Street, it was about 4 or 4:30 and I wrote this down because I actually saw a group of girls in [name of school redacted] uniforms going into the Shisha bar.”

- 4.33. The concerns presented by shisha bars continued throughout 2013.
- The Greater Manchester Police internal report notes that during March, April and May one piece of intelligence per month was submitted that referenced shisha bars. The April and May intelligence reports both referred to young ‘Messenger girls’ frequenting the Leisure Lounge shisha bar.
 - In February 2013, Chief Inspector A raised concerns about shisha bars at an Oldham Safeguarding Children Board meeting. The minutes stated: *“[Chief Inspector A] advised there are safeguarding issues around Shisha bars in Oldham. ... [Chief Inspector A] has asked that if anyone hears of any Shisha bars it needs feeding into the community safety team. They could potentially be CSE locations.”*
 - On 25 February, a children’s home emailed a social worker to report concerns in respect of Child 13, who, with another young person,

had mentioned going to shisha cafes in Oldham. The email specifically named two shisha bars. *“Staff are aware that, Oasis Shisha cafe also let out rooms for a few hours. These rooms are then used inappropriately.”*

- On 27 February 2013, Associate Assistant Director A sent an email to Chief Inspector A and copied to Councillor V. This explained that Councillor V had raised concerns about a property on King Street, opposite the Star Inn. A young girl had been seen entering the premises and there was concern about the building’s use. Councillor V was keen for the local safeguarding children board to receive regular monthly reports on child sexual exploitation, including monthly reports on police activity to prosecute/disrupt. Chief Inspector A replied on 14 March, copied to Councillor V and Chief Superintendent A:

“This is the premises I mentioned at the last LSCB²³, this is a real emerging safeguarding issue. We are arranging for patrols with police and college staff at key times ... We have had multiple meetings and discussions which really do not come up with a plan. The risks around CSE are massive.”

- 4.34. Chief Inspector A explained to the review team:

“I was concerned we needed a plan which effectively would disrupt and detect any offences. I was able to lead that response and the Police and Council provided taskable resources which on a weekly basis I would give them a list of premises to visit and at what time together with any intelligence profile we had. I would then receive an update on what they found.”

- 4.35. Oldham police convened a further meeting on the threat presented by the AYCE and Kloudz shisha bars in May 2013. The meeting invitation was copied to Councillor U, who commented on 16 April 2013 by email:

“I can't understand why we are struggling to gain entry when we've got all these concerns, surely Police have powers to get in! Is there any learning from Bradford/Blackburn as these two LA's have had Shisha bars for many years?”

²³ From 2006, all local authorities were required to have a local safeguarding children board (LSCB). They were responsible for coordinating local work to safeguard and promote children's welfare, ensuring the effectiveness of member organisations. They were replaced in 2019 by local safeguarding partnerships (LSP).

- 4.36. Later the same day Councillor U suggested the possibility of getting professional witnesses to gain access to the premises, possibly using Oldham Youth Council or children from another authority area.
- 4.37. The meeting was held on 10 May and was chaired by Chief Inspector A. The attendees included several officers from Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council, the LSCB business manager, and representatives from Oldham College, Oldham Sixth Form College and Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service. The minutes of the meeting revealed that Chief Inspector A outlined the current position regarding shisha bars and the intelligence picture around them and how they contributed to a risk of child sexual exploitation and a threat to cohesion. Furthermore, another police officer highlighted potential safeguarding issues relating to the AYCE and Oasis bars and reported that police officers had previously supported Oldham College staff in monitoring children visiting the premises. The minutes noted that once the children realised that they were being monitored, they chose not to enter. While this monitoring had limited impact, the officer suggested there was an opportunity to deliver a similar disruption activity in the future.
- 4.38. The meeting agreed that Chief Inspector A would write a problem profile to present to politicians, highlighting issues where changes in legislation were required. It was also agreed that multi-agency visits would be conducted to Kloudz and AYCE, involving trading standards and licensing, Unity Partnership (responsible for collecting business rates), Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service, Greater Manchester Police, Department for Work and Pensions, and the UK Border Agency. Approval was to be sought for surveillance under RIPA²⁴ to gather intelligence as part of a covert operation and it was requested that an educational programme prepared by Manchester City Council on shisha bars be forwarded to Oldham Safeguarding Children Board for dissemination in schools. The minutes noted that schools would be requested to notify parents that these premises were not what they were being portrayed as, and not necessarily as safe as they were led to believe.

²⁴ The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) regulates the powers of public bodies to carry out surveillance and investigation and covers the interception of communications.

- 4.39. This meeting confirms that, by May 2013, Greater Manchester Police, Oldham Council and their partners were aware of the various threats presented by shisha bars in the town, including the potential for child sexual exploitation. These minutes also demonstrate a comprehensive strategy to disrupt the operation of shisha bars and ensure that schools, colleges and politicians in Oldham were fully briefed on the dangers they presented.
- 4.40. In June 2013, the LSCB manager sent an email to Chief Inspector A explaining that they had not been made aware of the educational pack on shisha bars developed by Manchester City Council, but that the manager [did think it should come to the LSCB for dissemination into schools. However, while Oldham Council has endeavoured to locate evidence that this action was completed, it has been unable to find a record that this was done²⁵. Furthermore, we have seen the minutes of a meeting held with head teachers on 24 October 2013 and, while child sexual exploitation was an agenda item, there is no record in the minutes of shisha bars having been discussed. We can only conclude that the intention articulated at the meeting on 10 May 2013 to ask schools to notify parents of the risks was not carried out.
- 4.41. On 5 June 2013 Councillor W sent an email to the head of community safety and Leader A, among others, stating:
- “Given the reports this evening about the Blackburn Shisha bars²⁶ where there appears to be a link to CSE please can you advise the current situation with Shisha bars in Oldham- please reply to all.”*
- 4.42. Chief Inspector A responded with a detailed explanation. This email was copied to all the recipients of the original email from Councillor W, and also sent to the LSCB independent chair, the LSCB business manager and Councillor V. We have set out the content of Chief Inspector A’s email in full and it has been reproduced in the public domain on social media:

²⁵ We have asked Oldham Council for a copy of the information that was sent out to schools warning them of the threats presented by shisha bars. At our request, Oldham Council undertook an archive search of emails sent to head teachers’ and schools’ addresses between May and October 2013 with the key term ‘shisha’. The council was unable to find evidence that this action was completed.

²⁶ On 4 June 2013, a BBC report highlighted concerns that shisha bars were being used by paedophiles to groom children “as young as 13” in Blackburn and Darwen.

“Profile' in Oldham.

“Approximately 18 months ago a premises Cafe Mist, Horsedje Street operated as a public facing shisha bar ie it advertised itself as such and operated as such.

“Responding to intelligence that underage girls were engaging in sexual activity in the premises for alcohol a 'full police led' raid was conducted on the premises. Exactly as this news report there were no substantive criminal offences committed ie drug supply. Environmental Health Colleagues require evidence of actual smoking to prosecute ie catching somebody in the act of smoking. Interestingly these premises had never paid business rates. These premises subsequently closed.

“There is now an apparent illicit business model emerging where a premise usually an ex-public house will be bought and then pass through numerous owners and operators. These premises become 'private clubs' often advertising themselves on the internet via Facebook as a shisha bar though the front door is locked and access will only be given to 'known faces', rooms are available for rent by the hour and the premises are often available to be hired as a venue for the promotion of 'fresher's' type functions.

“Examples of this are Kloudz, Yorkshire Street, Oasis Cafe, King Street,

“Kloudz is a registered company at Companies House. It has never lodged any certified accounts and pays no business rates. It has been the target for intense partnership enforcement and currently has 4 outstanding health and safety breaches relating to electrics, asbestos, building safety and fire exits. I have chaired meetings to consider if there is sufficient evidence to obtain an ASB closure order but there is not persistent and serious public anti- social behaviour taking place.

“Oasis Cafe was brought to my attention and at the March Local Children's Safeguarding Board I raised it as a safeguarding issue as young people were leaving the college during the day and going into the cafe. We have arranged joint operations with staff from the college to safeguard their students, but this 'overt' action had little effect in the long term. As in the news story a concerned dad and brother has 'stormed' the premises dragging his daughter out.

“The Leisure Lounge was formally Riley's Snooker hall and it was also operating as a shisha bar but is currently closed and advertised for sale on Facebook. Interestingly I received a call from a safeguarding officer from Hathershaw College to say over the weekend some of their pupils had been seen removing TV's and other property from the Leisure Lounge and taking it into the Oasis Cafe. Greater Manchester Police received intelligence that an

Asian Heritage girl from [redacted] had been going into the Leisure Lounge [sensitive information redacted].

“[Councillor V] has been providing good support to me from the LSCB and with the safeguarding risk posed by these premises I called a critical safeguarding meeting on 10/5/13 to discuss the strategic and tactical actions we could take against these premises.

“[Redacted] is leading on a joint approach to Kloudz with Greater Manchester Police, HMRC, OMBC enforcement officers however the latest intelligence is that the premises have again 'changed hands' so the outstanding business rates etc with die with that transaction. There is no property of value within the premises.

“Joint action is planned in relation to Oasis and CCTV monitoring is being explored. A campaign will be undertaken to warn new college students of the risks posed by these types of premises,

“This model of purchasing premises is not just within the town centre. Ex-pubs can be bought cheaply at auction and applications are submitted to turn the upstairs into a house of multiple occupancy. This occurred at the Golden Buck in Chadderton.

“Planning permission was refused but when the premises were raided and hey presto people were living there but stated 'no money changes hands he lets me live here as a favour'. The risk here is that with the benefit changes more 'room only' accommodation will emerge.

“The current ASB legislation is not a suitable tactic, and I am developing a problem profile which [Councillor V] has undertaken to supply to government requesting a change to legislation. There may be an opportunity for the legislation change as the new ASB, Crime and Policing Bill passes through the house of commons.

“These premises pose a significant safeguarding risk. The operators are savvy at using the internet to market their activities and make contact with young people. They operate behind multiple changes of ownership and sub-letting and current legislation around ASB, Business Rate enforcement.”

- 4.43. In his interview with Greater Manchester Police on 12 November 2020²⁷, as part of the force’s internal review, Chief Inspector A explained that the attraction of the shisha bars was that they provided a place for some young

²⁷ Although the GMP review report is dated October 2020, it refers to an interview held with Chief Inspector A in November 2020.

Asian men to get away from their elders and be able to drink alcohol and take some drugs, and that some of them may have groomed young girls.

- 4.44. A number of our interviewees have questioned, with the benefit of hindsight, the wisdom of sending such a detailed email. As one senior manager explained:

“Chief Inspector A had a particular style in how he worked ... I think with this e-mail, the level of detail and the way it was phrased was inappropriate for a political briefing, particularly as it was dealing with things which were matters of concern which were being investigated, rather than established facts.”

- 4.45. On 5 June 2013 Councillor V forwarded this email to Mr K. Mr K was a former Labour councillor and associate of Councillor V's. He was also chair of a local children's charity operating in Oldham and Rochdale that provided services to children missing from home and at risk of exploitation. Mr K was also the father of Journalist A, who worked for the BBC. We will look in more detail in a later chapter at the reasons Councillor V chose to do this.

- 4.46. The following day, Journalist A made a request to the Oldham Council press office:

“You may have seen the story in the news earlier in the week about a raid on a Shisha café in Blackburn where inside they found a 13-year-old and a 15-year-old girl. So, there's the concerns, which are pretty longstanding to be fair, about people smoking inside Shisha cafes and breaking the law on that, but also now about the possibility of these cafes being used for sexual exploitation. They are actually set up as private members clubs which means you can't just walk into them and there are currently a few in Oldham. Oasis Café on King street near the college where lots of students have been going in and then Kloudz on Yorkshire street. Also, the former Welcome pub on Abbyhills road where very young girls have been seen going in and out late at night. These establishments are all run by men of Pakistani heritage, and you have to knock on a locked door and be let in or not. I'm told the former Gardeners pub has been bought with a similar plan in Lees.

“So, there are two elements here where I want to know if the Council is concerned and taking action ... First, on the issue of whether young people are going into these places to smoke inside. But secondly and most importantly, whether there are now safeguarding concerns about the possible sexual exploitation of young girls on these premises. I'm aware of a raid on a place called Shisha place called Café Mists on Horsage St around

two years ago where there were concerns about young girls being exploited. I don't think any charges came from that raid though. My understanding is that the fact that they are private members clubs means it's difficult to raid them without evidence of crimes being committed inside. I'll be speaking to the police and the colleges about this and it seems to me the obvious next step if men who have been exploiting girls are now conscious that it's not as easy as it was to pick up girls on the streets because the police are watching. Please get back to me on this as soon as you can. We want to know what the Council's position is on this and hopefully speak to someone who deals with safeguarding."

4.47. This clearly caused consternation at the highest level in the council. On 10 June 2013, Councillor W had a portfolio briefing meeting. The minutes recorded *"Shisha Bar... Concern about the level of detail that [Journalist A] had"*.

4.48. On 11 June, following a period of leave, Journalist A called the press office at Oldham Council and asked for an opportunity to interview someone from the council. A meeting was held of senior politicians on 12 June, and it was decided that Councillor U would call Journalist A to discuss the matter. Councillor U later reported back to the press office that Journalist A had agreed to drop the story.

4.49. In June 2013, Greater Manchester Police commenced Operation Tyrol. Phase 1 was an intelligence-gathering operation and overtime was granted in order to visit each shisha bar on the 'Wilmslow Road corridor' in south Manchester. During the visits, a questionnaire was completed, and a database made of all staff, management, owner and key holder details. The Greater Manchester Police internal report²⁸ stated:

"From phase 1 a thorough and detailed intelligence package was built up around every shisha bar and the persons employed in them. This intelligence package included thorough police systems checks and financial checks into the owners and the companies that were registered as the business. All the employees that had been identified from the visits were

²⁸ Review of Greater Manchester Police's response to allegations of child sexual exploitation in shisha bars in Oldham 2011–2014 and involving private hire drivers employed by Telecars 2008–2010. Greater Manchester Police Major Crime Review Unit, October 2020.

also researched. These packages were provided to the teams that entered the premises.”

- 4.50. Phase 2 of the operation was an enforcement phase, with the secondary aim of further intelligence gathering. The enforcement phase of the operation was a multi-agency approach that targeted specific premises identified via intelligence and Phase 1. The plan was to conduct visits to the premises every other week, usually on Thursday and Friday evenings, between July and December 2013. A police constable on the operation reported that:

“As the visits were progressing, we found out that the venues became aware of our presence and contacted each other to warn them. The management would then ensure that the premises were clear of wanted persons and underage individuals. To counter this we switched times and days with limited success. During the operation regular multi-agency meetings were held to debrief the visits and to plan and prioritise the next visits. Some premises were visited on numerous occasions if they were deemed to be more high risk for potential CSE and licensing offences.”

- 4.51. The internal report concluded:

“Clearly the premises were disrupted in their illegal activities as a result of operation Tyrol. In relation to CSE, PS [redacted] reported that they did not see any of their identified CSE victims in all their visits to shisha bars. They did find two 16-year-old girls in different shisha bars, one an outstanding missing from home. Neither was suspected to be at risk of CSE and both were returned to their home addresses. After Operation Tyrol was concluded, six warrants were executed at addresses connected to one of the shisha bars. These were the premises identified as causing the most concern over CSE and the criminal history of the staff. The addresses included the shisha bar, a takeaway restaurant, and homes of the owners. Both the takeaway and shisha bar were closed, the owner was arrested for money laundering and abstract electricity.”

- 4.52. Nonetheless, while the amount of intelligence about children visiting shisha bars did diminish after the operation was completed, it increased again later. Following Operation Tyrol, meetings were held with the local community, who largely supported the action taken against the shisha bars. The managers and owners of the shisha bars understood the need to protect children and were keen not to have their businesses associated with child sexual exploitation.

- 4.53. On 6 June 2013, there was a further Oldham ‘street safe’ patrol visit to Shugga Rush. It appeared to be running as a shisha bar, but the person present denied this. On 22 June a street safe patrol reported that the premises formerly known as Kloudz, which occupied the former Mess House, was to reopen as Fantasia, a shisha bar. On 28 June 2013, the street safe patrol reported that Kloudz was to be relaunched as Fantasia and would open around mid-August, noting:

“The rear yard would have decking and shelter for shisha smoking pipes. It will open from midday until around 9pm 7 days per week. However, between 9pm - 1am, premises will remain open with no new admissions.”

- 4.54. On 13 June 2013, Chief Inspector A wrote to the Greater Manchester Police and Crime Commissioner. This appeared to be an action arising from the meeting on 13 May. In this letter the chief inspector suggested that the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill making its way through Parliament needed to be strengthened to tackle the threat presented by shisha bars. In the letter, Chief Inspector A informed the police and crime commissioner that there was intelligence to suggest that children who accessed these venues were vulnerable to child sexual exploitation. This same letter also went to the local MP. The police and crime commissioner responded on 18 June, indicating that he intended to raise these concerns with the House of Commons Public Bill Committee later that week.

- 4.55. In July 2013, the Oldham LSCB’s annual report was published. There was no mention of shisha bars or the potential threat they posed. On 1 July 2013, Oasis Café was visited by a routine police patrol. A smell of cannabis was noted and the use of shisha. The cafe was reported to environmental health for permitting smoking on the premises. It was noted that rooms were let out to teenagers.

- 4.56. On 1 July 2013, the Greater Manchester Police press officer informed the Oldham Council press office that Journalist A had asked for a comment in respect of the “*shisha bar story*”. On 1 July, the senior communications officer from Greater Manchester Police approached a police sergeant in the Oldham division for an up-to-date position on shisha bars so that they could respond to the BBC. The sergeant replied on 3 July:

“There has been no evidence to support claims of sexual exploitation in Shisha Bars to my knowledge. I did a lot of work around these premises when I had responsibility for the town centre. There was one or two pieces of intelligence in relation to one Shisha bar which suggested that Messenger

subjects visited there. On every occasion when we visited these premises the only issue which came to light was smoking inside the premises and health and safety issues. I worked closely with all partner agencies and also worked with [an analyst] from the CRU at Oldham council. She too reviewed all the evidence in relation to one particular premises as we had a couple of issues in relation to ASB at one bar, and there were no offences and very little to support ASB. [A sergeant] and myself have visited these premises, time and time again, in order to establish if there were any issues for the Police.

“On most of the occasions I found students (of college age) using these premises to merely socialise and smoke Shisha, which is a matter for Environmental Health.”

This does provide contemporaneous evidence that the message to the BBC subsequently released was not deliberately ‘spun’ to downplay the threat presented by shisha bars.

- 4.57. On 2 July 2013, the director of children’s services asked Chief Inspector A to call to discuss how the police and the council could jointly step up their actions to remove the risk of child sexual exploitation at shisha bar locations. Chief Inspector A responded as follows:

“I am meeting Chief Superintendent A at 2.00 to discuss this along with a senior manager. To be honest I feel we have it covered for example last week I tasked our Messenger patrol to visit the Queens Public House which is due to open as a Shisha Bar. Currently closed likely to open during Ramadan. Police patrols visited the town centre premises over the weekend. Oasis is closed as it’s had its electricity cut off £5k outstanding. Kloudz is closed due to health and safety prohibitions but is being renovated to open again as a shisha bar. Sugar Rush states it is only used by friends to chill out but had a menu board stating prices for shisha’s so is being reported to business rates enforcement. I am currently submitting a bid and I have attached a drafted to the police for extra enforcement around CSE. I have done a mapping exercise around a current network which has some links to premises. The biggest risk actually is around certain residential properties and I discussed with Superintendent A, calling a strategic meeting with partners to discuss a more proactive enforcement phase. We are meeting today about the MASH and I will have the network chart if you want to take a look.”

- 4.58. Chief Inspector A provided the review team with some context in respect of these comments:

“My comment ‘we have it covered’ was that we had this plan and task and coordination process which was operating well. It wasn’t that I thought the problem had gone away. The Shisha Bars went out of operation quickly, but CSE was still a risk especially around residential or private spaces where it operated out of sight of any capable guardian.”

4.59. The meeting between the council and Greater Manchester Police on ‘unlicensed businesses’ in Oldham was held on the afternoon of 2 July 2013. It was chaired by Chief Superintendent A, who was accompanied by several senior police officers, a police constable from the Messenger team and the Greater Manchester Police press officer. The council was represented by Councillor W (portfolio holder for cooperatives and neighbourhoods) and two senior council officers.

4.60. Chief Superintendent A opened the meeting with the statement that:

“Recognition was needed of the political sensitivities surrounding ‘Shisha Bars’ when they are being described as being used by Asian males to have sex with ‘white females’. Following discussion there was a consensus that there may be a perception of CSE occurring at these premises but, during all visits conducted by officers, there has been no hard and fast evidence to substantiate this. It was agreed that [the Greater Manchester Police press officer] should contact the BBC to try and talk them out of running the story as there is no substantive evidence to suggest that CSE is occurring in any of these premises and that they are not in fact Shisha Bars. There are no Shisha Bars in Oldham.”

4.61. Chief Inspector A explained to the review team that the comment in the opening statement of *“no hard or fast evidence of CSE occurring in the premises”* was an example of the police and council using an evidential threshold to base their comments on. The chief inspector felt this was somewhat disingenuous and reflected the concerns that both Greater Manchester Police and the council had in respect of reputational risk.

4.62. Chief Superintendent A reported back to Chief Executive A after the meeting:

“We set the issues into context, established what we actually knew and where the intelligence gaps are and then developed a plan to move it forward. This may actually fall more into the OCG [organised crime group] arena than anything else and we would like a member of the OMBC fraud

team to work with us on unpicking some of the networks ... our press office is putting a letter together for [Journalist A].”

- 4.63. On the same day, a copy of the proposed press statement was shared by Chief Superintendent A with representatives of the council, including Councillor W and Chief Executive A. The original draft included the following sentence:

“One proposal we could look at would be to hold fire on the story and come out on a raid or operation when we visit these premises so you can see exactly what is going on.”

- 4.64. Councillor W responded as follows:

“Thanks [A]. I'm not sure at this stage that the suggestion of [Journalist A] going with police/council officers on a "raid" is appropriate. As I understand it there has only been one instance anyway where there was sufficient evidence to actually raid premises. Also I seem to remember that one of your officers wanted to consult with colleagues who had been into these premises before making that offer?”

- 4.65. Chief Superintendent A acknowledged this as “a good point” and the Greater Manchester Police press officer amended the draft statement accordingly. Councillor W copied this exchange to Leader A and Chief Executive A. The email to Journalist A was dispatched the following day (3 July 2013). This was over four weeks after the journalist’s initial press inquiry. The email stated:

“The premises we are talking about here are not Shisha Bars at all, but rather private establishments bought through auctions for a cheap price and then used for private purposes. As you say, entry is through knocking on the door and is for private members only. The main point is the one about CSE and possible grooming going on at these premises. From the report you’ve seen, you’ll see there are only two pieces of intelligence Greater Manchester Police has ever received about possible sexual exploitation – enforcement action was taken but there was no evidence to substantiate these pieces of intelligence. I would also add there has been no crimes reported to Greater Manchester Police about CSE at these private premises. That is not to say that CSE is not taking place, but rather that we have only two pieces of intelligence to suggest it might have done and nothing to substantiate that being the case.

“This is where our main concern would lie. Given the tensions in Oldham with EDL etc and the upcoming funeral of Fusilier Lee Rigby we are concerned that any sensationalist and inaccurate reporting about CSE occurring at these private premises when there is no evidence to back that up would cause an uproar in Oldham and seriously affect community relations, leading to possible protests and disorder.

“These premises are certainly something we are aware of and are working with Oldham council to substantiate how they operate and what goes on behind doors which may be wider criminality. However, to focus on CSE at this time would inflame the situation without any evidence to really back it up.

“One proposal we could look at would be to hold fire on the story for now and revisit this when we have more evidence of what is going on at these premises and involve yourselves in any operation.”

- 4.66. This exchange of emails is at the heart of the suggestion on social media that the council deliberately understated the known threats presented by shisha bars to protect the Labour Party. Chief Executive A explained to the review team when interviewed:

“The issue with shisha bars and the definition of shisha bars versus private members clubs might feel its semantic but it’s quite important. I think the term shisha bars was used in a generic way, if it had said we didn’t have a problem with private members clubs my view was of course we had a problem but we had a problem about a set number of these which we subsequently dealt with and by the end of 2013 most of those bar one, which we couldn’t buy because it got into a ridiculous position had come into the control of the LA [local authority] so the issues of those particular venues had disappeared. The key concern was this, was there as wider issue about CSE was there a wider issue safeguarding yes and we were alive to that but when you make a direct link to that where the far right at the time were saying at the time these people are abusing our children and making the links about shisha bars and using the term in a generic way you had a potential cocktail for disaster.”

- 4.67. In our interview, Journalist A was clear that for them and their organisation it was a judgement call. Journalist A accepted the view presented by the police that there was no evidence of child sexual exploitation and also the view that a report on Asian men grooming White girls in these premises could potentially inflame community tensions. Journalist A told us in interview:

“It was quite an intense response, and the language was over the top considering my track record at Radio Manchester. I took this as a response

from the Council and the police and this was after the whole month of me saying I wasn't happy with their first response. In conversations they told me they were onto it and the situation was being monitored, but then in the email it was the first time the funeral of Lee Rigby was mentioned, but when I read that, in my professional opinion, it didn't seem an unreasonable concern because there had been EDL²⁹ protests in the town and Oldham hadn't lost the tension from the riots. The key line for me and my editor at the time in that statement where it says 'there is only two pieces of intelligence Greater Manchester Police has ever received about possible sexual exploitation, action was taken but there was no evidence to substantiate these pieces of intelligence' as a journalist it's a situation where the police are telling you the information you have is not inaccurate it is out of date, in conversations with Council press officer I was being told the situation is being monitored and essentially the implication of me going down there knocking on doors caused worry."

4.68. On 10 July, Journalist A replied:

"In our view there is clearly a safeguarding issue with these private clubs, whether it be CSE or not, and with more of these empty pubs being bought at auction by Asian men it seems to us it's one that is certainly not going away. But we do acknowledge the particular tensions of the moment and appreciate that the understanding of what activities are taking place in these clubs may not be as well established as the email I saw seemed to suggest. Having said that, I've spoken to a number of people about it and I'm aware of concern, particularly among Asian councillors, about the pattern that is emerging. I've also spoken to people living and working near these establishments who are worried about what's going on behind the closed doors.

"This is an issue that you're going to have to talk about at some point and we would suggest sooner rather than later if you want to control the fall out. All it would take is for one father who drags his daughter out of one of these places to go to the Sun and you won't get the genie back in the bottle.

"So, we will be monitoring the concerns around these establishments as I'm sure you will be and we would ask that if any operations are planned or you decide the time is right warn parent about these places, then you give us first opportunity to run the story or come on any operations."

²⁹ English Defence League.

- 4.69. When interviewed by the review team, Journalist A explained that, while the BBC decided not to pursue the story in a way that interfered with an ongoing investigation, it did not mean they had dropped interest in the story and that was why they continued to pursue the story over time.
- 4.70. On 12 July 2013, there was the funeral in Bury and burial in Middleton, Rochdale, of Fusilier Lee Rigby, who had been murdered in a terrorist attack.
- 4.71. Street patrols continued to look into activities within the shisha bars throughout the summer of 2013. This was, no doubt, the agreed action arising from the meeting chaired by Chief Superintendent A. On 13 July, a visit was made to the AYCE Café. There were only two adults present. Two used, but cold, shisha pipes were found at the rear of the cafe. It was evident that some painting and decorating had taken place inside, but this was described as being to a poor standard. The general state of the premises was run down and untidy. The basement area had around 100 black bin liners containing rubbish strewn across the floor. On the same night a visit was made to Oasis. The premises were in darkness and no activity was noted. On 23 July an Oldham police officer reported the following, which was passed to the head of community safety, Chief Inspector A and Chief Superintendent A:
- “I have looked at Kloudz Facebook and there has been no conversation since April 2013; looked at Head Rush (King St.) - there has been no conversation on Facebook since 15th June; Was unable to locate a Facebook page to Oasis (Ayce Express Shisha), King St. I did come across a posting on Facebook, where it was stated that they would not be undertaking any Shisha during Ramadan (not sure this applies to all.”*
- 4.72. On 16 July 2013, the council press officer became aware of a query from another BBC reporter, Journalist B, in respect of child sexual exploitation and asking for figures to compare the prevalence of child sexual exploitation across all Greater Manchester authorities.
- 4.73. On 22 July 2013, an Oldham Council communications officer responded to the questions posed by Journalist B at the BBC.
- “How many young people are believed to be actually experiencing child sexual exploitation in your area currently?”*

“Answer: The Messenger team is currently working with 40 individuals. However, this does not mean that they are necessarily victims of CSE. These are young people who we consider to be 'at risk' and are working alongside to prevent them becoming victims. It's important to note that these figures cannot be easily used to draw comparison with other geographical areas. The recording of incidence of CSE is not synchronised regionally or nationally and will vary from area to area.

“Can you give an overall figure for how many young people are currently at risk of CSE in your area? If you can please break this down on the spectrum to include those at high risk, through to those showing early signs?

“Answer: At present we can't report on this group. There are a range of variables that cannot be easily isolated as definitive pre-cursors to CSE.

“How many cases involving CSE have your SCR [Serious Case Review] Consideration Panel looked at?

“Answer: None.

“How many of these have resulted in a SCR or any other kind of review?

“Answer: Not applicable.

“Please give three features of what your LSCB is doing to safeguard children against CSE — good examples to show where it is working.

“Answer: We have had a specialist Messenger team in place now since 2006 to prioritise this work. This is multi-agency — including Oldham council, social workers and specialists from children's charity Barnardo's, and also works across other local authorities. We have also established a Missing from Home and CSE strategic subgroup. This is to ensure that effective practice is in place from young people who go missing from home and CSE, including e safety. We carry out training with all people who work in this area, including teachers, faith groups, and social workers, to raise awareness and help them to get a better understanding so that they can proactively spot and act upon the signs of young people at risk. This includes a basic awareness raising session and a two-day in-depth training session: both led by Barnardo's. it is available also for voluntary staff and we are introducing it now for taxi-drivers and other licence holders. Local sexual health services have also received training. We also carry out awareness raising programmes in schools and youth clubs. We have, for example, commissioned work with a theatre group which visits secondary schools and colleges across the Borough.

“Please highlight key areas where you recognise you need to do more as a board.

“Answer: To develop more effective data collection to inform future service design and delivery, and to improve outcomes for children at risk of CSE.”

We believe this provides further evidence that the council was frank about the occurrence of child sexual exploitation in Oldham and was prepared to engage with the media about this.

- 4.74. On 23 July 2013 Chief Inspector A produced a report titled *Unregulated premises problem profile – position statement*. We have considered this report and its appendices carefully and it primarily draws on incidents that had occurred in 2011 and 2012 to support the view that shisha bars presented a potential threat. The report distinguished between legitimate shisha bars and those operating as private premises, stating:

“The use of this generic term for any premises where shisha pipes are found fails to draw a distinction between premises which are at one end of a spectrum public facing premises which fully comply with the environmental health no smoking legislation, paying business rates etc through to premises which operate as private premises with locked doors, blacked out windows and which only allow entry to ‘known faces’.”

The report questioned whether there was an organised crime link with shisha bars and stated this was currently being researched by Operation Caminada. While one shisha bar had previous intelligence entries relating to organised crime group (OCG) connections to the premises, the remainder had no connections. Chief Inspector A concluded that there was a reducing trend of OCG-related intelligence and reduction in level of risk. The chief inspector also concluded that there was currently no identified OCG involvement in unregulated premises. In respect of safeguarding, Chief Inspector A stated:

“Appendix 3 a, b and c shows the historic intelligence entries which do name previous CSE victims who have accessed these premises. They have or are still supported by Operation Messenger, but none have made any formal disclosure for incidents of abuse taking place within these premises. Operation Messenger staff have been consulted and there is no current intelligence which identifies any named vulnerable children being linked to these premises.”

- 4.75. The report concluded that the application of a partnership problem-solving approach to these premises had given Oldham an evidence base of ‘what works’ and developed experience and knowledge within a range of staff to manage this type of premises as they emerge.

“The repeated visits to the premises within Operation Street safe give an intrusive disruption tactic which stops illicit or illegal behaviour developing.”

- 4.76. On 29 July 2013, Chief Superintendent A attended Councillor W’s portfolio briefing. The meeting minutes recorded that:

“[Chief Superintendent A] reported that the BBC had got hold of the information re: Shisha Bars. Police have been visiting the Shisha Bars weekly and been granted access. There is no evidence to suggest that there is Sexual Exploitation of children going on and therefore nothing enforceable that the police can do. There is a wider risk of exploitation at other properties e.g. flats, houses etc but not specifically Shisha bars/licensed premises. Chief Superintendent A is proposing to invite [Journalist A] in to put all information into context and even welcome [Journalist A] to visit the Shisha Bars. Chief Superintendent A asked for feedback. ACTION: [Chief Superintendent A] will speak to Comms.”

- 4.77. On the same day, a written complaint was submitted by Leader A and the police and crime commissioner to the monitoring officer and Chief Executive A. The complaint was that Councillor V had leaked a confidential email to a member of the public, who subsequently sent the information to a reporter at the BBC. They asked that the matter be referred to the standards committee for formal investigation. This matter is covered in detail in Chapter Seven.

- 4.78. On 2 August 2013, a licensing officer submitted an intelligence report following night-time patrols. The officer had made a visit to AYCE Café and noted that there were a couple of men playing on a machine and shisha pipes were seen but not lit. Within the basement area to the right of the stairs, the officer noted that there were quite a few flies, and approximately 100 full refuse bags containing debris, food and waste. The person present stated that the previous manager (who had now gone to manage Kloudz) had left the bags and the new manager had placed them in the basement. The licensing officer also made a visit to Shugga/Head Rush, which was closed at the time, but a light was on in the middle floor and there were six men outside waiting for it to open. The officer then visited Oasis and spoke with the owner and saw quite a few unlit shisha pipes and coals in the kitchen area. The premises had had their electricity supply cut off as the tenants had not paid the bill. On the counter, the officer noted that there were some leaflets stating that the premises were open for business and that they would be serving hot and cold drinks.

- 4.79. These intelligence reports are notable as it is clear that some shisha bars were still operating, and this was known to the authorities.
- 4.80. The 2020 Greater Manchester Police internal report stated that in August 2013 one intelligence log referred to an *“Operation Messenger girl putting herself at risk by visiting shisha bars”*; the report did not specify which bars she visited. However, we have seen a report by the same analyst dated 2 August 2013 that specifically names two children and the shisha bars visited. The police analyst informed Chief Inspector A by email that they had just discovered that there were serious concerns for Child 14, who was going out daily and meeting Asian men for sex and attempting to take other young women out with her (including Child 2), where they met prior to moving on to other places to have sex. The analyst’s email listed nine venues for such meetings, including three shisha bars. It is of concern that Child 2 had been drawn to the attention of the authorities as early as 2011, when she was a very young teenager, and was known to visit shisha bars and was continuing to be at risk in 2013.
- 4.81. Following the freedom of information request from Journalist B, Journalist A had been informed that Leader A believed this to be a continuation of Journalist A’s own story on shisha bars in Oldham. On 7 August 2013, Journalist A sent an email to Leader A. This email had subsequently been shared on social media and formed a key exhibit in the suggestion that Leader A did not want the shisha story to be publicised and that the BBC colluded with this intention. We have copied the email in its entirety:
- “Email from Journalist A to Leader A 7 August 2013*
- “As you’re aware, last month I was passed some information about concerns about private clubs in Oldham and suspicions about CSE taking place inside them. As a responsible journalist I made enquiries with both you and Greater Manchester Police. Despite contacts in the Asian community confirming to me that there was concern about young people going into these clubs, at the request of Greater Manchester Police and the Council, we agreed not to broadcast anything after you told us that knowledge about the activities at these clubs was very limited and you were concerned about tensions in the town ahead of Lee Rigby’s funeral. You assured us that this issue wasn’t being ignored, that you were monitoring the situation, and should action be taken we would be first to know.*
- “On this basis, I agreed to hold any story on the private clubs for the time being. I have been true to my word. I have only discussed the story with my news editor and no-one else at BBC Radio Manchester.*

“However, I have come back from two weeks holiday to be told [Leader A] that you’re of the opinion that I was also behind the request for the CSE figures and that this is somehow a continuation of my requests for information on the private members clubs. This is not the case.

“A colleague at Radio Manchester, [Journalist B], has spent the past year covering the fallout from the high profile CSE court case in Rochdale and he has covered the story extensively and professionally, often with the cooperation of Rochdale Council.

“Following [the police and crime commissioner]’s statement that stopping CSE was his priority as Police and Crime Commissioner, [Journalist B] thought it would be good to establish how many children in the city region were currently considered to be ‘at risk’ and so began contacting Councils including your own.

“That is a legitimate request. How else would the public know next year if [the police and crime commissioner] had achieved what he set out to do if they didn’t know what the starting point was? All ten Councils gave [Journalist B] the information and the story ran this yesterday. The story didn’t mention the Oldham figures individually. This request was in no way linked to the private clubs story and I had no involvement in it.

“I want to make it clear that when I said I would stop pursuing the CSE story about the private clubs that is what I did. That said, I should also make it clear that if I get more information which suggests there is CSE taking place at these private clubs then I will be back in touch. I feel my integrity is being questioned so I hope this puts the record straight. I have always had a good relationship with your communications team and would be very disappointed if your misunderstanding damaged the trust between us.”

4.82. Leader A responded on the same day:

“Whilst I acknowledge your email I am not going to go into a detailed response, mainly because I go on leave myself tomorrow (technically started yesterday but happened to be on email just now).”

4.83. Leader A then copied this reply to Chief Executive A with the following covering note:

“For your information. I’m not going to get into a detailed response because it is clear about deflecting the member complaint, or that’s my reading of it in any case.”

- 4.84. We have interviewed Journalist A and Leader A in respect of this email exchange. For his part, Journalist A explained that he had returned from holiday and was told by his father that the view of the council was that he had misled them, and they believed that he was still actively pursuing the shisha bar story after he had said he would step back from it. He accepted at one level the response appeared petulant but stated that he felt aggrieved, and he was not happy with the idea that those people who he thought should have respected his integrity were apparently misunderstanding and misconstruing the freedom of information (FoI) request from Journalist B as him misleading them. Journalist A stated:

“No, me and [Leader A] never had a conversation about this. When I emailed [Leader A] and said ‘you told me’ I never had communication with [Leader A] at the time, this referred to the organisation that he was leading as in the council in partnership with the police. This has been mis-interpreted) in [redacted]’s blog that [Leader A] personally tried to use Lee Rigby’s funeral to put me off the story. I was referring to the organisations and my earlier correspondence with the Council and Greater Manchester Police. When that email is read in its entirety it is much clearer that the reference to “you” meant the council.”

- 4.85. Clearly, if Journalist A had not spoken directly to Leader A the use of the phrase *“I have been told by your officers ...”* would have been more accurate, less confrontational and more likely to have engendered a more constructive response from Leader A. Leader A has also informed the review team that they did not have a conversation about this matter. Journalist A has maintained that he does not have a private relationship with Leader A, and it was clear from our interview that Leader A approached any contact with Journalist A with a certain degree of caution as he was the son of Mr K. While we have reviewed over 400 email exchanges between council officers and Journalist A, we have seen nothing to suggest otherwise. All the emails were primarily in response to standard press releases and there was very little direct correspondence with elected members.
- 4.86. Journalist A explained in his interview that he never received a fuller response to his email, although this had been promised by Leader A. He did share with the review team that in 2019 they had a conversation as the matter was being raised on social media. Leader A asked him if they had ever spoken about this subject. Journalist A said **“no”**, and Leader A then asked why the email said, *“you told me”*, if they never spoke about it. Journalist A explained that he had meant *“you”* as in the organisation and Leader A commented that this was *“unfortunate”*.

- 4.87. We have been provided with assurance from the council's managing director of children's and young people's services that we have been supplied with all available correspondence between Journalist A and the council. We do acknowledge, as set out in Appendix C, that correspondence from and to members but not copied to officers of the council has not been retrieved as this was not archived. Given the number of senior officers involved in this correspondence, our view, on the balance of probabilities, is that we have been shown all the relevant information to allow us to reach our conclusion.
- 4.88. Having reviewed all the evidence, we have found nothing to support the assertion that Journalist A and Leader A colluded to hide from the public the potential threat presented by shisha bars and child sexual exploitation. However, there is clear evidence that both the police and the council were concerned about the impact on community cohesion at a sensitive time.
- 4.89. On 1 October 2013, intelligence was submitted on locations where 'Operation Messenger girls' were being sexually exploited. These locations included three shisha bars in Oldham – AYCE, Kloudz and Oasis.
- 4.90. When asked about the intelligence from 1 October, the detective sergeant who submitted it recalled:
- "When I first went into the office in 2013 there was intelligence from one of the Messenger subjects, that she was visiting several shisha bars in the town. I asked for several types of surveillance on her and on the premises when she reached 16 years but the risk was deemed too high for surveillance. So we did overt checks on the premises but couldn't always get access to the shisha bars as they are not licensed and we had no powers to enter. What we did then was use the Environmental Health agency or fire services that do have rights to enter. We couldn't get warrants to enter as there wasn't sufficient evidence or intelligence to obtain them from the information we had."*
- 4.91. On 23 October 2013, Journalist A wrote a second time to Senior Communications Officer A in respect of shisha bars:
- "On the private club's story, I'd like to request again that someone from the Council speaks to us about it. Lee Rigby's funeral is months ago now which was put forward as the main concern re possible tensions. I want to know if these clubs still considered a child protection issue. I'm told they are. If they are, what is the Council doing about it? You have the chance to move*

proactively on this. It will come out eventually and when it does, just like happened in Rochdale, parents will want to know why the Council knew all about it for months if not years and didn't warn them about the dangers they were well aware of. The publicity from that will be a lot worse than anything you're worried about at the moment."

- 4.92. Journalist A explained that, when he agreed to step back from the story temporarily, he thought he would get a call from Greater Manchester Police to be asked to join in on an operation. He had received no such request and he had also received information from sources that the situation was not particularly being monitored, and Lee Rigby's funeral had also passed so Greater Manchester Police's area of concern was no longer valid. Senior Communications Officer A responded on 23 October and stated that they could not respond until they had spoken to Chief Executive A and Leader A together. However, it appears that on 24 October Senior Communications Officer A and Journalist A spoke on the telephone about three matters. The first is not relevant our review, the second was the suspension of Councillor V (covered in Chapter Seven) and the third was in respect of the unlicensed premises.

- 4.93. We have been provided with a copy of an email sent by Senior Communications Officer A to Chief Executive A on 24 October.

"After a series of phone calls and extremely robust conversations with [Journalist A] he has now backed down and agreed to completely drop the stories on (a) [redacted as not within our terms of reference], and (b) [Councillor V]. I also, after some fact-finding with [Chief Inspector A,] convinced him there is no issue with private members' clubs in Oldham. All premises referred to in that infamous 'email' are now out of operation and we monitor them every week. In comparison with other neighbours across Lancashire, we simply don't have a problem: He has now also dropped that story.

"It has taken nearly two days but killing all three is a right old result in the end.

"PS. In case you didn't know: We've also won Best City at Northwest in Bloom again today."

- 4.94. We have interviewed Senior Communications Officer A, who stated in this interview that they would only have relayed the information that had been given to them by Chief Inspector A. However, whether it was known to

Senior Communications Officer A and Chief Inspector A or not, it was an overstatement to suggest that there was no issue with the private clubs and that all the ones referred to in the leaked email were out of operation. Only three weeks earlier an intelligence report had identified that Messenger subjects were still frequenting AYCE, Kloudz and Oasis.

- 4.95. Journalist A's recollection of the conversation was somewhat different:

"I recall [Senior Communications Officer A] saying 'they are all closed down now so the issue has gone away' and I wasn't happy with that, and we still hadn't addressed whether these places had been active places of concern for CSE, and I wanted to know what had been done as I wanted to run the story."

- 4.96. On 23 November 2013, Chief Inspector A met with the independent investigator considering the standards complaint against Councillor V. The investigator quoted Chief Inspector A:

"Chief Inspector A said that shisha bars are no longer an issue in Oldham. None are open. The premises have generally been turned into living accommodation. Kloudz has changed hands. The police received intelligence that one might open – an 'e-shisha bar' using electronic cigarettes or the like – but in reality, the business model does not work. The income is insufficient to maintain the premises (which is why bypassing the electricity meter was not uncommon) and overt surveillance by the police and others prevented their use for more remunerative illegal activity."

- 4.97. Nonetheless, in December 2013, Operation Waterloo was commenced by a detective inspector and detective sergeant, aiming to disrupt CSE 'hotspots'. The operational order stated that:

"Oldham Town Centre has a busy night- time leisure economy with a high number of take away premises. This economy attracts alcohol and drug usage attracting young people, which in turn can attract sexual predators. Oldham has also seen the opening of so called "shisha bars" which have in other areas become "honey pots" for vulnerable young people, the Phoenix-Messenger Team are aware of a number of these premises but there remains very little intelligence in relation to these premises."

- 4.98. The detective sergeant is reported to have told the 2020 Greater Manchester Police internal review that shortly after joining Operation Messenger she

started to hear about 'kids' being taken to particular areas or shisha bars. She thought that these snippets were talked about in Operation Challenger organised crime group meetings that Chief Inspector A chaired. She could not be sure of the source, and she believed the intelligence was more a sort of 'word on the street' fed back by community social workers. Because of the lack of clarity and corroboration, the detective sergeant felt that it would be best to gather further intelligence and basically prove or disprove the rumours and then take measures to disrupt if they were proven. The team was assisted by five constables and two special constables for the operation. The intention was to split the operation into two phases, the first to research and gather intelligence and the second to be a proactive phase.

The Waterloo operational order contained a list of the following shisha bars: Café Mist on Horsedge Street; Kloudz (previously the Old Mess House); Queens Hotel, Rochdale Road; Oasis, King Street; Sugar Rush; Golden Buck, Chadderton; and Welcome Inn, Abbey Hills. The order also contained a list of a further 10 'hotspot locations'. The operational order listed the following aims:

- Assist in the safeguarding and disruption of activity involving subjects already known to Phoenix–Messenger
- Identify young people not known to the service that may be at risk of CSE and take action to safeguard and educate those individuals
- Gather intelligence regarding the locations and perpetrators of CSE in the Oldham area
- Attempt to engage service users to develop understanding of their risk/activities.

4.99. Updates gathered for Operation Waterloo on 6 and 7 December had no information on, or mention of, the shisha bars. On 8 December it was noted that all shisha bars had been checked, with the following results:

- Sugar Rush, King Street – *“open however no one present”*
- Café Mist, Horsedge Street – *“no longer open”*
- Queens Hotel, Rochdale Road – *“under renovation”*
- Oasis, King Street – *“closed”*
- Golden Buck, Manchester Street – *“spoke with occupants of flats above, premises being renovated as restaurant”*
- Welcome Inn, Abbey Hills Road – *“under renovation occupant states will be a private dwelling”*

- Kloudz (Old Mess House), Yorkshire Street – *“premises not open to public as yet however about 6 people inside. Manager states will be open in January and is happy to have regular visits. Will be allowing under 18 years in premises until 6pm only”*.

4.100. The Greater Manchester Police internal review commented:

“Although not considered to have a significant effect on the running of Operation Waterloo officers could have conducted better research into shisha bars in Oldham prior to the operation commencing. Police and open sources did contain intelligence about CSE and shisha bars which was not recorded on the Operation Order.”

4.101. Nonetheless, by the end of the year, Operation Waterloo had established that a number of the shisha bars perceived as a threat had since closed down and had not identified that those that were open presented any substantial concerns.

4.102. On 10 December 2013, Oldham Council issued a press release stating that the former Oasis Café was to be demolished after a tenant vacated the property in October 2013.

4.103. In January 2014, Greater Manchester Police produced a CSE problem profile³⁰. Within this document there is no mention of either the threat presented by shisha bars or private hire taxis.

4.104. On 15 January, Journalist A put a series of questions to Senior Communications Officer A at Oldham Council, explaining that Oldham *“will be part of the half hour story”*. The journalist’s questions were:

- *“You said before Christmas that all the shisha bars/private clubs of concern had closed since the summer. Would you please check if that’s still the case?”*
- *“If they have all closed, would you find out how the Council managed to achieve this if it was involved. Last time we spoke you mentioned*

³⁰ Understanding CSE in Oldham problem profile. Greater Manchester Police, 2014.

health and safety issues with the building etc. Obviously, you've bought one of the buildings but I'm guessing that was the plan anyway.

- *"Are these kinds of establishments still a concern to your safeguarding team?"*
- *"Did the Council at any time, whether in conjunction with the sixth form college or otherwise, attempt to warn parents in the town about the child protection risks it knew existed at these establishments?"*
- *"Can you tell me if Oldham council has been part of efforts to get this amendment to the Anti-social behaviour bill?"*

4.105. On 16 January, Journalist A sent a second email that indicated that he and Senior Communications Officer A had spoken on the phone. In this email the journalist asked a second set of questions:

- *"How many of these shisha bar/private clubs are there in the town currently?"*
- *"How many were there a year ago?"*
- *"How many has the Council safeguarding team had concerns about?"*
- *"How many has the Council been able to shut down in the past year?"*
- *"How were you able to shut them down?"*
- *"What, if anything, have you done to make parents and children aware of the risks of these places?"*
- *"These are the questions we're asking to all the Councils, ranging from you, Manchester and Blackburn to Bradford and Leicester and others."*

Journalist A added that the previous questions could now be discarded.

4.106. We have not seen how Senior Communications Officer A responded to these questions. However, on 16 February 2014, Leader A alerted Senior Communications Officer A that the BBC was to broadcast Journalist A's story on shisha bars. Senior Communications Officer A's reply is revealing:

"Thanks [Leader A]. As discussed, we've picked up and monitored.

"The timing of it is purely down to me kicking off and insisting he expand the question GM wide – then delaying our answers so that he was forced to

widen the net. Been ultra-combative to ensure it did not become an Oldham-centric story and am confident this isn't."

We questioned Senior Communications Officer A on the approach they had taken. They maintained that their only intention was to ensure that the story was not just about Oldham but also about the context within the Greater Manchester area. Senior Communications Officer A explained they believed these serious issues were not specific or unique to Oldham alone – the issues were wider and involved individuals acting across borough boundaries around Greater Manchester and beyond.

The communications officer was unable to recall how they responded to the questions set by Journalist A and could no longer access that information.

- 4.107. In February 2014, the BBC broadcast a report by Journalist A identifying the threat of shisha bars in Oldham. This referred to the leaked intelligence report produced by Chief Inspector A and stated that Oldham Council had confirmed that all the shisha bars it had been concerned about had since closed. An assistant chief constable was interviewed. He described shisha bars as a relatively new phenomenon and stated that:

"There is no evidence at this point in time to suggest that shisha bars are related to any sexual exploitation of young people ... My understanding is now in Oldham that the majority if not all the shisha bars have now closed in Oldham either because we have taken action against them or arrested people because of activity going on ... or because there is not an economic market."

It is fair to say that the line taken by senior officers of Greater Manchester Police accurately reflected the findings of Operation Waterloo.

- 4.108. On 2 April 2014, which was the day of a full council meeting in Oldham, a note and a press article relating to Oasis Café were posted through the office doors of the Liberal Democrat leader and Conservative leader. The note alleged:

"... It is also the building being monitored by the police in the leaked email to Mr K as a shisha bar where girls are being groomed. Within four months of Cllr V being suspended it had been acquired by OMBC and demolished. Cabinet lead Cllr U. He was a friend of [Offender A]³¹, Labour Party Member

³¹ Our anonymisation.

given 42 years for rape Rochdale grooming case ... Ask tonight why Councillor U was so keen to demolish this controversial building.”

It later transpired that the note had been sent by Councillor X, a Labour member and associate of Councillor V, who admitted this to Leader A. We have not considered the motivation of Councillor X in any great depth but believe the substantive content does not stand up to any analysis. We have seen independently that Councillor U was concerned about the threat of shisha bars and had suggested that children be recruited to help build an intelligence picture. Several of our interviewees also explained that the demolition of the Oasis Café was part of the overall regeneration plan for the town centre.

- 4.109. From 27 May to 31 May 2014, Greater Manchester Police conducted Operation Citrus. This was similar to Operation Waterloo. The objective of the operation was to monitor ‘hotspots’, although shisha bars were not specifically mentioned in the operational order.
- 4.110. There were two further disruption operations in 2014, Ovid and Patina. Operation Ovid ran from 13–17 September 2014 and was similar to Operation Citrus, again not targeting shisha bars. This operation did highlight taxi drivers and takeaway outlets and used local authority licensing officers on the proactive phase. There was no mention of any shisha bars.
- 4.111. On 1 October 2014, Chief Inspector A produced a briefing paper for Ofsted on shisha bars; we assume that this was in response to the Ofsted thematic inspection conducted in 2014 into how councils were tackling child sexual exploitation. This was more or less the same content as the *Unregulated premises problem profile – position statement* Chief Inspector A had produced in July 2013.
- 4.112. The October 2014 unpublished report from Ofsted on the specific findings of its thematic inspection remarked:
- “Prevention: Ofsted described this as an area of strength for Oldham. They found that there was clear strategic leadership by the Council at both Member and Senior Manager level, and this was well supported by good partnership working with a range of partners, particularly the Police.*
- “Prosecution: Ofsted found evidence that both Police and Council actively disrupted the activities of grooming gangs and closed down or mitigated the risks of dangerous places — shisha bars, take aways, etc. There was*

evidence that perpetrators were caught and prosecuted, although they picked up concerns about the slowness of prosecutions and lack of local engagement by the Crown Prosecution Service.”

- 4.113. In November 2014, Operation Patina was run as part of the Operation Phoenix week of action. The operation had a proactive element to target hotspot areas. Again, the areas identified to be targeted were those where the most intelligence had been received and did not include shisha bars. Interestingly, the operation did have an element to target two taxi firms suspected as being involved with the transportation of 'Messenger nominals'. The two firms were not linked to the Rollers/Telecars taxi company previously investigated by the police. The Greater Manchester Police 2020 internal report also noted that a month of action to target the taxi firms identified was planned. This involved resources from the divisional organised crime gang unit, the force Intercept team, the tactical aid unit (TAU) and partners from the Oldham Council licensing department, the Department for Work and Pensions, (UK Visas and Immigration and the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA). The Greater Manchester Police review was unable to find any results from Operation Patina.

Chapter 5.

Allegations made on social media about the nature and extent to which adults had inappropriate access to children and young people resident in children's homes in Oldham, putting them at risk of harm during 2011–14

Summary and conclusions

- 5.1. In this chapter we have considered the allegations that adults had inappropriate access to children resident in children's homes in Oldham. Our key findings are set out in Chapter One. In summary:
- 5.2. We have been provided with no evidence, either through our interviews or documentary review, to suggest that there was widespread exploitation of children within residential settings in Oldham. There is evidence that some children in residential settings were being exposed to child sexual exploitation and we cover this in detail in this chapter. The evidence suggests that residential staff worked in a professional and supportive way with these children to win their trust and protect them, as far as possible, from further abuse. In many instances these interventions were successful. On other occasions these attempts were frustrated.
- 5.3. In 2007, Oldham Council introduced an innovative approach by developing a specialist residential care facility, Rivendell House, for young women at risk of child sexual exploitation. We have heard from previous managers and staff that this approach worked well in the first 12 months and the residential team was well supported by police officers in the community and regular meetings with the Messenger service. After 12 months the funding was reduced, and former managers and staff believe they became less effective. By 2010, Rivendell was no longer a specialist facility.

- 5.4. In 2014, serious allegations were posted on social media by a former residential worker suggesting that in 2010 Pakistani men would sexually exploit the children resident in the home. Oldham Council commissioned an independent consultant, Consultant A, to review these allegations. The consultant concluded that the children's home staff were active and persistent in supporting the young women and there was no basis for saying that child sexual exploitation was not recognised or dealt with by the police in Oldham during this period.
- 5.5. Ofsted inspected the quality of care provided at Rivendell on 12 occasions between 2009 and 2015. The home was consistently judged to be good and by January 2014 was consistently rated outstanding.
- 5.6. In 2014, Oldham commissioned another independent consultant, Consultant B, to undertake an audit of cases where the child was at risk of sexual exploitation. The consultant considered 20 cases in total, four of which were in residential care. In three of these four cases, Consultant B concluded that the plan was appropriate, commenting on one of them:
- “In a situation which is intractable, the police and partners are proactively pursuing all routes to improve her level of safety.”*
- 5.7. Two of the cohort had been in residential care but had been discharged as it was perceived that being in residential care had increased the risks to them.
- 5.8. A follow-up audit was undertaken by the same consultant in 2015, this time considering 40 cases. Eight of these children were living in residential settings during the period of the audit. The consultant judged the current plans on these eight children to be effective and having an appropriate impact. In many of these cases Consultant B acknowledged the approach of residential care staff and the effective work undertaken by the Phoenix team to disrupt the activities of potential perpetrators.

Detailed findings on inappropriate access to children and young people resident in children's homes

- 5.9. By the second half of 2006, Oldham Council recognised the threat of child sexual exploitation and approved additional funding to strengthen its

response. At that time, upwards of 30 children (all girls) between the ages of 12 and 16 had been identified as being involved in sexual exploitation³². A number of these children already had significant support and some of them were in care. At the time, it was recognised that it was not possible to gauge with accuracy the exact numbers of children involved in sexual exploitation in Oldham due to the extreme reluctance of victims to reveal information and the covert activities of perpetrators. The council's investment in the Messenger service included a specialist residential resource for children at risk of exploitation.

5.10. In November 2006, plans were already underway to develop this residential facility. A report to the Messenger partnership executive board noted that a residential care home was being refurbished and redesignated as Rivendell House, scheduled to open in March 2007. The same meeting also noted that Greater Manchester Police would provide guidance to residential homes on the management of potential forensic evidence.

5.11. We have been shown a draft application to the then regulator, the Commission for Social Care Inspection, which appears to have been written before January 2007. It stated the following:

"Oldham has long experienced problems with young women in need of intensive support. A number of ways of working to safeguard the young women involved are being implemented ... Oldham Borough Council, in association with other agencies have taken the decision to open a residential children's home for girls who are at risk and in need of intensive support."

5.12. We have also seen a draft version of the statement of purpose for this residential home, which read:

"Rivendell House will accommodate up to six girls in need of intensive support and have been assessed as needing a residential placement due to them being unable to live within their own or substitute families and due to the levels of identified risk, of significant harm, maltreatment, sexual abuse and or physical abuse. The girls accommodated may be admitted in cases of emergencies by the courts, and or at risk, and or pregnant in need of an

³² Briefing for the Labour group: Oldham's response to child sexual exploitation (CSE). July 2012.

intensive support package. The girls may range between the ages of 10 years and 18.”

- 5.13. While the statement of purpose does not specifically mention child sexual exploitation, it was widely understood at the time that Rivendell would be a significant resource for young women vulnerable to exploitation. Associate Assistant Director A informed the review team:

“Rivendell specifically became a children’s home for children mainly girls at risk of sexual exploitation. The rationale for this was that a child became looked after and was engaged with exploitation. There was a serious concern they would groom other younger children in that home. Rivendell was specifically set up to manage child sexual exploitation. Initially it had a police officer linked to the children’s home, the staff were very proactive around disruption.”

We interviewed former staff and managers of Rivendell. They explained that in the first year the home was well resourced with intensive staffing. Staffing included two waking night staff as well as two staff on duty during the day, with access to further staff if required. The residential workers were well networked with the broader Messenger service, attending the weekly Messenger meetings. The residential team were also supported by police officers, who worked shifts alongside them. A former staff member told us:

“We had police with us 24/7 in the first year, we were involved in surveillances, we had undercover operations with the police. I used to go to Messenger meetings every Wednesday at the police stations and discuss activity in Oldham and that was really useful to share information with partner agencies.

“I think when it was first set up because of the other agencies involvement it was fantastic. It was an amazing project at the beginning, the young people did benefit a lot, there were some that you can’t manage because it depends on where the girls are in that cycle but building that relationship up with those girls was crucial.”

- 5.14. The review team were impressed by the commitment and dedication the staff showed towards the children and the close working between the staff within the residential unit and the police. Former staff explained:

“We had CCTV filming the front gardens, it was hard to keep the young people we had at the time in sometimes. We used to divert them as much as we could, we would have conversations with them at the door, and then they had surveillance with the police, depending on what level risk they were they

were monitored closely. We had opportunities to share information daily with the police depending on risk, we had a home vehicle and used to take them away to break the cycle for a period of time, so we would book a caravan and have a member of staff go with that person, the staff would work with them whilst there.”

- 5.15. Nonetheless it was evident that abusers continued to attempt to lure the children away. This was usually by way of a phone call to a young person and then subsequently collecting them by car. When staff discussed it with the children, they were told that the girls were first approached by younger men, who would become their ‘boyfriends’ to build that trust and then subsequently introduced to older men who would exploit them.

- 5.16. According to the residential staff we interviewed, the abuse was well organised:

“It was all very organised, it was the same gangs that came round, usually after a phone call to a young person. We would know and would have a procedure in place. Our girls had lists of names with phone numbers which were all passed to the police. It was organised CSE, it was groups who all knew each other, whether from taxi’s, take-aways, different groups of Albanians in their takeaways etc but it was prominent on where these gangs were, and they knew what Rivendell was and they would use their connections. It wasn’t like a taxi would just wait and pick up girls, it was all organised.”

- 5.17. After 12 months, the funding was reduced by the other agencies and former staff informed the review team that this made the task more challenging as they lost the support network around the home. The close links between the police and the children's home began to reduce, as the police were less of a presence in the home and the immediate area.

- 5.18. Until 1 April 2007, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) had the regulatory responsibility to inspect children’s residential care homes. Oldham Council was not subject to any inspections undertaken by CSCI during the time period of this review. We therefore asked to see the reports of the

Regulation 33 visits³³ undertaken prior to Ofsted conducting its first inspection in 2009. Oldham Council provided the review team with reports from one Regulation 33 visit undertaken in 2007 and three undertaken in 2008. The reports found the following:

August 2007

“The findings from this monitoring inspection indicate that Rivendell House is operating to the required standard for its continued registration. It was evident that national minimum standards are generally being met at the home although there were a small number of requirements following this inspection that the manager is required to respond to.”

There was one reference to sexual exploitation where the report noted that three children residing at the home had recently been taken off the Messenger list of those at risk of sexual exploitation.

September 2008

“The findings from this monitoring inspection indicate that Rivendell House is operating to the required standard for its continued registration. However, it is evident that there are a number of issues, which cause concern. Managing continuous, challenging behaviour by the young people, the reported inability of staff to manage these situations both in terms of their skills and fatigue, and the feeling of a lack of effective organisation and management in a manner which provides the best possible child care is contributing to neither the needs of the staff nor the young people being met and ultimately a failure to meet a number of national minimum standards.”

There was one reference to child sexual exploitation. The report stated that the staff had questioned the placement of one young person, in respect of whom there were no prior concerns of sexual exploitation, but since her admission she appeared to have been drawn into exploitation.

November 2008

“The findings from this monitoring inspection indicate that Rivendell House is operating to the required standard for its continued registration. The management issues require resolution if it has been confirmed that the current manager is not to return.”

There were no mentions of sexual exploitation in this report.

December 2008

³³ Regulation 33 of the Children's Homes Regulations 2000 requires a person independent of the home to undertake a visit on a monthly basis and prepare a written report on the conduct of the home.

“The findings from this monitoring inspection indicate that Rivendell House is operating to the required standard for its continued registration. It was evident that national minimum standards are being met at the home. In this instance, there were no requirements relating to the NMS [national minimum standards] and Every Child Matters outcome ‘Enjoying and Achieving’.”

Again, there was no mention of child sexual exploitation.

- 5.19. The specialist role of Rivendell was reviewed in about 2010. There was some agreement that, while there were some gains from this role, the location was not ideal and the presence of a number of children who were already involved in child sexual exploitation could attract unwanted attention from abusers. It was decided to revert to a generic registration and for Rivendell to accommodate children across the borough.
- 5.20. In 2012, the murder of a woman in Oldham led to a domestic homicide review (DHR) conducted by the community safety partnership. The person convicted of the murder was not believed to be associated with child sexual exploitation, but the victim, a young Asian woman, had some associates known to the Messenger team and was known to some residents of Rivendell. There was a suggestion that she may have encouraged children to come to her property and she had been issued with a child abduction warning notice because of this activity. There was no other relevant information in the DHR.
- 5.21. Ofsted inspected the quality of care provided at Rivendell on 12 occasions between 2009 and 2015. The home was consistently judged to be good and by January 2014 was rated as consistently outstanding (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Ofsted inspections of Rivendell October 2009
– November 2015**

Date of Ofsted inspection	Judgement	Comments by Ofsted
05/10/2009	Good	The home has taken appropriate action to resolve previous recommendations. Young people continue to be safeguarded and protected by the good policies and procedures trained staff follow.
20/10/2010	Good	The home works closely with outside agencies in order to meet the full range of young people's needs. Care planning documentation is detailed, and young people are consulted, and their views listened to. There is good provision for young people to be helped with the necessary skills to become independent on leaving the home.
28/02/2011	Good	The home provides young people with good support. Their safety and welfare is promoted and safeguarded.
05/11/2011	Good	The home provides a supportive environment in which young people can live. Staff are lively and enthusiastic and provide young people with consistent levels of care.
02/02/2012	Good	The young people benefit from sound consistent practice, underpinned by thorough comprehensive placement plans, and risk assessments.
05/07/2012	Good	Young people enjoy positive relationships with staff. They say that they feel safe and that the staff support them to understand the importance of keeping safe. This is also in relation to the likelihood of young people going missing. Although there are still incidents of young people missing from the home, these have decreased, especially in connection to high-risk behaviours. The home works closely with police and effective recording systems are in place to enable staff to monitor and address any concerns.

21/03/2013	Good	The home continues to demonstrate a real commitment to improve the quality of care it provides for young people.
23/01/2014	Outstanding	Young people are making exceptionally positive progress from their initial placement at the home. They have exceptionally positive relationships with staff and other young people, and this contributes towards them feeling safe within a stable and supportive environment.
25/03/2014	Outstanding	Young people benefit from being supported by a consistent, well trained, experienced and highly motivated staff team. They demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the young people's needs and individual plans for short term and longer-term support.
30/09/2014	Outstanding	Young people's placement plans, and risk assessments are detailed and highly personalised to their individual needs and daily activities. As a result, the staff team provides consistent care that helps young people reach their potential and keeps them safe.
11/02/2015	Outstanding	The Registered Manager and staff at the home continue to support young people to achieve excellent outcomes. Robust review and evaluation of the support provided ensures young people's experiences and outcomes remain central to the ethos of the home and standard of care provided.
10/11/2015	Outstanding	Children receive highly individualised care from a consistent and experienced staff team, who know and support their needs very well. Effective safeguarding arrangements promote the safety and welfare of children. This has resulted in a significant reduction of absences from the home and risk taking behaviour.

- 5.22. On 2 September 2014, a former residential worker posted comments on social media suggesting that Pakistani men would drive round and round waiting for girls to come out from Rivendell children's home. The staff were

"not allowed to detain the girls". The author said they passed information to the police and the LSCB and that nothing was done about it.

5.23. In response to these allegations, a series of multi-agency professional abuse initial consideration meetings were held, chaired by the LADO³⁴, and an independent consultant, Consultant A, was brought in to investigate. Consultant A undertook interviews with the former residential worker and staff and managers at Rivendell and in the Messenger team, and examined case records and numerous documents, including supervision notes. The consultant also worked closely with the police while conducting the investigation. Consultant A's remit was to consider practice during the time of the former residential worker's employment and gather evidence to support or refute the allegations made. The consultant's report was produced in December 2014. We interviewed Consultant A and also reviewed the report.

5.24. Consultant A summarised the main findings as follows:

- There was no basis for saying that child sexual exploitation was not recognised or dealt with by the police in Oldham in 2010/11. Greater Manchester Police had allocated resources to dealing with the issue. At the time, there was a lack of consistency in the police team and consistency had since been recognised as important in dealing effectively with child sexual exploitation. However, it was clear that in Oldham the police and council staff were wrestling with some very difficult and intractable problems.
- The children's home staff and others who were part of the multi-agency CSE plans were active and persistent in supporting the young women. The work done by the children's home staff had some positive effects, but these would not have been evident immediately.
- There was nothing to support the suggestion that anyone in Oldham was discouraged from dealing with the problem because of the ethnicity of abusers.
- The consultant also believed that evidence of the involvement of criminal gangs was extremely limited. and whether child sexual

³⁴ The LADO (local authority designated officer) is responsible for coordinating the response to concerns that an adult who works with children may have caused them, or could cause them, harm.

exploitation was part of a pattern of organised crime in Oldham, and precisely what the links were, remained to be understood.

- 5.25. Similarly, the residential staff and managers we interviewed completely disputed the account of the former residential worker and asserted that their whole way of working was about confronting these men and discouraging the children from going with them. One of the workers stated:

“But I am speechless with the comments about Pakistani men driving around waiting for girls to come out – this is not true. Staff have prevented very young girls of leaving by talking to them.”

- 5.26. Consultant A reviewed in detail the cases of two children who were living in Rivendell at the time the former residential worker was employed.

“The two young people whose records were looked at in detail were both the subject of CSE Plans. One began [redacted] just before she was admitted to Rivendell. The other young person's CSE Plan began [redacted] ... Both plans are detailed and comprehensive. They deal with not only the risk of CSE but also the full range of needs including health and education. There were regular Core Group Meetings. Review CSE Conferences were held at appropriate intervals. The Senior Social Worker in the Messenger Team was present at many of the meetings.

“What is evident is that, although CSE has been clearly identified as a risk to the young people's welfare, there are no readily available solutions. For one young person, CSE had been part of her life from an early age ... many years before she entered the care system.

“Nevertheless, one of the two young people looked at in detail had moved away from CSE effectively so that by [redacted] her CSE Plan was terminated. She continues to do well in this respect. The second young person has done well, but some concerns remain for her safety. All of the records show detailed consideration of attempts to persuade young people away from CSE activity. The records show the struggle of all those involved to understand the complex motivations of the victims and the abusers and to find more effective ways of safeguarding the young women.”

- 5.27. We undertook a detailed review of one of these children about whose support the former residential worker had expressed concern. We concluded that it was increasingly evident that Rivendell was not a suitable placement for her.

5.28. Also, in December 2014, an audit was undertaken by another independent consultant, Consultant B. This is referred to in more detail in Chapter 3. The consultant reviewed 20 cases, four of which involved children in residential settings. The following cases included in the audit involved children placed in residential care:

- Child A was placed in a therapeutic residential placement. Consultant B noted that the plan was appropriate, and some progress was being made.
- Child B was known to be frequenting the red-light district and returning with money and gifts. She had been placed in secure accommodation but that had not prevented her from going missing. Consultant B commented that she was not currently safe, and reviews were not sufficiently SMART³⁵. The consultant agreed with the plan to initiate care proceedings.
- Child C was openly accepting money for sex. She was using heroin and reported that she was having sex with Asian men for money. Attempts had been made to manage the risks of harm or abuse, but these had been ineffective because of Child C's level of resistance. At the point of audit, she had been missing from home on 215 occasions. Consultant B commented:

"Disruption has thus far been ineffective. She has been referred to the National Crime Agency who have awarded temporary victim status which means that the police will continue to treat her as a child up to the age of 18. In a situation which is intractable, the police and partners are proactively pursuing all routes to improve her level of safety."
- Child D had been recorded as missing and had been found to be in the company of a man who had previously been served with an abduction notice. The consultant commented that, as a child in the care of another authority, Child D received a different standard of service locally. She did not receive a service from Messenger and there were concerns that, until recently, police action against a potential abuser had not been robustly pursued.

5.29. Two of this cohort had been in residential care but had been discharged as it was perceived that being in residential care had increased the risks to them.

³⁵ SMART stands for specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely.

One child, who was 15, had had a previous period in accommodation but this was unsuccessful as she had been associating with children with similar vulnerabilities. Another child considered had, according to the consultant, been resistant to residential care and returned to live with her family due to concerns that when she was in care she was in danger of child sexual exploitation.

5.30. A follow-up audit was undertaken by the same consultant in 2015. This time Consultant B considered 40 cases. Eight of these children were living in residential settings during the period of the audit.

- Child E was known to be frequenting shisha bars outside of Oldham and vulnerable to child sexual exploitation. The consultant noted that there was significant action aimed at disrupting her contact with adult males. This included the serving of abduction notices on six individuals.
- Child F had recently been made the subject of a care order as she was homeless and staying with unsuitable adults. The Barnardo's charity was working with her to establish a relationship to influence her into safer behaviours.
- Child G had numerous missing from home episodes. There was a period when vigilance around risk and good engagement by the residential key worker saw some lessening of risk, but a further very concerning missing episode prompted Oldham Phoenix to update the risk assessment.
- Child H was made the subject of a secure order. At the time, she alleged that she had been raped but would not talk to the police. She was transferred to an open residential unit. Since her discharge from secure accommodation, her risk of child sexual exploitation had been deemed to be medium and there was good evidence of disruption activity by Oldham Phoenix, including arrests following breaches of abduction notices by adults known to present a risk.
- Child I was moved in 2015 from a residential placement to a semi-independence unit. The consultant commented that although the plan, over time, had lacked coherence and appeared to be reactive, the current approach to engaging with Child I around rules and boundaries was appropriate.
- Child J spent a period in secure accommodation, following which she was placed in a further therapeutic placement. Since her release there had been no reported missing from home incidents or any reports of drug use.

- Child K had been associating with older males outside of Oldham. After the successful completion of work with her, Child K was no longer in a relationship and was no longer sexually active or absconding. She had re-engaged with school. The consultant concluded that there was evidence of good work by Oldham Phoenix and the adolescent support unit (ASU) in achieving an improved outcome.
- Child L was placed in a secure unit following a very troubling period. At the time of the audit, she appeared to be settling and beginning to build trusting relationships. The consultant noted that this was a particularly high-risk case. The current plan was necessary and appropriate. However, the earlier planning was reactive, and it is possible that an earlier application for secure accommodation might have managed the risks more effectively.

Chapter 6.

Allegations made on social media about the nature and extent of the use of local taxi services to access children and young people for the purposes of sexual exploitation during 2011–14

Summary and conclusions

- 6.1. In this chapter we have considered allegations about the nature and extent of the use of local taxi services to access children and young people for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Our key findings are set out in Chapter One. In summary:
- 6.2. We have been provided with no evidence, through either our interviews or our documentary review, to suggest that senior managers or councillors sought to cover up the potential exploitation of children by local taxi services. We have found evidence that a small number of Oldham taxi drivers had been accused or found guilty of sexual offences against children. As can be seen in this chapter, the council licensing panel had previously approved several licences for individuals who had been convicted of serious sexual offences against children. The national guidance at the time was not sufficiently robust to prevent this. This serious weakness was recognised in subsequent years and the national guidance was strengthened.
- 6.3. We have been unable to review the detailed work that Greater Manchester Police conducted as part of a police investigation into the Telecars firm and the allegation that drivers were exploiting children at the old Conservative Club. Greater Manchester Police has shared with the review team its report following this investigation, and the force concluded that there was no evidence to substantiate these allegations. We have not been provided with any evidence that would contradict this finding.

- 6.4. Following the national publicity in respect of child exploitation in Rotherham, in 2014 Oldham Council reviewed all those cases where licence holders had been accused of sexual offences.
- 6.5. Of the nine cases that were subsequently put before the licensing panel, six licences were revoked or were not renewed. One driver whose conviction had been overturned by the appeal court retained his licence on the same grounds on which he won his appeal. Two cases where the drivers retained their licences did give the review team grounds for concern, and we set these out in the detailed findings section of this chapter. Although by 2015 the licensing panel was taking a more robust approach to allegations of a sexual nature against taxi drivers, this was by no means a uniform approach, and a small number of drivers who had either been convicted or suspected of sexual offences were allowed to continue as licensed drivers.
- 6.6. The current guidance on the “Fit and Proper Standard” followed by Oldham Council now includes a stipulation that nobody with a sexually related conviction or who has been convicted of an offence against children should hold a licence.³⁶ Such matters now are delegated to the head of licensing to ensure swift action is taken to refuse such licences if an application is made. The head of licensing also holds the delegated authority to immediately revoke a licence on being notified of a potential offence.
- 6.7. The head of licensing in Oldham Council has, in their capacity as chair of Greater Manchester Licensing Network, sought to strengthen the quality of information and intelligence shared by the police with local councils. In December 2018, the head of licensing wrote to the chief constable at Greater Manchester Police about the widespread problem of councils not being informed of serious offences. but was not responded to. After we shared our indicative findings with both Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police, the current chief constable replied to the 2018 letter and informed Oldham Council they had commissioned a review of the content, application and senior ownership of the force’s policies on disclosure in respect of these matters.

³⁶ Where the commission of a sexual offence involves a child or young person, then a person applying for a licence, renewing a licence or an existing licence holder whose licence is being reviewed will normally have the application refused, or the licence revoked. **Oldham Council Statement of Fitness & Suitability (Private Hire & Hackney Carriage).**

Detailed findings on local taxi services

6.8. It has been alleged on social media that a police investigation took place into taxi drivers from a company known as Telecars sometime between 2008 and 2010. It has been alleged that these drivers *“picked up young girls took them back to the first floor of the old Conservative club building and raped them”*. We have been unable to directly review the records held by Greater Manchester Police, but the force shared with the review team a copy of its 2020 internal review of these allegations³⁷. This Greater Manchester Police review found no record of any such investigation taking place between 2008 and 2010. It concluded:

- The Conservative Club building in Westwood was converted into a restaurant in 2000 and was being run as such during the period of this review. From research there were 10 incidents recorded at the address on OPUS (the operational policing unit system). These incidents were all related to the restaurant; none of them could be linked to a taxi firm or any sexual offence. In October 2000 a taxi driver reported his car stolen from outside the Conservative Club and said that he worked for Telecars and gave an address in Westwood (possibly in the same building as the Conservative Club).
- According to Oldham Council records, Rollers/Telecars³⁸ was licensed as a taxi operator from 2009 to 2018. Companies House also has a business listing for Rollers Telecars. Between 2008 and 2010 there were no incidents or reports at the registered address that had any reference to child sexual exploitation or sexual offences.

6.9. The head of licensing at Oldham Council informed the review team that since their arrival in Oldham procedures in respect of licensing had been consistently strengthened over the years, and explained:

“When I took over in 2004 our convictions policy guidelines to elected members was one page of A4 and basically said 3 years post-conviction of a sexual offence you can get reconsidered to be a taxi driver. That document

³⁷ Review of Greater Manchester Police's response to allegations of child sexual exploitation in shisha bars in Oldham 2011–2014 and involving private hire drivers employed by Telecars 2008–2010. Greater Manchester Police Major Crime Review Unit, October 2020.

³⁸ The names appear to have been inter-changeable.

is now 30 pages long and says you'd never get a taxi license if you have got an offence of that nature. Times have changed and so has guidance. I had never heard of CSE in 2004 and how people are now vetted and the emphasis we put on people's destinations are very different now to what it was then."

- 6.10. One senior manager in children's social care informed the review team:

"I recall ... the chief executive before Chief Executive A in a meeting with taxi companies. We were warning them that they would lose their licences if they transported looked after children without authority. We also had a procedure of residential workers taking the numbers of taxi plates as part of our disruption tactics throughout the life of Messenger ... We had started to build intelligence regarding vehicles around children's homes."

- 6.11. In July 2012, the chair of the Oldham licensing panel wrote to the leader of Rossendale Borough Council seeking support in not renewing licences for taxi drivers not predominantly working in Rossendale. This letter said:

"As you will no doubt be aware a High Court judgement in October 2010 opened the flood gates for drivers to obtain hackney licences yet work other areas from a private hire company. On the 1st June 2012 the High Court heard another case ... In this matter the court went further than in the previous case and examined whether a Council could attach conditions to a hackney carriage licence to restrict the use of such licence to the area where it was licensed and to keep records of hirings. Mr Justice Foskett held that it was not irrational or unworkable to attach such conditions. Taking into account the above case and our concerns I would urge you to consider whether you renew existing licences when applications are lodged on the basis that they are not predominantly working in Rossendale and implement a policy of new conditions being placed on future licences granted to restrict the use of the vehicle and recording bookings."

- 6.12. This clearly was not an end to the matter, and in January 2014 Councillor W, as portfolio holder for cooperatives and neighbourhoods, wrote once more to the leader of Rossendale Council:

"Information contained on your website states "Rossendale Borough Council would expect licensed hackney carriages to predominantly operate within the Borough of Rossendale." This is clearly not happening, and the power lies with your Council to adopt policies to cease this practice. I would urge you to consider whether you renew existing licences when applications are lodged

on the basis that they are not predominantly working in Rossendale and implement a policy of new conditions being placed on future licences granted to restrict the use of the vehicle and recording bookings. My Officers would be more than happy to supply details of vehicles working in this Borough.”

6.13. In 2012, Oldham Council considered the recommendations made by the report into grooming gangs in Rochdale. Recommendation 12 stated that the *“Council joins with other local authorities and appropriate agencies to seek clarity at a national level regarding:*

- *“The legal framework for enabling social care practitioners to have access to information/intelligence regarding potential CSE perpetrators in order that preventative action can be taken to safeguard children and young people more effectively.*
- *“The grounds and circumstances upon which authorities can suspend and/or revoke licences for taxi drivers and fast-food establishments, thereby enabling more robust disruption tactics for CSE.*
- *“The legal framework that denies local authorities the ability to restrict the number of private hire and hackney carriage licences they issue when deemed appropriate.*
- *“The most effective over-arching legal framework(s) to enable prevention and detection of CSE, whilst at the same time enabling each agency to fulfil its role in safeguarding those at risk.”*

6.14. The report to members by an Oldham Council officer noted that Oldham’s licensing team and local safeguarding children board worked closely together with regards to revoking taxi drivers’ licences and fast food establishment licensing, and that they were looking to ensure that protocols and procedures were in place so that if a taxi driver was identified as having inappropriate behaviour both the licensing officers and the LADO were informed, therefore allowing them to take the most effective action to safeguard children and vulnerable adults. The Oldham Safeguarding Children Board manager and Assistant Associate Director A had asked for a meeting with magistrates, who could make licensing decisions, to ensure that safeguarding vulnerable groups was a priority. In July 2012, Associate Assistant Director A raised concerns with the licensing panel in respect of a taxi driver who had recently been acquitted of a sexual offence against a child, explaining:

“My feedback on this in advance of the Licensing Panel meeting tomorrow. From a safeguarding point of view I have serious concerns about this person being a “fit and proper” person to hold a private hire licence. Regardless of the outcome of the criminal proceedings and his acquittal, he has admitted behaviour which in itself evidences he is not fit and proper.

“My understanding is that the alleged victims date of birth is [redacted]. The alleged offence took place on the [date redacted] making her under 16 and not 16 plus at the time of the offence. On his own admission he knew her for about 3 months before the alleged offence, meeting her in an illegal Shishi Bar. He further admits to using his taxi for purpose of sexual activity with the alleged victim after [sensitive information redacted]. (It should be noted that whilst he is not known to our Messenger services this is behaviour which are a feature of the recent Rochdale Child Sexual exploitation). He used an open public car park for the purpose of sexual activity with this young person which in itself draws into question his suitability to carry a private hire licence and position of trust.

“Please let me know the outcome of the panel or if I can assist any further.”

- 6.15. Taxi drivers were recognised as a threat by those working with children at risk of sexual exploitation. The senior social work practitioner in the Messenger service informed the Greater Manchester Police review team:

“Around 2010 we realised that there was an issue with taxi drivers and taxi owners and the night time economy in general. Taxis were transporting the young people around, so we approached the council licensing department to devise a course for all taxi drivers and owners. The course was run by Barnardo’s and all of the drivers and owners had to attend to keep their licences. They were trained in CSE.”

- 6.16. In 2014, the council undertook a review of all taxi drivers known to have a criminal conviction. The head of licensing informed our review team that this was not triggered by known concerns in Oldham but was a response to the issues raised in Rochdale and Rotherham, and stated:

“That was after Rotherham and Rochdale. It was a piece of work that I initiated at the end of 2014 where I alerted elected members and chief officers that we had licensed people with sexual offences, not necessarily CSE in a broader sexual sense. I wanted to remind members that we had people on our books which I wasn’t comfortable with, and a review was done and that was when [Chief Inspector A] got involved and insisted that a number of licenses got revoked.”

- 6.17. The analysts in the community safety team informed our review team that they had been asked to commence this work by Chief Inspector A:

“I did a piece of work for [Chief Inspector A] on taxi companies. He gave me a list of registered providers there were concerns in respect of a couple, can I put the information on a spreadsheet? [Chief Inspector A] did ensure a couple of taxi companies had their licences revoked. I think this was at the end of 2014 at the time project Rose was on. We identified that children were returning to children’s homes by taxi and wanted to know where their money was coming from ... We thought the girls might have been exploited for fares as we could not understand how they could be getting around so easily.”

- 6.18. In September 2014, the head of licensing brought forward a briefing report to the portfolio holder for housing, transport and planning that focused on taxi drivers who had committed criminal offences. This report asked for agreement to commence a review of these licences, and set out the circumstances of five specific drivers:

- Driver A: Offence in 2001 of indecent assault on female 16+ in shopping centre. Received conditional discharge. Granted licence in 2003.
- Driver B: Offence in 2001 of indecent assault and child abduction on girl aged 13 while in his private hire vehicle. Served 18 months in prison. Granted licence in 2005.
- Driver C: Offences in 1981 of indecent assault on female 16+ and exposure. Served three months in prison. Granted licence in 1992.
- Driver D: Offence in 1962 of indecent assault. Received a conditional discharge. Granted licence in 2008.
- Driver E: Offence in 1992 of unlawful sexual intercourse with a girl under 16. Fined £100. Granted licence in 1998.

- 6.19. The legal advice on the September 2014 briefing report was not particularly supportive of this approach and stated that:

“Once a licence has been granted and the person deemed fit and proper which is the test in law the Council should not revoke the licence just because it changes its mind. There would be a strong likelihood of appeal to the courts if we revoked licences.”

- 6.20. In summary, there is evidence that, prior to 2014, several known offenders had been granted or had their taxi licences renewed by Oldham licensing panel. The briefing report to the portfolio holder did note that the guidelines on convictions had been updated and made stronger over the years. For example, when the first two licences covered in the report were granted, the guidance referred to a presumption of refusal unless there was a minimum of three years post-conviction. However, our review team have noted that the first driver's offences had occurred within three years of his licence being granted. In 2009, the first set of Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) guidelines were issued and raised the bar to a minimum of between five and 10 years post-conviction.
- 6.21. Furthermore, of the five drivers identified with previous convictions, only one was taken forward to the licensing panel with a recommendation that his licence be revoked. Driver B (charged with abduction of a girl aged 13) was taken forward to the licensing panel in January 2015 and had his licence revoked. However, no further action was taken in respect of the other four drivers. No records now remain in respect of the decision-making process, but we were informed by the current head of licensing that the decision not to take further action followed a screening exercise involving both Greater Manchester Police and LSCB representatives. The head of licensing's recollection was that these decisions were based on the passage of time since the offences were committed. Unfortunately, Driver A went on to commit a sexual assault in 2015 on a child passenger and his licence was immediately revoked (see below). He was convicted in 2017, and the judge queried why a licence had been granted given his previous conviction. This triggered a complaint to the council. Chief Executive B subsequently instructed council officers to undertake a further review of all licensed drivers (approximately 1,300) to establish who had been convicted of offences that, under the guidelines in place at the time, would have not been recommended for a licence.
- 6.22. In January 2015, a report went to the council's licensing panel. The report explained that following various investigations into child sexual exploitation across the country, the director of adult and children's services had asked for a review of licensed drivers to take place involving anybody convicted of a sexual offence or when intelligence was held on them. The report listed nine drivers, only one of whom had actually been convicted of offences against children. This was Driver 1 who was Driver B in the September 2014 report. The other eight drivers in this report had not been found guilty by a court. The details and decisions were as follows:

Table 2 Licencing Decisions involving Drivers suspected of offences against children

	Allegations and convictions	Decision by licensing panel January 2015
Driver 1	2002: Indecent assault on child under 16 2002: Abducted child aged 13 years Driver received 18 months' imprisonment. Licensing panel approved licence on reapplication in 2005.	Revoked
Driver 2	2006: Section 18 assault 2007: Rape of over-16-year-old Driver not charged for 2006 offence and found not guilty of 2007 offence.	Revoked
Driver 3	2001: Indecent assault of child under 16 2004: Section 47 assault 2004: Indecent assault of over-16-year-old No action taken by police.	No further action
Driver 4	2005: Rape of over-16-year-old No action taken by Crown Prosecution Service.	No further action
Driver 5	2008–10: Rape of child under 13 1999: Section 20 assault No further action taken by Greater Manchester Police as victim of alleged rape had withdrawn the complaint.	Revoked
Driver 6	2010: Sexual assault on over-16-year-old No further action by Crown Prosecution Service due to conflicting evidence. 1998: Violent disorder Three months' imprisonment.	Revoked

Driver 7	2001: Indecent assault on over-16-year-old 2010: Sexual assault on over-16-year-old While the driver was not convicted of any of the offences above, the police raised concerns about his conduct. Officers suspended the driver's licence, but this was reinstated by the licensing panel in June 2012.	Licence lapsed before 2015 hearing
Driver 8	2011: Sexual assault 2013: Threats to kill victim Offence 1 – Convicted but won appeal and conviction quashed. Licence had been suspended by the panel pending court case. This was overturned on appeal by the courts. Offence 2 – No action taken.	Warning issued without any further action, on the same basis as his appeal against the conviction
Driver 9	2010: Sex act on child under 16 The case was discontinued by the Crown Prosecution Service but police concerns led to the driver having his licence revoked by the panel in November 2012. This decision was appealed and the licence reinstated.	Licence revoked

- 6.23. In summary, of the nine cases that were put before the licensing panel, six licences were revoked. Driver 8 had his conviction overturned by the appeal court and his licence was reinstated on the same basis. We have not seen the grounds for that appeal and therefore cannot form a judgement as to the appropriateness of that decision.
- 6.24. The cases in respect of Driver 3 and 4 do, however, give the review team grounds for concern.
- Driver 3 had been questioned by police in relation to two separate alleged sexual assaults, three years apart, on two young female passengers. In relation to the first of these, Greater Manchester Police had supplied information to the licensing panel that there was sufficient evidence to prosecute but the victim would not support the prosecution. In respect of the second offence, Greater Manchester

Police supplied supporting evidence as follows: *“The aggrieved person would not provide a statement and just wanted to inform the police of what had happened. The driver denied any incident occurred and stated there is a cage between him and passengers in the vehicle.”* Although the police took no further action, the legal advice to the panel was clear that it should make the judgement on the ‘balance of probabilities’. It is our view that there were sufficient concerns presented to the panel in respect of these allegations for it to revoke Driver 3’s licence.

- In the case of Driver 4, the detail of the alleged offence is also concerning. It was alleged that the victim was sexually assaulted in his taxi and subsequently raped. No further information was supplied to the licensing panel other than that the Crown Prosecution Service had taken no further action. Given the serious nature of the offence and the involvement with a paying customer, it would have been helpful for officers to have furnished the panel with more details surrounding the circumstances that led to the allegation.

- 6.25. Although by 2015 the licensing panel was taking a more robust approach to allegations of a sexual nature against taxi drivers, this was by no means a uniform approach and a small number of drivers who had either been convicted or suspected of sexual offences were allowed to continue as licensed drivers. Furthermore, as we have indicated, Driver A (mentioned in the September 2014 report) went on to commit a sexual assault on a child passenger in 2015. He was subsequently convicted, and the judge queried why a licence had been granted given his previous conviction. This triggered a formal complaint to the council. Chief Executive B subsequently instructed officers to undertake a further review of all licensed drivers (approximately 1,300).
- 6.26. The current guidance followed by Oldham Council now recommends that nobody with a sexually related conviction or anybody convicted of an offence against children should hold a licence. Such matters are now delegated to the head of licensing to ensure swift action is taken to refuse such licences if an application is made. The head of licensing also holds the delegated authority to immediately revoke a licence upon the holder’s arrest on the grounds of public protection.
- 6.27. The head of licensing in Oldham Council has, in their capacity as chair of Greater Manchester Licensing Network, sought to strengthen the quality of

information and intelligence shared by the police with local councils. In December 2018, the head of licensing wrote to the chief constable at Greater Manchester Police about the widespread problem of councils not being informed of serious offences, explaining:

“Some examples of issues we have encountered include where a driver had been arrested on three occasions for indecent assault, but this wasn’t disclosed, theft convictions stripped out before the DBS certificate was issued and failure to notify of taxi drivers being arrested for sexual offences. What we would like is your support on is reviewing how we can work together to safeguard the public and ensure the safest drivers carry the public in their vehicles. This would include how we can work on division with local officers to source intelligence and vet applicants outside of the Disclosure and Barring Service process which we no longer have confidence in.

“I attach a letter sent from the Local Government Association to your colleague, [chief constable], on this matter in October and would welcome your comments on how we can progress things. I am happy to meet with one of your Officers should this assist.”

- 6.28. The head of licensing did not receive a reply. This is disappointing as the council’s procedures, while significantly more robust, are dependent on the timely disclosure of offences to council officers by Greater Manchester Police. On sharing our indicative findings with both Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police, the current chief constable of Greater Manchester Police replied to the 2018 letter and informed Oldham Council that they had commissioned a review of the content, application and senior ownership of the force’s policies on disclosure in respect of these matters.

Chapter 7.

The alleged victimisation of Councillor V

Summary and conclusions

In this chapter we have considered the alleged victimisation of Councillor V. Our key findings are set out in Chapter One. In summary:

- 7.1. Councillor V received an emailed letter written by Chief Inspector A on the threat of shisha bars in Oldham. The councillor subsequently shared this with an associate, the chair of a local charity. A complaint about Councillor V's conduct was subsequently submitted by the police and crime commissioner at the time and Leader A.
- 7.2. Our terms of reference do not include providing assurance on the handling of standards complaints or any disciplinary action taken by the Labour Party. Nonetheless, we did seek assurance that none of the actions taken were designed to cover up the issue of child sexual exploitation or unreasonably punish any individual who had legitimately raised concerns.
- 7.3. We have interviewed Leader A, Councillor V, Chief Executive A and an Oldham council solicitor. We have reviewed the report produced by an independent law firm on its investigation into whether Councillor V breached Oldham Council's members' code of conduct. We have also reviewed all reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications held on the various council systems concerning this investigation.
- 7.4. We conclude that there was a legitimate concern by both Leader A and the police and crime commissioner that sensitive and confidential information had been inappropriately shared with a third party. We also agree with the independent investigator that had Councillor V believed the information needed to be shared with this third party, the councillor should have sought the permission of the author of the letter before doing so. We do not therefore believe that there are grounds to support the allegation that Councillor V had been victimised.

Detailed findings on the alleged victimisation of Councillor V

- 7.5. In May 2013, Councillor V was replaced as the portfolio holder for children and safeguarding. The councillor's new role included being the Labour Party whip and a member of several council committees. On 5 June 2013, as set out in Chapter Four, Councillor V received an email from Chief Inspector A setting out the situation in respect of shisha bars in Oldham. We understand that Chief Inspector A was not aware at the time that Councillor V was no longer the cabinet member for safeguarding. The change had only happened two weeks before and the chief inspector had not been briefed. Chief Inspector A informed the independent law firm undertaking the standards investigation that if they had known of the change they would not have copied the email to Councillor V. On the same day as receiving it, Councillor V forwarded the email to Mr K, without any explanation or comment. Mr K was a former member of Oldham Council and a Labour Party colleague and personal friend of Councillor V. The information in the email was subsequently passed to Journalist A, the son of Mr K.
- 7.6. In a subsequent interview with the independent investigator, Councillor V explained that he sent the email to Mr K, in his capacity as chair of a local children's charity and because Mr K had expressed an interest in the subject matter. Councillor V did not consider that this was 'whistle-blowing' in any sense. The councillor thought that the disclosure was reasonable, in the public interest, made in good faith and in accordance with any requirements imposed by the council.
- 7.7. On 6 June 2013, the council press office received a request for information from Journalist A. The press office advised Chief Executive A, who spoke to Leader A. Chief Executive A was concerned that there could have been a leak of confidential information. The press office agreed to ask for a written enquiry. When this arrived, it appeared that the journalist had had access to the email sent by Chief Inspector A. A review of the council's IT system revealed that the email had only been forwarded once, by Councillor V to Mr K. The matter was referred to the Labour group and, after several meetings, Leader A and Councillor V reached an agreement on 1 July 2013. This was confirmed in writing by Leader A. Leader A agreed to drop the complaint, advising that there should be no repeat of the action that led to the complaint and that the matters referred to in the email from Chief Inspector A remained confidential *"until such time as the safeguarding team and/or the police*

consider it appropriate to raise in a public forum". Leader A added in the emailed confirmation to Councillor V that should the matter appear in the public domain or media because of the breach of confidential information, normal action would resume both within the Labour group and beyond.

7.8. Subsequently, Leader A learned that Journalist A had made further enquiries of Greater Manchester Police. Leader A also received a message on Facebook from Journalist A asking the council leader to *"come to us first when you decide the time is right"*. Leader A was also made aware of an enquiry by another BBC journalist in respect of the prevalence of child sexual exploitation across the Greater Manchester area. Leader A formed the view that the matter was not closed, and was still active in the media, and that it had to be taken further. On 29 July 2013, Leader A and the police and crime commissioner submitted a formal complaint about Councillor V to the monitoring officer of Oldham Council.

7.9. The independent law firm was commissioned to undertake an investigation into the allegation concerning the conduct of Councillor V and produced its final report in February 2014. The investigator came to the following main conclusions:

- On balance, the contents of the leaked email were sensitive and confidential.
- The appropriate and correct way for this information to have been passed to others required an informed decision by the authors of the information.
- There was no firm and direct evidence that Councillor V intended the contents of the email to reach Journalist A and to be broadcast, although the investigator found that Councillor V had been reckless and careless.
- The disclosure was neither reasonable nor in the public interest.
- Councillor V had failed to comply with Oldham Council's code of conduct.

7.10. The report specifically addressed the issue as to whether disclosure was in the public interest. It set out the following arguments to refute this suggestion:

- Councillor V had never claimed to be in any sense 'whistle-blowing' to make the issue of shisha bars and the possible link with child

sexual exploitation public to ensure that effective action was taken. If anything, publicity would have impeded further action, such as the covert surveillance that was under consideration. Until a very short time before the disclosure, Councillor V had been responsible (with others) for ensuring that action was taken.

- If the disclosure was limited to Mr K on a confidential basis and in his role as chair of a charity, there would have been an arguable public interest justification, but Mr K in his own evidence to the investigation accepted that there was no likely benefit to the organisation and that if he personally needed this kind of information to perform that role, he could and should have obtained it from the chief executive of the charity.
- There was a risk of prejudicing current and future operations and surveillance by the police and the council.
- Harm could be caused to the owners of the premises in question from a link with child sexual exploitation based on unsupported intelligence.
- Harm could have been caused to community relations and cohesion, and possibly even to public order, if the contents of the email had been turned into a sensational news story at that particular time, when there were national and local tensions because of the death of Lee Rigby.
- There was a need for trust and confidence between the key agencies dealing with these difficult matters, especially the council and the police.

7.11. Councillor V's conduct was thoroughly and independently investigated by an independent law firm from 2013 to 2014. The review team conclude that there is no evidence that Councillor V was either a whistle-blower or that he was victimised for sharing information on shisha bars.

Chapter 8.

Complaints made in a letter by ‘Sophie’, an individual complainant, to the leader of Oldham Council in November 2019 and copied to the Mayor of Greater Manchester about the handling of her case during 2005/06

The allegations

- 8.1. On 13 November 2019 ‘Sophie’ wrote an ‘open letter’ to Leader B, who was then the leader of Oldham Council.
- 8.2. In summary, the letter includes the following allegations:
 - Sophie was groomed online in 2005, and subsequently raped by an adult male, Offender E, in 2006. In 2015, he was imprisoned for 11 years for this offence.
 - Sophie was abducted from Oldham Police Station in October 2006, raped by two men, attacked by another and then raped by a further five men. An adult male was convicted in 2007 in connection with these incidents and imprisoned for six years.
 - The residents of Address A (the street containing the house in which Sophie alleged she had been raped) “had repeatedly told the council about a large-scale grooming operation in which taxis would amass on the street every Wednesday night and children would be taken to [the address] in a conveyor belt fashion”.
 - The council’s response dated 17 December 2013 to a letter from the chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee concerning the abuse that Sophie had suffered, described her complaint as “*litigious*” and refused to answer the chair’s enquiries “*due to the passage of time*”.

In her open letter, Sophie sought acknowledgement from the council leader and the chief executive that there had been a cover-up of these failings and asked for an apology.

Our methodology

- 8.3. We asked Oldham Council to share with the review team all reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications, whether in electronic format or hard copy held on the various council's systems, in respect of their dealings with 'Sophie'. We were given access to the social care records held by Oldham Council, and correspondence about complaints submitted to the council in respect of Sophie's case. Oldham Council also shared with the review team a copy of a report it commissioned from an independent consultant regarding Sophie's case in December 2019. We also interviewed several senior officers and councillors about their knowledge of her case.
- 8.4. We asked Oldham Council to seek consent from Sophie and her advocate to share their contact details so that we could approach them. We were informed by Oldham Council that neither party had agreed to be interviewed and had commenced legal proceedings to challenge our review's terms of reference. In May 2021, we met with Sophie's social worker, who indicated that any further approach by the review team or an intermediary of the review team would be potentially detrimental to Sophie's welfare. The social worker told us that they had spoken directly with Sophie who advised that she did not wish to cooperate with the review. The social worker believed it would be inappropriate to apply any further pressure on Sophie, who was fully aware of how to contact the review team if she changed her mind. We asked for the council to consider an approach that would be acceptable to Sophie given the significant relevance of Sophie's allegations and the review team's terms of reference.
- 8.5. We received a letter from Oldham's managing director of children's services on 21 May 2021, advising the review team that the council believed that any further approach to Sophie to seek her consent to participate in the review could be seriously damaging to her welfare and providing some additional, privileged information. The managing director confirmed that Sophie had been made aware of the review and had not given her consent to participate. They concluded this letter by setting out the following concerns:

“The council is in receipt of expert assessments in relation to Sophie which have been directed by the Court, and therefore cannot be disclosed without the express permission of the Court. I am confident that the professional opinions expressed within those assessments would support the Council’s conclusion that engagement with the review team at this time may well pose a considerable risk to Sophie.”

- 8.6. Given these very significant concerns for Sophie’s welfare, we did not make a direct approach to Sophie to participate in this review and proposed to produce a confidential chapter.
- 8.7. We were initially unable to undertake a detailed review of the actions carried out by Greater Manchester Police as a data processing agreement could not be agreed with the force prior to the original publication date planned for this report. This is covered more fully in Chapter Two. However, after we provided Greater Manchester Police with our indicative conclusions, in August 2021 the force shared with the review team a redacted copy of its internal professional standards investigation into Sophie’s complaint. On considering our emerging findings, the mayor and chief constable asked the review team to undertake a further specific assurance exercise in respect of Greater Manchester Police’s investigation of the potential offences reported by Sophie. A data processing agreement to support this additional piece of work was agreed on 22 November 2021.
- 8.8. As part of the fair process, Sophie received a copy of our initial findings and made representations in January 2022 that she had not been approached for interview by the review team. Following an initial meeting in February 2022 to establish how she wished to take the matter further, Sophie was interviewed by the review team on 14 March 2022. In addition, she supplied a significant amount of documentary information she asked the review team to consider prior to finalising this section of the report. Sophie was supported in this process by an organisation dedicated to the support of survivors and we would recommend that Greater Manchester Police continues to develop effective links with these organisations to ensure that the voice of survivors helps to guide improvements in practice. We have since completed a review of all the available records held by Greater Manchester Police into the offences against Sophie and have included our findings in this report.

Detailed findings on complaints made by a significant complainant

The exploitation of 'Sophie' by Offender E

- 8.9. In 2006, when Sophie was only 12 years old, she was befriended by Offender E on a social messaging website. She believed he was only 18 years old and thought he was *'nice and caring'*. He was in fact in his early 30s and a serial paedophile. He went on to rape Sophie on two occasions.
- 8.10. In 2009, Offender E was jailed for six years for possessing indecent images of children. In 2015 he was convicted of the rape of Sophie in 2006 and was sentenced to 11 years in prison. In 2020, he received a life sentence for raping another child victim in 2005. We believe there were serious failures in how both Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police responded to the threats presented by Offender E.
- 8.11. Sophie was first referred to children's social care in March 2006. She was 12 years old. Her school informed children's social care that Sophie had reported that a family member had hit her. A duty social worker subsequently visited the school and interviewed the parents and Sophie separately. Sophie alleged that following an argument she had been hit her on the arm and smacked across the face. She contacted Childline, who told her to contact Connexions the next day. Connexions subsequently told her to inform her teacher. The family member denied hitting Sophie across the face and there were no injuries. Sophie returned home that night. The school referred her to the school doctor with the intention of getting support from the Reflections service based at the Oldham child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). It was reported that Sophie had previously had some support from CAMHS when she was seven years old in respect of possible attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Children's social care took no further action at this stage, but the information was passed to the Greater Manchester Police family support unit for a check on the family's antecedents.
- 8.12. The CAMHS social worker completed a full assessment on 6 April 2006. The assessment set out the relationship issues with the family. The family were described as very caring, and Sophie was viewed as challenging and

abusive to her parents. Sophie maintained that she wanted to be placed in care. Sophie disclosed to the social worker that she had a 16-year-old boyfriend she had not met in person yet but who she had talked to over the MSN online messaging network. She stated she would be worried about meeting him and was not planning to do so at this time. The case was allocated to a CAMHS social worker, and an outreach worker was enlisted to support the parents and work with Sophie.

- 8.13. The outreach support commenced in April, and this included one-to-one sessions with Sophie. Sophie maintained her view that she wanted to come into care and shared with the worker that she *“had been talking to older men on the internet”*. The outreach worker recorded that she discussed the dangers of this with Sophie during this session and added that *“Sophie appears to try to gain attention and shock others by what she says”*. On 15 June, Sophie recounted to her social worker that recently *“she had tried to meet an older man on a chatline”*. This adult male, said to be 18 years old by Sophie, had arrived to meet her in a convertible car but Sophie had fled when her father appeared. She also said that she had met someone else because of her chatline conversations who *“turned out to be a 12-year-old boy”*. Sophie had also informed her outreach worker that she wished to go on the pill at this point *“as it was better for her periods”*. On 29 June, Sophie reported to the outreach worker that that she had *“been in contact with a man of 19 from the internet”*. She also said that she had met him on one occasion in Sainsbury’s car park. Once again, the outreach worker discussed the dangers of this with Sophie. Sophie stated she had no sexual partners. The outreach worker concluded the record by stating: *“She seems to enjoy telling me things to impress or shock me. It is very difficult to know when Sophie is telling the truth or inventing stories.”*
- 8.14. However, during the same period, on 21 June 2006, a referral was made to children’s social care by the manager of the Brook Advisory Centre (BAC). The manager was concerned that Sophie had attended the Brook clinic three times in the preceding week and had been sexually active *‘since before she was 12’*. Given the serious issues these visits raised, the clinic had set aside the usual rules on confidentiality and made a referral to children’s social care. These were that:
- Sophie was a 12-year-old child who had insisted that her mother should not be involved.
 - Additionally, Sophie had told the clinic that she was in a relationship with a 19-year-old male (noted to be *‘her latest partner she met on the internet’*) who looked older than his apparent years and who –

according to Sophie – had recently accompanied her to a family wedding.

- Further, although a pregnancy test had proved negative, Sophie asked the clinic to be placed on a specific combined mini-pill.

- 8.15. We have seen a copy of the decision record kept by the assessment team in children's social care. It records on 21 June 2006 that the case would be allocated, and Sophie seen at the Brook clinic. On 26 June, it is recorded that the duty social worker would contact the police. There is no record of the police being advised of the referral. On the same day, the outreach worker reported that Sophie had been in good spirits but paradoxically also recorded that Sophie had ingested a small amount of bleach that morning.
- 8.16. The case was allocated to a social worker, and it was agreed that she would see Sophie at the clinic when she next visited. However, the manager of the clinic subsequently notified the social worker that Sophie had cancelled her visit. Contact was made with the outreach worker who explained that Sophie was *"prone to fantasise"* and that CAMHS was assessing Sophie for ADHD. On 5 July 2006, the social worker sent a letter to the CAMHS social worker setting out the concerns expressed by the Brook clinic and ending: *"Given your involvement I propose to close the case to myself, I have not contacted Sophie or her parents in respect of this referral."*
- 8.17. No further action was taken by children's social care. The CAMHS social worker was not spoken to directly at this point. On 31 July 2006, the CAMHS social worker replied to the letter from children's social care. The CAMHS social worker explained that they had been working with Sophie for several months and Sophie was currently in the process of being assessed for ADHD: *"I am attempting to support the family through [outreach worker] at Outreach and we are aware of Sophie's attendance at Brook and her vulnerability."* The CAMHS social worker confirmed that they would continue to work with Sophie and continue with six-monthly review meetings set up by the school. This was an inadequate response by children's social care. Given the serious safeguarding concerns raised by the Brook clinic, children's social care should at this juncture have called a strategy discussion under the child protection procedures.

The 2006 edition of Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children is unequivocal in setting out what was required of all agencies in respect of this situation:

“A child under 13 is not legally capable of consenting to sexual activity. Any offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 involving a child under 13 is very serious and should be taken to indicate a risk of significant harm to the child.

“Cases involving under 13s should always be discussed with a nominated child protection lead in the organisation. Under the Sexual Offences Act, penetrative sex with a child under 13 is classed as rape. Where the allegation concerns penetrative sex, or other intimate sexual activity occurs, there would always be reasonable cause to suspect that a child, whether girl or boy, is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm. There should be a presumption that the case will be reported to children’s social care and that a strategy discussion will be held in accordance with the guidance set out in paragraph 5.54 below. This should involve children’s social care, police and relevant agencies, to discuss appropriate next steps with the professional. All cases involving under 13s should be fully documented including detailed reasons where a decision is taken not to share information.”

8.18. None of these requirements were followed, which was a considerable shortfall in the protection provided to Sophie.

8.19. On 29 August 2006, the CAMHS social worker informed Sophie that they were concerned about Sophie meeting a man she had met on the internet who was said by Sophie to be 18 years old. The social worker recorded:

“Sophie said I could meet him and show me he was OK. Again, we discussed the dangers. I refused to drop Sophie off in town to meet the man.”

However, no further action was taken to identify who this man was and whether he presented a threat to Sophie.

8.20. On 5 September 2006, there had been a break-in at the family home. It is noted by the social worker that the mother was upset because Sophie knew who the people responsible were and continued to go out with them the same night. Sophie’s school attendance problems continued throughout September. It was at this point that the outreach support was ended; the reasons for this are not clear as the presenting issues had not been resolved.

- 8.21. On 27 October 2006, Sophie's mother reported to the police that Sophie was missing. The police incident report states the following:

"On speaking to the parents of the MFH [missing from home] it is known she regularly uses MSN and contacts strangers. She has in the past spoken with a male named [Offender E with telephone number]. He is aged in his twenties. And he has met up with the MFH once before. The meeting ended abruptly because the MFH took her friend, and this deterred [Offender E] from making contact with her. She later phoned him, and he told her that he didn't want her to be with her friend because he thought she might tell MFH's parents ...

"I have done a check on [Offender E] but there is no one who fits his age group on the OIS [operational information system], the address is also negative, it is believed he either lives in Middleton or Stockport. MFH's parents have spoken to [Offender E] and he sounded genuinely concerned when he heard she was missing. A message has been left on his mobile to contact the police."

It appears this number was called more than once by the police, however there was no answer, so a voicemail message was left. On the morning of 28 October, the officers searching for Sophie were also sufficiently concerned to seek urgent authority under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) to identify the user of the mobile phone, although this was not progressed as Sophie returned home before the application was made.

- 8.22. We believe that it was evident from this information that Offender E was potentially a risk to Sophie. Sophie returned the following day and subsequently disclosed to the police a series of brutal rapes committed on her by men unrelated to Offender E. We cover this abuse in the next section. During her three interviews with the police, we believe that Sophie provided sufficient information to trigger a full investigation into Offender E and the risk he presented to Sophie. For example:

- An entry from an officer on the police incident report details speaking to one of the young people who was with Sophie at the churchyard where an alleged sexual assault took place. The officer records *"she describes how [Sophie] ran off later as she was going to call her other boyfriend called [the first name of Offender E]"*.
- In subsequent interviews, Sophie described Offender E as a *"really good mate"* and was distressed at the thought of the interviewing officer trying to make contact with Offender E or telling her mother about him. While Sophie did not make any disclosures concerning

Offender E, our review of the interview transcripts leads us to believe that the interviewing officer had identified that Offender E was a person who potentially posed a risk to Sophie and there was sufficient evidence to be concerned about the nature of the relationship between Sophie and Offender E to warrant further investigation.

- 8.23. We have concluded that this information identified Offender E as a potential threat to Sophie. No further work was undertaken on this line of enquiry, and it appears that the risk presented by Offender E got lost within the wider investigation following Sophie's subsequent disclosures. We regard this as a missed opportunity. If further action had been taken it may have prevented any further offences Offender E committed against children. Offender E was convicted in 2009 of offences involving possession and making of indecent images of children in 2008 and offences against a child in 2007.

The disclosures by Sophie of multiple rapes

- 8.24. Sophie returned home on 28 October 2006 in a distressed state and a police officer attended her home address. Over the next few days, Sophie was interviewed by the police on three occasions. She made the following disclosures:
- She had been in Oldham town centre with three friends. They had been shopping and ended up in the grounds of Oldham Parish Church. While at this location, Sophie states she was indecently assaulted by an Asian male known only as Ali.
 - She reported that she went to the police station and was told to *"reattend with an adult when she was not drunk"*.
 - While she was in the police station, she was beckoned by two males who asked if she wanted to get in their car. *"Scared to go home. Two guys winked at me and asked to go to the car, near camera at police station front door. Asked me to chill in his car. I said okay, other went into police station. I went with them. One had to take in his driving licence, we waited round corner in car."*
 - They waited in the car for 10 minutes for a third male who Sophie said was inside the police station. Sophie stated that one of the men raped her in the car. Sophie also disclosed that she was driven to a petrol station, which she was able to identify, where money was drawn out of a cash machine by one of her assailants.

- At approximately 10.30pm Sophie was dropped off near Werneth Park. Sophie asked a man for directions; he said he would help her and invited her into his house. While inside the house, the man raped her. Sophie was given money by this man to pay her bus fare. She then left the address. This address was later identified as the home of Offender G.
- Sophie went on to say that she was then picked up by another male, Offender H, in a green car, he told her he would help her. Sophie then states that he took her to an address, later identified as Address A. While at this address she was raped over several hours by five males. The following day, she was taken by one of the males to her home address. The crime report states that the matter was referred to a social worker in Operation Messenger on 30 October 2006, who conducted a search of all relevant records. Following the investigation into this series of incidents only two arrests were made, and these were of Offender H and Offender G.

- 8.25. This was a complex investigation into very serious offences against a 12-year-old child. Our judgement is that there were serious failings in the investigation of the crimes reported by Sophie. We have been advised that at that time, due to pressures within the Messenger service, the responsible detective inspector directed that no new investigations were to be commenced until Messenger had caught up with its outstanding work. This had serious consequences for the investigation as the responsibility for investigating this complex series of offences fell to a generic detective in the CID.
- 8.26. The initial response by officers following Sophie's disclosure of rape when she returned home on 28 October 2006 was appropriate. She was seen quickly by a specially trained officer, taken on a drive round to identify the locations where she had been raped (leading to the eventual arrest of Offenders H and G) and medically examined. She was also quickly interviewed the following day on video.
- 8.27. However, the sexual assault in the churchyard, and Sophie's rape by the men she met at the police station, were not recorded as crimes and we have been unable to establish that any significant lines of enquiry were followed to identify and apprehend these offenders. Our judgement is that the investigating officer concentrated on building a prosecution case against Offenders H and G without sufficient regard to identifying the other

offenders. We regard this as a serious failure to follow the national crime recording standard (NCRS) in place at the time and to conduct the investigation thoroughly.

8.28. We believe there were several proportionate and reasonable lines of enquiry available, based on Sophie's interviews, to investigate these offences. We have summarised these below and provide what assurance we can:

- Examination of CCTV footage of the police station reception area and outside to establish whether there was evidence of two, or possibly three, men engaging with Sophie. We have been advised by Greater Manchester Police that this was done but have been unable to identify any evidence to support that assertion. Specifically, we can find no reference that this line of enquiry was pursued, either on the relevant crime reports or the later Operation Solent HOLMES account.
- Examination of any CCTV footage from the petrol station where these same men were reported by Sophie to have stopped to take cash out. We cannot find any record that was done, and Greater Manchester Police does not assert that this enquiry was completed. Specifically, we can find no reference that this line of enquiry was pursued, either on the relevant crime reports or the OP Solent HOLMES account.
- Make enquiries of records held at Oldham Police Station reception desk to establish who came into the police reception at around that, time possibly to produce their documents, deal with a property matter or report as part of bail conditions. We have been advised by Greater Manchester Police that this was done but have been unable to identify any evidence to support that assertion. Specifically, we can find no reference that this line of enquiry was pursued, either on the relevant crime reports or the Operation Solent HOLMES account.
- Make enquiries with staff on duty at the time within the reception area of Oldham Police Station to establish the circumstances of Sophie attending the station, to comment on her demeanour and corroborate her account. We have been advised by Greater Manchester Police that this was done but have been unable to identify any evidence to support that assertion. Specifically, we can find no reference that this line of enquiry was pursued, either on the relevant crime reports or the Operation Solent HOLMES account.
- Submit phased forensic submissions in respect of the large number of condoms and other material recovered from Address A. We can

confirm this was done and a record we found as part of our examination of Operation Solent records suggesting it was not done is inaccurate. Specifically, this information is recorded on forensic science submission documentation.

- Conduct enquiries at the churchyard to identify if there was any CCTV evidence that may have assisted with identifying an offender. We have been advised by Greater Manchester Police that this was done but have been unable to identify any evidence to support that assertion. Specifically, we can find no reference that this line of enquiry was pursued, either on the relevant crime reports or the Operation Solent HOLMES account.
- Conduct enquiries to identify other offenders through examination of mobile phone devices seized from Offenders H and G. We have been able to confirm this was completed. Specifically, a summary of this enquiry is recorded on relevant prosecution case file documentation
- Recognise Offender E as a potential risk to Sophie and attempt to identify him through phone examination or other methods. We are satisfied that this line of enquiry was not pursued. Specifically, there is no record of this line of enquiry being pursued on the relevant Messenger records, children's social care records, the relevant crime reports or the Operation Solent HOLMES account.

In conclusion, we believe there were some serious weaknesses in the investigation. Some of these weaknesses were acknowledged when the matter was reinvestigated as part of Operation Solent, which was undertaken by Greater Manchester Police and concluded in March 2014. We will cover this later in this chapter.

- 8.29. On 15 November 2006, a referral was received by children's social care from the police, setting out Sophie's disclosures in detail. The duty worker noted on 20 November that it should be established whether CAMHS was still involved as *"this child appears to be putting herself at risk"*. The CAMHS social worker called back the following day and it is noted on 21 November that they were still involved and aware of the *"sexual assault"*. It was again discussed that Sophie was being assessed for possible ADHD. The final note on the file was that the *"risk of exploitation processes"* might be used and that CAMHS should progress this. The matter was then closed to children's social care.

- 8.30. The Messenger team picked up the concerns in respect of the offences against Sophie and raised a family support investigation document for the Messenger team to consider on 15 November 2006. This explicitly recorded that Sophie had informed the investigating officer that she went to the police station to make a complaint about a sexual assault that had just occurred and that she was told to *“reattend with an adult when she was not drunk”*. It also states that she informed the investigating officer that while she was in the police station, she met two males who invited her into their car *“to chill”*. These men sexually assaulted her and further sexual assaults by different men took place in a car and a house. We conclude that the failure to provide protection to Sophie when she attended the police station was not appropriately investigated at the time. This is all the more concerning as the crime report dated 9 November 2006 had been seen by the acting detective sergeant attached to Messenger and their supervising inspector. No one raised concerns about the apparent failure to protect Sophie when she presented herself at the police station. We believe this is evidence of a significant failing by Greater Manchester Police in its treatment of a vulnerable 12-year-old child.
- 8.31. There is no evidence that a formal strategy discussion was held to consider the risks to Sophie, and this is a further serious failure. Had a strategy discussion been held then not only would the threat presented by Offender E have been considered in a multi-agency forum but also the failure to protect Sophie when she had presented herself to the police on the evening of 27 October 2006. We have been advised that her case was discussed at a weekly Messenger case management meeting involving several agencies. However, we do not consider that to have been sufficient to either comply with the statutory procedures in place at the time or, as events demonstrated, to sufficiently scrutinise the facts of the case to properly protect Sophie and bring the perpetrators to justice.
- 8.32. On 15 December 2006, the inclusion and child protection officer at Blue Coat School faxed a referral to children’s social care about their *“child protection concerns”* for Sophie. This noted the serious sexual assaults of October 2006 and, by that time, the limited involvement of CAMHS. The school noted that, since the sexual assaults, Sophie’s attendance at school had been further affected. The letter ends by stating that *“Sophie remains vulnerable and in need of support”*. This was dealt with by once again reaffirming that CAMHS was involved and letting Sophie’s mother know that a referral had been made by the school. No other action was taken.

- 8.33. Offender G was remanded to court following arrest and subsequently remanded to prison. Offender G was then released following a bail application to a judge. Offender G was an illegal immigrant and following release on bail he failed to attend his appointment with the immigration service. Police checks were completed to attempt to trace and arrest him but without success.
- 8.34. In May 2007, a man (Offender H) was found guilty and sentenced to six years' imprisonment for the rape of Sophie. During his trial, as part of his mitigation, he named two other men, Offender F and Offender J, involved with the rapes of Sophie at Address A. This information was not followed up by Greater Manchester Police at the time. We consider this to be a further serious failure and was not considered by the professional standards investigations in 2013 or 2018. When we interviewed Sophie in 2022, she was shocked and dismayed that Greater Manchester Police had not pursued these lines of investigation and had not shared this information with her despite 10 years of her seeking answers.
- 8.35. In July 2007, a relative of Sophie telephoned children's social care duty on 18 July to discuss their concerns about her welfare; Sophie was by this time 13 years old. This relative (an aunt) firstly mentioned the court case in respect of the rape and cited that Sophie was allowed to smoke, drink and "*date much older men*". The relative was informed that children's social care had no current involvement and was advised to let the court case finish and only then discuss her concerns with Sophie's parents. If she remained concerned after that time, she was advised that she could again contact children's social care. This is very poor advice given Sophie's severe vulnerability, and her recent history of exploitation.
- 8.36. In 2009, Offender J was convicted of the attempted murder of his wife. An organisational review by Greater Manchester Police in 2014 concluded that had the forensic enquiries been completed in 2006, Offender J may have been identified and this may have prevented his assault on his wife in 2009. We have been able to confirm that there were several forensic submissions made in 2006. However, we have not been able to assess the quality of the enquiries conducted following those submissions to form a judgement on this matter. It does remain a point of concern that an organisational review identified a failing of this nature. In 2011, the wife of Offender J reported to the police that he had admitted to her that he had raped a 12-year-old and had retained newspaper clippings in relation to the conviction of Offender H.

This information was passed to the Messenger team but again was never acted on. We consider this to be a further serious failure.

- 8.37. In 2009, Offender E was sentenced to a nine-year prison sentence for raping another child. In June 2012, Sophie made a report to the police in respect of Offender E's abuse of her and in 2015 he was subsequently sentenced to 11 years' imprisonment.

Responses by Oldham Council to Sophie's complaints

- 8.38. On 31 August 2012, Sophie, then aged 18, gave written evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee into child sexual exploitation and the response to localised grooming. On 23 November 2012, the chief executive of Oldham Council received a letter from the chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee:

"I would be most grateful if you were able to tell me what steps social services took to protect Sophie and whether they are reviewing the case."

- 8.39. Associate Assistant Director A reviewed the files on Sophie following receipt of this letter and emailed a solicitor within the Council's legal department as follows:

"I have looked at both files now and read every page. From my point of view there is very little if anything to support [her husband's] allegations of a failures to protect. There was evidence that we had tried to support the family with Sophie's behaviour and the family worker had counselled her about dangers of the internet and dating older men as she claimed to have. The only gap might be in evidencing any contact with police prior to her having been assaulted in which case police were involved. She never gave any detail of alleged adult boyfriends and never made any complaint. Can we discuss on Monday what line of response to [the Chair of the Home affairs Committee] should be?"

- 8.40. We believe, given the failure to follow the statutory child protection processes in place at the time, that this was a wholly unrealistic assessment of the deficiencies of both the council and the police in their response to Sophie.

- 8.41. On 26 November 2012, the council received a statement of complaint from Sophie, which stated the following:

“Despite 10 safeguarding referrals, many of which concerning sexual abuse, you never believed Sophie, who was actually being sexually abused. On the 29th August 2006, Sophie invited you to meet her abuser and watch 'what they do together'. Your Community Outreach Team decline (sic) the opportunity, when the offender was known to be waiting outside of Oldham Police Station on Barn St, Oldham. You did nothing to protect her on any of the occasions you were made aware of her significant risk of foreseeable harm. You humiliated her parents and you left Sophie in an easily recognisable turmoil of abuse. On one occasion, your social worker writes 'Sophie is in good spirits today, but she drank bleach this morning'. It does not even take a social care professional to recognise something was clearly not right and that intervention was not only needed but required.”

- 8.42. A council solicitor informed the complaints department on the same day:

“I would suggest this has gone beyond the bounds of what would reasonably come within the complaints process and/or the LGO [Local Government Ombudsman] both in regard to passage of time and the litigious nature of the outcome sought. If Sophie wants to take the matter further, then [her husband] needs to step aside and allow Sophie to seek legal representation to pursue a claim if she is advised she has one. He is not legally qualified to pursue litigation on her behalf. I'm afraid this is just going to go on and on in this vein otherwise.”

- 8.43. On 27 November 2012, however, Chief Executive A commented on receiving the proposed response:

“Thanks however, don't we need to put something in writing to her from Legal fully explaining her rights, what she may or may not choose to do and get her to try and decide what course of action she wishes to pursue? The e-mails below don't seem to say we are going to actually do that unless, I am missing something. In turn, do we need some external legal advice to prepare for any case or, are you happy with the internal colleagues handling matters?”

- 8.44. It appears that a final response to the chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee was drafted with the support of legal services and the civil litigation department. Initially the letter drafted by Associate Assistant Director A was to include the following information:

“However, it is our intention to commission an external independent review of the case files in order that we can be assured of a high level of objectivity. I will ensure that the outcome of this external review will be shared with you as soon as it is completed.”

- 8.45. However, on 11 December 2012, a council solicitor informed Associate Assistant Director A that the reply had been amended following a meeting with the team manager over the civil litigation:

“I attach herewith the amended version jointly agreed. You will see we have taken out the independent review and details of the requested outcome of the complaint and expanded a bit on the detail of what services were offered. The review is a double-edged sword and probably better done within any legal claim that may be forthcoming.”

- 8.46. The chief executive subsequently replied to the chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee as follows:

“I can confirm that Sophie was known to Oldham’s Children Social Care Services in 2006. This followed a referral received from her school after an alleged physical assault by her father. The social work files record Sophie making allegations of physical assaults ... and her parents’ difficulties in setting boundaries and managing her behaviour at home. Further referrals were subsequently received from Brook Sexual Health Service where Sophie had presented at a very young age.

“Sophie was seen to be a vulnerable young person, possibly with ADHD although no diagnosis was made, and she was referred to the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) where regular appointments were offered with that Service along with Outreach support where one to one meetings took place between Sophie and her outreach worker to discuss problems. In addition, interventions included work with her parents to manage Sophie’ behaviour and set boundaries, and work with Sophie herself. Over a period of several months both before and after the incident referred to below, the local authority facilitated a significant level of support to the family.

“As you will be aware Sophie was the victim of an appalling, serious sexual assault in November 2006. As far as we have been able to ascertain from her records Sophie was not known to her perpetrators prior to the assault taking place.

“There has been recent contact with Sophie following a subject access to records request and a complaint has been lodged with the local authority on

her behalf. The social care records have been carefully reviewed by a Senior Officer and legal services and we do not consider that there is evidence to substantiate the claims made in Sophie's complaint. Additionally, the complaint is beyond the bounds of what would reasonably come within the complaints process both in regard to the passage of time and the litigious nature of the outcome sought."

8.47. We believe this was an inadequate response to a serious enquiry from a senior politician charged with considering the national response to child sexual exploitation and grooming. A cursory review of Sophie's file would have revealed the numerous warning signs and that the council and Greater Manchester Police had failed to follow their own procedures in respect of protecting Sophie, who was 12 at the time, from the risk of serious harm. There were at least two occasions when multi-agency child protection procedures should have been initiated, and if they had been, opportunities could have been identified to protect Sophie from the predatory males who ended up abusing her. Furthermore, if a strategy discussion, Section 47 investigation and child protection plan had been put in place, the shortcomings of earlier interventions would have been scrutinised appropriately and the decision-making in respect of what had occurred at Oldham Police Station on the night of 27 October reviewed in depth.

8.48. We have found no evidence that this approach was influenced by Leader A, who was the leader of the council at the time, or any other politician. It is clear from the evidence that the response was led by the senior professional responsible for safeguarding at the time, supported by the council's legal department.

8.49. On 4 January 2013, the complaints officer from the council informed Sophie her complaint could not be progressed through or investigated under the complaint process.

"This is due to the passage of time that has elapsed from the events in question, and also due to the litigious nature of the outcome you are seeking. I can confirm however that both a Senior Officer and Legal Services have carefully reviewed the social care records and have found no evidence that would support further investigation, or substantiate the claims made within your statement of complaint. In light of this we are unable to progress these matters further for you."

- 8.50. Sophie's husband responded on the same day and complained that the council had failed to mention significant evidence in its response to the chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

"The specific points Sophie raises are issues of fact in the letter. It would seem that the Children's Services Division refers to two separate groups of offenders as the same. I must be clear that in the social services file (which I have referred to in the complaint and which are clear in the social services records), Sophie offers to allow her social worker to meet a 'man with a convertible car'. Since offences have been proven, and there is a suspect, it is not in doubt whether Sophie was abused by a person who owns a convertible car. In fact, this matter is now one that is for trial. For that reason, Sophie is extremely concerned that 'we do not consider there is evidence to substantiate the claims made in Sophie's complaint'... The complaint issued to you refers to specific social services records, and therefore Sophie is concerned that the Oldham Local Authority is being purposefully deceitful and in fact has provided the false opinion that there is no evidence to substantiate the matters raised."

- 8.51. On 13 April 2015, Associate Assistant Director B, sent an email to Chief Executive B and Leader A in respect of an enquiry by *The Times* newspaper in respect of Sophie.

"This is in relation to a trial of a man, who has pleaded guilty to 4 counts of rape and convicted today for 11 years We have indicated to the Times that we have no intelligence to suggest this although we had involvement at the time. Sophie was known to CSC initially for alleging physical abuse by parents (unfounded) and then for behaviour. Other information that came out was that Sophie had an unhealthy interest in the internet and was said to meet up with older people from there (we only have evidence of 1 occasion). There was never any intelligence or information that would assist in making a referral to the police of these older men, no names etc."

"The incident above relating to Offender E occurred in June 2006 of which we have no record of it and at a time when CSC's outreach worker was regularly meeting with Sophie, as well as other professionals e.g., school, CAMHS. Sophie never disclosed this information. Sophie was a victim in an unrelated incident in November 2006 raped by 4/5 Asian individuals whom she'd met that day, there is no evidence of CSE as the perpetrators were not known before that day and no suggestion of grooming."

- 8.52. This account clearly only presented part of the story. Sophie had sought birth control from the Brook clinic when she was 12 years old, and on more than

one occasion talked about meeting with an older man in a convertible car and had even invited her social worker to meet him. By October 2006, the name and telephone number of Offender E were known to Sophie's parents, and she had disclosed the same to the police in 2006. It is likely that appropriate enquiries would have revealed that Offender E was a 33-year-old male, and this alone should have been sufficient for the protective agencies to question why he was associating with a vulnerable 12-year-old.

- 8.53. Earlier, in December 2014, Oldham Council had received a letter from a firm of solicitors representing Sophie. It had been instructed to investigate a potential claim against Oldham Council for negligence and/or breach of duty caused by personal injury to its client. The legal firm alleged that Sophie suffered sexual abuse. The council instructed external solicitors. In November 2015, the external solicitor provided an update following their meeting with one of the social workers involved with this case. In January 2016, the solicitor met with Associate Assistant Director B. the solicitor noted that Associate Assistant Director B, *"confirmed that the actions taken by the social workers, bearing in mind the information they had at the time, was reasonable. The social workers involved had complied with the requirements to undertake an initial assessment and liaise with other agencies thereby allowing Sophie to be counselled both by internal services and CAMHS as well as engaging with Sophie's school."*

- 8.54. We do not accept this interpretation as there were at least two opportunities to provide a more robust approach to protecting Sophie from exploitation. We asked Associate Assistant Director B to clarify their response. They responded as follows:

"From my recollection I had previously been asked to attend a meeting with the previous AD and head of legal to discuss the case and was advised that practice was a reasonable response with what was known or not known, policy and procedures of that time. This was agreed after taking legal advice. Also, to note that contextualised safeguarding was at its infancy and our policies and procedures related to abuse within the family home primarily. The incident with the unknown male was run by the police in Mash and they agreed they couldn't progress this without a name."

We remain of the opinion that the assessment by Associate Assistant Director B was not an accurate reflection of the serious failures by both Oldham Council and Greater Manchester Police in protecting Sophie when she was a vulnerable child^{1.59}. On 21 December 2016, Sophie's lawyers notified the council's solicitor that they were formally discontinuing the case.

Responses by Greater Manchester Police to Sophie's complaints

- 8.55. On 4 January 2013, the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee wrote a letter to Greater Manchester Police in a similar vein to the one sent to the council. Greater Manchester Police was unable to locate a copy of its reply. However, in her open letter, Sophie stated that a letter from Detective Chief Superintendent Y dated 4 February 2013 said that Detective Chief Inspector Z found that the investigation was “*flawless*” and that there was no manner in which the investigation could have been improved.
- 8.56. On 20 August 2013 Sophie's husband submitted a complaint against Greater Manchester Police on her behalf. The complaint concerned the following: The conduct of the investigation into the circumstances on 27 October 2006
- That key evidence and lines of enquiry had not been followed
 - The failure to initiate an investigation into the grooming undertaken by Offender E
 - The evidence that one of the males convicted of raping Sophie was connected to Rochdale care homes and the Rochdale grooming gang and there had been no effort to identify his other victims.
- 8.57. The outcome letter was sent to Sophie's husband on 16 July 2013. It concluded that: *“After reviewing all the information available to me I am unable to prove that the 2006 investigation contained procedural irregularities, key evidence was ignored, and key lines of enquiry were not followed. This finding is supported by the fact the investigation resulted in a conviction and the opinion of DCI Z who has completed a review of the 2006 investigation and reports no concerns were identified.”*
- 8.58. We recognise that a professional standards branch enquiry is not a reinvestigation of the case and instead focuses on the conduct of the officers concerned and seeks to identify any organisational failings. However, we have set out above those areas where we have been unable to provide assurance that the investigation was conducted appropriately. We note that Operation Solent also identified flaws in the investigation, and it is disappointing that the professional standards branch investigation did not acknowledge these at the time to both Sophie and her husband.

8.59. This is all the more troubling as we know that Greater Manchester Police had commenced an internal investigatory review that concluded on 6 March 2014. This identified the serious weaknesses in the original investigation and led to a major police investigation known as Operation Solent. Operation Solent conducted a further series of forensic submissions of exhibits seized from a bedroom where Sophie was raped.

8.60. The subsequent forensic results were as follows:

- Male 1 – Offender H and Sophie's DNA on condom
- Male 2 – Unidentified full profile from condom. There was also DNA from Sophie and the unidentified full profile matched DNA from saliva on her neck and clothing.
- Male 3 – Offender J: his DNA was in a condom that was not linked forensically to Sophie. Enquiries confirmed that Offender J was the man referred to by Offender H at his trial. Offender J was arrested by Operation Solent. He gave no comment to questions put to him in interview and no charges resulted.
- Male 4 – Offender K: his DNA was in a condom that could not be linked forensically to Sophie. He was arrested and denied the offence, stating he had sex with a prostitute at that address and put the condom in the bin.
- Male 5 – Offender F: this man had been apprehended 'kerb crawling' with two young people, subsequently identified as victims of CSE, in his car in 2006. His DNA was on a condom that could not be linked forensically to Sophie. He was arrested in May 2014 by Operation Solent and said he had sex with sex workers on two different occasions at Address A. He denied rape of Sophie and no charges were made.
- Male 6 – Offender L: his DNA was recovered on tissues that could not be linked forensically to Sophie.
- Male 7 – This was an unidentified male whose DNA was on a tissue not forensically linked to Sophie.
- There was also DNA material from four females and three were identified. These three women were interviewed. One woman disclosed she was a sex worker and two disclosed they had had sex with Offender H at Address A when they were 16.

- 8.61. We believe this forensic evidence does go some way to support Sophie's later assertion that Address A was a place where young women were sexually exploited by Asian males.
- 8.62. In March 2014, the organisational review by Greater Manchester Police concluded by recognising the following failings within the original investigation:
- Forensic examination not conducted, crimes not investigated thoroughly or recorded, and Offender G charged but never traced
 - It recognised that the following key evidence was lost or destroyed:
 - CCTV
 - Sophie's 'achieving best evidence' (ABE) video interview
 - Exhibits from the address
 - The prosecution file destroyed "despite being placed in long term storage"
 - Mobile telephone work not completed/reviewed to identify offenders at Address A
 - No policy book by investigating officers
 - No real efforts to trace Offender G.
- 8.63. It is therefore clear that in early 2014 Greater Manchester Police was aware of the many serious weaknesses in the original investigation. These weaknesses were not acknowledged to Sophie or her husband at the time nor were they made aware of the disclosures by Offender H during his trial and the failure of Greater Manchester Police to investigate them
- 8.64. In May 2018, the professional standards branch within Greater Manchester Police undertook a further review of complaints submitted by Sophie. We were provided with a copy of this redacted report in August 2021. It concluded:
- "Apology - On behalf of Greater Manchester Police, I would like to offer a sincere apology to Sophie, her family and relatives. I recognise and acknowledge that the 2013 review of events from 2006, would not have occurred had it not been for the actions of Sophie, who sought answers to outstanding issues connected to a personal and traumatic time of her life. There is an argument to suggest that this review could have occurred earlier,*

as a result of good governance of a historic serious sexual offence incident. The review process did identify some failings, despite this, I remain of the view that the 2006, investigations were conducted to a reasonable standard. I reach this conclusion based on the fact that Criminal Justice Partners oversaw the investigations, a senior officer 'reviewed' the processes and concluded they were of a sufficient standard."

Sophie cannot recall receiving that apology and Greater Manchester Police has been unable to confirm whether the apology was made.

8.65. We are concerned that the conclusions by the internal professional standards branch are significantly at variance with the conclusions of Operation Solent, which candidly recognised the failures within the 2006 investigation and our own assessment of the investigation. Insufficient regard has been given to the failure of the Greater Manchester Police with its partners to respond appropriately to the threat of harm presented to Sophie and a failure to follow the child protection procedures in place at the time. This lack of candour in response to Sophie's legitimate complaints is deeply concerning.

8.66. In respect of the failure to pursue the investigation into Offender E, the professional standards branch investigation conducted in May 2018 concluded:

"Police Officers can only be expected to act on information supplied to them or otherwise supported by other evidence. Given that [Sophie's father] confirms that he did not provide the key logger data to the police or report any concerns and Sophie did not report matters until 2013, I am of the view the concern GMP failed to act to prevent CSE in 2006 is one that is both unfair and without substance. Once Sophie had reported matters GMP with [name of officer] conducted an investigation that led to a successful prosecution."

8.67. The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) took a similar view that as numerous serious criminal offences had been reported by Sophie, the police were correctly focusing their efforts on bringing the perpetrators to justice.

8.68. We do not share this view. The missing from home report supported by Sophie's comments in interview, in addition to what was already known about Offender E by Oldham Council and the Brook clinic, should have initiated a multi-agency strategy discussion to consider the obvious concerns of an adult male seeking to engage with a vulnerable 12-year-old.

The second professional standards branch report completed in 2018 concluded the following:

“[Sophie’s] first account makes no mention of her being turned away at the police station, it does outline that she was scared. However, given the views of Detective Chief Superintendent Y, I am inclined to simply conclude that [Sophie’s] attendance at Oldham Police Station in 2006, may not have been managed correctly. On balance, the views of Detective Chief Superintendent Y and [Sophie’s] being scared are in my view, sufficient indication to reach this conclusion. In the absence of any other information to develop this issue I am unable to conclude, with confidence that a police officer / civilian member of staff behaved inappropriately. I do not have to reach a conclusion in this relation to this matter.”

- 8.69. We cannot be sure exactly what happened at the police station; however, Sophie was consistent in her contemporaneous accounts that she had gone to the station to report what had occurred in the churchyard and had been told to return with an adult when sober. Given her age and vulnerability, this is very concerning and set in train a set of events that led her to be seriously abused on multiple occasions by different men.
- 8.70. We believe this is evidence of a serious failure by Greater Manchester Police to consider the circumstances surrounding Sophie’s attendance at Oldham Police Station and specifically the actions of the relevant police officers and staff present. It is disappointing that neither of the two professional branch investigations satisfactorily addressed these issues. We would have anticipated that the professional standards branch report would have commented on the lack of action taken at the time to establish whether staff on duty at Oldham Police Station had acted inappropriately towards Sophie when she went into the station to speak to a police officer. We have established that several officers of sergeant and inspector rank were aware that Sophie had been told to return when sober and considering her age and vulnerability we believe this should have initiated some enquiries at the time to establish exactly what had happened.
- 8.71. On 1 August 2019, Sophie’s husband submitted an appeal to the IOPC. On 29 February 2019, the IOPC reported its findings back to Sophie.
- “I believe that the investigation that was undertaken into your complaints was carried out in a proportionate manner and dealt with all of your complaints. However, having examined all the evidence I disagree with some of the decisions that have been made about the complaints that have been*

investigated. Whilst I am satisfied that no officer has a case to answer for misconduct or gross misconduct, I am not satisfied that the appropriate findings were made in relation to some of the allegations.”

The IOPC upheld Sophie’s appeal in the following areas only:

- Sophie’s attendance at the police station may not have been managed correctly
- The investigating officers’ record-keeping in respect of forensic evidence was below the level that should be expected
- The investigating officer should have taken more care in the retention of his day books
- The investigating officer should have managed the retention of forensic evidence more diligently.

The IOPC concluded:

“As outlined above I consider [the investigating officer] should receive management action in order to address his errors. Although the errors occurred some time ago, I am of the view that he should be made aware of them to ensure they do not occur again.”

8.72. It is unclear to us as a review team how these conclusions could have been drawn if the IOPC had been fully cognisant of Operation Solent and its subsequent conclusions.

8.73. On 19 December 2019, Oldham Council commissioned an independent consultant to undertake an independent review of Sophie’s file. He concluded his review as follows:

“There were, in my view, missed opportunities to intervene using the child protection procedures throughout this period of intervention. I think that this was particularly the case following the referral from BAC [Brook Advisory Centre] in June 2006 and then again following the referral from the police in November 2006.

That this did not occur seems to me to be for the following four main reasons:

“(i) That the case was, during this period, open to a CAMHS social worker with most of the work being completed by an outreach worker. The primary focus seemed to be on investigating Sophie’s possible ADHD and (perhaps associated) tendency to fantasise. It is stated on more than one occasion

that it was difficult to be sure whether Sophie was telling the truth or not. This is likely to be how her allegations were viewed, i.e. with some scepticism.

“(ii) The almost reflexive reaction from the children’s social care front door that, as the case was open to another service, there was no requirement to get involved.

“(iii) There also seems to have been very little attempt to ‘join the dots’, i.e. to see Sophie’s escalating behaviours throughout 2006 as forming a pattern of increasingly concerning and risk-taking activity. I am aware both of the dangers of hindsight and of the fact that, in 2006, thinking about child sexual exploitation was much less developed than it is in 2019. However, the essential and timeless professional skill of considering patterns of events and what these might mean or imply was noticeably lacking.

“(iv) All of this meant that Sophie’s and these escalating and linked concerns were never considered at a strategy discussion where there would almost certainly have been a more explicit pooling of information and intelligence. This would conceivably, perhaps even probably, have led to more protective action being taken.”

- 8.74. We would concur with these conclusions and add that the multi-agency procedures are there to protect vulnerable children from sexual exploitation and the failure to follow those procedures meant that the risks to Sophie were insufficiently considered and the approach to them was inadequate. This failure has been compounded by the successive responses from Oldham Council and from Greater Manchester Police to the effect that neither Greater Manchester Police nor Oldham Council could find evidence to substantiate the complaints that Sophie had made.
- 8.75. We believe that the interventions of both the council and Greater Manchester Police fell far short of what was required to protect Sophie at the time and these failures have been compounded by the denials that have subsequently been issued to Sophie and feed a view that both agencies were more concerned about covering up their failures than acknowledging the harm that had been done to a vulnerable young person.
- 8.76. We recommend that both Greater Manchester Police and Oldham Council publicly acknowledge these serious failures and apologise to Sophie.

Appendices

- A. Terms of reference.
- B. Key participants.
- C. Information reviewed.
- D. Chronology of main events.

Not for publication

- E. Confidential report on the cases of known offenders previously employed within Oldham Council and the extent to which the historical actions and employment records have been adequately investigated by the council.
- F. Confidential report on the allegation that Councillor Z was punished for being a whistle-blower.
- G. Confidential report on detailed case studies of ten children.

Appendix A: Terms of reference

Assuring the effectiveness of multi-agency responses to child sexual exploitation in Greater Manchester

Terms of reference for Oldham workstream

Purpose

In September 2017, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, in his role as police and crime commissioner, launched an independent assurance exercise to explore the current and potential future delivery model of the response to child sexual exploitation (CSE) across Greater Manchester. The first report of the independent review team is to be published in January 2020 into Operation Augusta a joint police and children's services investigation into child sexual exploitation within the Manchester City area. The review team has also commenced but has not yet concluded an assurance exercise into the exploitation of children in the Rochdale area.

In November 2019, the leader of Oldham Council, Sean Fielding, and Henri Giller, chair of Oldham Safeguarding Partnership, wrote jointly to the mayor and the Greater Manchester Safeguarding Standards Board's independent chair, Jane Shuttleworth, to request that the review into safeguarding practices in the borough of Oldham be combined into the independent review team's assurance work.

The remit of this aspect of the review will focus on historical allegations relating to child sexual exploitation and consider whether the council, with its partner agencies, provided an appropriate response to protect children vulnerable to, or known to be victims of, child sexual exploitation. The assurance review will specifically consider, but will not be limited to, allegations that have circulated on social media of inappropriate access to young people involving shisha bars, taxi companies and children's homes. It will also look at the extent to which historical actions and employment records have been adequately investigated in the case of known offenders previously employed within Oldham public services.

The findings of the report completed by the assurance team will be published and communication inquiries will be dealt with by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) on behalf of the mayor, in his role as police and crime commissioner, in consultation with Oldham Council and other partners.

Scope

To review the practice of Oldham Council in partnership with its statutory safeguarding agencies in response to allegations of child sexual exploitation between 2011 and 2014, with particular reference to the concerns expressed in social media and elsewhere that the statutory agencies were aware of this abuse, failed to respond appropriately to safeguard the children and subsequently covered up these failings. In addition, the review will consider specific cases that may fall outside of the 2011–14 timeframe (as set out in points 2 and 3 below).

The assurance work will cover the work of the safeguarding agencies in Oldham during the period 2011 to 2014 (review period).

The scope of the review will include, but not be limited to, providing assurance in respect of the following concerns:

1. Allegations made on social media about:
2. The risks posed to children from local shisha establishments during 2011–14
3. The nature and extent to which adults had inappropriate access to children and young people resident in children's homes in Oldham, putting them at risk of harm during 2011–14
4. The nature and extent of the use of local taxi services to access children and young people for the purposes of sexual exploitation during 2011–14
5. Allegations or concerns expressed in relation to specific cases. The review will in particular consider complaints made in a letter by an individual complainant to the leader of Oldham Council in November 2019 and copied to the Mayor of Greater Manchester about the handling of her case during 2005/06
6. The cases of known offenders previously employed within Oldham Council and the extent to which the historical actions and employment records have been adequately investigated by the council
7. The review team will not review any active enquiries or ongoing investigations into any of these allegations, but Greater Manchester Police will support the review by sharing progress on Operation Hexagon.

Methodology

This review will provide assurance through the following methodology:

A desktop review of all reports, audits and performance information on the management of child sexual exploitation during the review period

- Review and evaluate all reports and information provided to the Oldham Council cabinet, Oldham scrutiny committees and the Oldham Local Safeguarding Board on child sexual exploitation in the borough, including its prevalence, prevention and detection during the review period
- Any whistle-blowing allegations made during the review period that relate to CSE or concerns about how the agencies were responding to the issue
- LSCB audit and thematic review evidence from the period, including annual reports and the work of the LSCB subgroups that address the issue of CSE

- Serious case reviews, Ofsted or Department for Education notification of cases of concern where CSE was an issue during the review period
- Details of any CSE thematic single agency audits held during the review period

Scoping the allegations made in social media postings covering the period 2011–14

- Review of social media postings expressing concerns about the council's response to concerns in respect of child sexual exploitation during the review period
- Interviews with individuals who have made significant allegations
- Preliminary interviews with senior officers in Oldham Council, and if required, former officers
- Review of the management of known offenders previously employed within Oldham Council and the extent to which the historical actions and employment records have been adequately investigated by the council
- An initial evaluation of the evidence base for the allegations and setting out of the key lines of inquiry
- Developing key lines of inquiry based on substantive evidence

Gateway reviews and the engagement of partner agencies

- Regular gateway reviews will be built into the work programme for the review team. The first review will be undertaken by the steering group following the completion of the desktop analysis, the scoping of the allegations and development of the key lines of inquiry. This gateway review will also determine, based on the key lines of inquiry, whether access to additional information and data will be required from Greater Manchester Police and NHS agencies.
- For the first gateway review, the review team will provide a report to the steering group. This report will determine if further work is required to provide the necessary level of assurance, including any additional key lines of inquiry. If further information is required, a formal request will be made to access data held by the statutory agencies to complete its assurance exercise.
- To facilitate access to case records, reports, correspondence and other information relevant to the review's inquiries, a data processing agreement will be agreed between GMCA, the review team and Oldham Council and, if required, also with Greater Manchester Police and NHS organisations.

Additional assurance

The review team will undertake further detailed assurance work, as required, on specific cases where it is identified that children may not have been appropriately protected from sexual exploitation or where there are specific concerns in respect of the conduct of individuals employed by the council in relation to CSE.

This will include evaluation of the records for young people identified at risk of or experiencing CSE at the time and where a concern has been identified that the risk or incidence of CSE was not appropriately identified and responded to at the time.

The assurance team

The team will report directly to Baroness Hughes, Deputy Mayor of Greater Manchester, who will act as sponsor.

The team will be led by Malcolm Newsam CBE, who will be supported by Gary Ridgway.

Malcolm Newsam is an experienced childcare expert with extensive experience of providing diagnostics, interventions and improvement support to a range of councils across the country. He has been appointed by the Secretary of State for Education as a commissioner for children's services in Rotherham, Sandwell and Northamptonshire. He was awarded a CBE in the 2017 New Year Honours for services to children's social care.

Gary Ridgway was previously a detective superintendent in Cambridgeshire Police and head of public protection. He has pioneered proactive, victim-led CSE investigations and led Operation Erle, which resulted in the successful conviction of 10 offenders. He now works as an independent consultant supporting the National Crime Agency, councils and police forces on CSE.

Governance

- This work has been commissioned by the Mayor of Greater Manchester at the request of Oldham Council and the Oldham Safeguarding Partnership.
- The team will report directly to the deputy mayor in relation to progress and outcomes. In 2017, the deputy mayor established a steering group to join her in providing governance and oversight of the assurance review. The steering group is chaired by the deputy mayor and is attended by the chief constable of Greater Manchester Police, the chief executive of Manchester City Council, the chief executive of Bury Council, the chief executive of Rochdale Borough Council, senior officers from St Mary's

Sexual Assault Referral Centre, senior officers of GMCA and the review team. The Oldham workstream will be overseen by this steering group. Oldham Council will be represented on the steering group by the strategic director for communities and reform and by the managing director for children and young people.

- There will be regular meetings chaired by the deputy mayor to monitor progress, tackle any concerns and agree the next milestones. Additional meetings may be required, which will be arranged according to need.
- While formal governance for the review is through reporting lines to the deputy mayor, the team will, on a regular basis, engage directly with core members of the Oldham Safeguarding Partnership to discuss matters that relate to the review and progress on the key lines of inquiry.
- The GMCA deputy chief executive will be responsible for the management of the contracts with the external team and will oversee the budget.

Resources and commitments

- GMCA, on behalf of the mayor, will engage with partner agencies including Greater Manchester Police, local authorities, NHS colleagues and the Oldham Safeguarding Partnership to explain the scope of, and arrange cooperation with, the assurance team and will organise meetings as required.
- The deputy mayor, GMCA's deputy chief executive and the other steering group members will engage as required with Oldham Council, Greater Manchester Police, Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust and other relevant NHS organisations in relation to this work to ensure that a data processing agreement is in place if required in respect of access to case records, reports, correspondence and other information relevant to the review's inquiries.
- Greater Manchester Police will ensure that relevant information on the progress of Operation Hexagon is shared with the review team to support their inquiries.
- GMCA, on behalf of the mayor, will be responsible for all communications in consultation with partners.
- On behalf of the mayor, GMCA's deputy chief executive will provide senior executive officer support to the assurance team to ensure it runs effectively and is adequately resourced.

- GMCA, on behalf of the mayor, will provide legal advice to the assurance team as required and will provide legal input into the final drafting and publication of the report.
- GMCA, on behalf of the mayor, will provide a note-taker to be present at all interviews undertaken by the team and a minute-taker for all decision-making meetings.
- GMCA, on behalf of the mayor, will provide a secure room for the team to be based during their work at Churchgate House. Oldham Council will provide a secure room for the team to be based during their work at the Civic Centre and staff support to access information and records.

Appendix B

List of individuals referred to in the report (anonymised)

	Identifier	Role	Response
1	Leader A	Leader of Oldham Council	Interview
2	Chief Inspector A	Chief inspector seconded by Greater Manchester Police to Oldham Council	Interview
3	Journalist A	BBC journalist	Interview
4	MP and chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee	Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee	Not approached by review team
5	Detective Chief Superintendent Y Detective Chief Inspector X	Detective chief superintendent who was formerly also a detective chief inspector in Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
6	Detective Chief Inspector Z	Detective chief inspector in Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
7	Offender A		Not approached by review team
8	Offender B		Not approached by review team
9	Offender C		Not approached by review team
10	Offender D		Not approached by review team
11	Offender E		Not approached by review team
12	Councillor Y	Oldham Council councillor	Not approached by review team
13	Councillor T	Oldham Council councillor	Not approached by review team
14	Councillor Z	Oldham Council councillor	Interview
15	Chief Executive A	Chief executive Oldham Council	Interview

16	Chief Executive B	Chief executive Oldham Council	Interview
17	Executive Director C	Executive director Oldham Council	Interview
18	Councillor W	Oldham Council councillor	Interview
19	Councillor V	Oldham Council councillor	Interview
20	Police and crime commissioner	Police and crime commissioner for Greater Manchester	Written response
21	Executive director during Operation Helena 2	Executive director Oldham Council	Not approached by review team
22	Consultant A	Consultant commissioned by Oldham Council	Interview
23	A detective sergeant	Detective sergeant Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
24	A detective sergeant	Detective sergeant Greater Manchester Police	Interview
25	Superintendent A	Superintendent Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
26	A detective sergeant	Detective sergeant Greater Manchester Police	Interview
27	A sergeant	Police sergeant Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
28	Associate Assistant Director A	Associate assistant director Oldham Council	Interview
29	Chief Superintendent A	Chief superintendent Greater Manchester Police	Written response
30	Chief Superintendent B	Chief superintendent Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
31	Councillor U	Oldham Council councillor	Not approached by review team
32	Head of community safety	Head of community safety Oldham Council	Interview
33	Director of Children's Services A	Director of children's services Oldham Council	Interview
34	Journalist B	Journalist at BBC	Not approached by review team
35	Monitoring officer	Monitoring officer Oldham Council	Interview

36	Senior Communications Officer A	Senior communications officer Oldham Council	Interview
37	An assistant chief constable	Assistant chief constable Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
38	Councillor X	Oldham Council councillor	Not approached by review team
39	Liberal Democrat leader	Oldham Council councillor	Not approached by review team
40	Conservative leader	Oldham Council councillor	Not approached by review team
41	A former residential worker	Residential social worker Oldham Council	Not approached by review team
42	Residential staff and managers we interviewed	Residential manager Oldham Council	Interview
43	Residential staff and managers we interviewed	Residential social worker Oldham Council	Interview
44	Consultant B	Consultant commissioned by Oldham Council	Not approached by review team
45	The head of licensing	Head of licensing Oldham Council	Interview
46	The chief executive before Chief Executive A	Chief executive Oldham Council	Not approached by review team
47	Oldham chair of the licensing panel	Oldham Council councillor	Not approached by review team
48	LSCB manager	Oldham Safeguarding Children Board business manager	Not approached by review team
49	Analyst in the community safety team	Analyst Oldham Council	Interview
50	Analyst in the community safety team	Analyst Oldham Council	Interview
51	Leader B	Leader Oldham Council	Not approached by review team
52	Sophie	Individual complainant	Interview

53	Managing director of children's services	Managing director of children's services Oldham Council	Not approached by review team
54	CAMHS social worker	Social worker Oldham Council	Not approached by review team
55	Outreach worker	Outreach worker Oldham Council	Not approached
56	A council solicitor	Solicitor Oldham Council	Deceased
57	Service manager for child protection	Service manager Oldham Council	Interview
58	An officer in the community safety department	Officer in the community safety department Oldham Council	Not approached by review team
59	A detective sergeant	Detective sergeant Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
60	Greater Manchester Police press officer	Communications officer Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
61	Service Manager A	Service manager Oldham Council	No response
62	Executive Director A	Executive director Oldham Council	Not approached by review team
63	Detective Inspector A	Detective inspector Greater Manchester Police	Written response
64	Superintendent A	Superintendent Greater Manchester Police	Written response
65	Detective Chief Inspector A	Detective chief inspector Greater Manchester Police	Interview
66	A detective sergeant	Detective sergeant Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
67	Street Angel 1	Volunteer	Interview
68	Street Angel 2	Volunteer	Interview
69	Officer KOGS	Officer Keeping Our Girls Safe	Interview
70	No direct reference in report	Director of children's services Oldham Council	Interview
71	No direct reference in report	Chair of Oldham Safeguarding Children Board	Interview

72	No direct reference in report	Chair of Oldham Safeguarding Children Board	Interview
73	No direct reference in report	Executive director Oldham Council	Interview
74	A licensing officer	Licensing officer Oldham Council	Interview
75	No direct reference in report	Messenger team manager Oldham Council	Interview
76	No direct reference in report	Head of service Oldham Council	Interview
77	Social worker	Social worker in Messenger team Oldham Council	Interview
78	No direct reference in report	Social worker Oldham Council	Interview
79	No direct reference in report	Senior communications officer Oldham Council	Interview
80	No direct reference in report	Superintendent operations Greater Manchester Police	Interview
81	No direct reference in report	Superintendent Greater Manchester Police	Written response
82	No direct reference in report	Detective sergeant Greater Manchester Police	Written response
83	No direct reference in report	Detective chief inspector Greater Manchester Police	Written response
84	No direct reference in report	Detective sergeant Greater Manchester Police	Written response
85	No direct reference in report	Assistant chief constable Greater Manchester Police	Interview
86	The responsible detective	Detective constable Greater Manchester Police	Not approached by review team
87	The investigating officer	Detective constable Greater Manchester Police	Written response
88	No direct reference in report	Advocate for Sophie	No response
89	No direct reference in report	Residential manager Oldham Council	No response
90	Oldham LADO	Local authority designated officer Oldham Council (LADO)	Interview
91	No direct reference in report	Residential manager Oldham Council	No response

92	No direct reference in report	Residential manager Oldham Council	Interview
93	No direct reference in report	Posted allegations on social media	No response
94	Associate Assistant Director B	Associate assistant director Oldham Council	Interview
95	No direct reference in report	Posted allegations on social media	No response
96	No direct reference in report	Posted allegations on social media	No response
97	No direct reference in report	Posted allegations on social media	No response
98	No direct reference in report	Posted allegations on social media	No response
99	No direct reference in report	Inspector in Messenger team Greater Manchester Police	No response
100	A sergeant	Sergeant in street safe team Greater Manchester Police	No response
101	Mr K	Chair of local children's charity	Not approached by review team
102	Director of children's services	Director of children's services Oldham Council	No response
103	Independent law firm Cllr V	Independent investigators	Not approached by review team
104	Independent law firm Cllr T and Cllr Z	Independent investigators	Not approached by review team

Appendix C

List of reviewed information shared by Oldham Council

First information request	
1	A desktop review of all reports, audits and performance information on the management of child sexual exploitation during the review period
2	All reports and information provided to Oldham Council cabinet on child sexual exploitation in the borough, including its prevalence, prevention and detection during the review period
3	All reports and information provided to Oldham Council scrutiny committees on child sexual exploitation in the borough, including its prevalence, prevention and detection during the review period
4	All reports and information provided to the Oldham Safeguarding Children Board on child sexual exploitation in the borough, including its prevalence, prevention and detection during the review period
5	All whistle-blowing allegations made between 2011 and 2014 that relate to CSE or concerns about how the agencies were responding to the issue
6	All LSCB audits and thematic reviews in respect of CSE between 2011 and 2014
7	All LSCB annual reports 2011–14
8	Any reports produced by the LSCB subgroups in respect of CSE between 2011 and 2014
9	All serious case reviews, Ofsted or Department for Education notification of cases of concern where CSE was an issue during the review period
10	Details of any CSE thematic single-agency audits undertaken by the council from 2011 to 2014
11	Scoping the allegations made on social media postings covering the period 2011–14
12	An electronic copy of all relevant social media postings making allegations about the conduct of the council between 2011 and 2014
13	Names and contact details of the key complainants
14	Names and contact details of relevant officers to be interviewed at the suggestion of the council

15	Name and contact details of Oldham liaison officer who will support the review team
16	Draft data processing agreement between GMCA, Oldham Council and the review team
17	The local authority received an Ofsted thematic inspection of child sexual exploitation in October 2014. In relation to this, the following was shared: • Documentation in folders 1–18, which were provided to the inspection team along with the additional documents folder • Ofsted thematic inspection: child sexual exploitation feedback letter published by Ofsted, together with an internal summary of Ofsted inspection's findings

Second information request

18	Minutes of gold community tensions group 2009–12
19	Gold community tensions group 2009–12 risk register
20	Gold community tensions group 2009–12 action plan
21	Minutes and supporting papers for partner meeting about community impact around CSE, 17 January 2011
22	Guidance for safeguarding in mosques and madrassahs, 2011
23	Minutes and supporting papers of Messenger executive group and Messenger operational group, 2011
24	Minutes and supporting papers of wider CSE group chaired by divisional commander, April 2011
25	Minutes of Messenger and missing from home group 2011–14, including background papers and risk register
26	Minutes of community safety partnership 2009–14, including background papers
27	Minutes of community safety partnership tasking/tactical subgroup (delivery subgroup) 2009–14, including background papers
28	Evaluation of ROSE project, 2014 or 2015
29	Operation ROSE process chart (including referral pathways), circa 2014
30	CSE problem profile, 2014

31	CSE problem profile, 2016
32	Unregulated premises problem profile, 23 July 2013
33	Minutes and supporting papers of Operation Challenger organised crime group meeting, plus subgroups, 2008–15
34	Project ROSE risk assessment tool
35	All association charts produced by analysts in relation to CSE, 2012–15
36	All reports on Operation Helena

Third information request

All reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications, whether in electronic format or hard copy, held on the various council systems in respect of the following between 1 January 2011 and December 31 2014³⁹:

37 Offender A

38 Offender C

39 Shisha bars and premises known as [REDACTED]

³⁹ On 14 January 2021, Oldham Council forwarded to the review team a paper that set out the methodology undertaken to search for documents requested by the review team. This is a helpful document and sets out some key constraints impacting on the council searches. The key paragraphs are set out below:

Overview

The Appendix 1 request for documentation from the Independent Review Team was reviewed by Oldham and requests were made to specific service areas and council officers for folders to be searched and papers supplied. Given that many colleagues from the time stipulated within the review were no longer employees, personal assistants and the executive support team were also approached to help source materials by searching shared folders.

In later appendices, where requests were received such as - All reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications whether in electronic format or hard copy held on the various Council's systems in respect of the following ... the search for documentation was expanded to include IT email searches. The service area, council officers and IT email archive search parameters are listed in the tables below.

IT Email Archive Searches

The email archive system we have been using to trace historic emails for the Independent Review Team, was designed to reduce the storage requirements of the Exchange mail system. The archiving of emails ceased in March 2019 and therefore just historic records (prior to that date) remain in the system. The system archived any emails retained in a user's mailbox after 90 days. Emails deleted before the 90-day retention period were not archived. Councillors & Unity partnership mailboxes were excluded from the archive, so any emails we find from a Councillor perspective will be if they were exchanged with officers. This means that emails between a Member to [a journalist] only, may no longer be available.

IT Searches of leavers work folders (H: drive)

Prior to the O365 migration (Summer2019) the users home drive was retained in a separate and secure server store for one year following their leaving date. This means, that for any officer who left the council more than a year ago, any documents in their H drive will be lost.

IT Search of Shared work folders (S:drive and T:drive)

S drives and T drives can be searched for documentation assuming that the documents are still available and have not been deleted over time. Due to the high number of S drives and T drives within the council IT system it is not effective to search for a document based on a keyword only. Document owners and dates would not be relevant as a search parameter. In order to reduce the time required to search for a specific document in the shared work folders, the name of the folder and its approximate file path has to be known. Further investigation is underway to determine how searches of shared folders can be utilised.

40	Investigation into allegations that Councillor V shared confidential information with a third party
41	Investigation into the allegations in respect of Councillor Y, including [REDACTED]
42	Investigation into the allegations against Councillor T, including [REDACTED]
43	Names and roles of the members of the three standards panels set up to hear the allegations against Councillor Z (the hearings did not go ahead)
44	All communications between Journalist A and council officers and/or members, from 1 January 2013 to 31 January 2014
45	The gold strategy, circa July 2011
46	Minutes and all background papers of corporate safeguarding accountability meetings, 2011–14
47	Briefing note to members on CSE, 2011

Fourth request (including outstanding issues) made to Oldham Council, November 2020

- 48** All communications between Journalist A and council officers and/or members from 1 January 2013 to 31 January 2014. These need to be unredacted, showing all recipients and copies
-
- 49** All reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications, whether in electronic format or hard copy, held on the various council systems between 1 January 2011 and 31 December 2014 concerning an investigation into allegations that Councillor V shared confidential information with a third party
-
- 50** Unregulated premises problem profile – unredacted versions of appendices 3a, 3b and 3c to the report by Chief Inspector A, including but not limited to the unredacted identity of the ‘Messenger girls’
-
- 51** Appendices to Ofsted shisha bar update report by Chief inspector A, 1 October 2014, to include the following appendices
- a. Appendices 1, 1a and 1b, July 2013: update and intelligence logs – review team only had the update
 - b. Appendix 2: Street safe log, 2 August 2013
 - c. Appendix 3: Copy letter
 - d. Appendix 4: OCG daily update
-
- 52** Minutes and all background papers of the corporate safeguarding accountability board for meetings in 2011 and 2012. Also:
- a. 9 July 2013 – briefing paper/key issues
 - b. 31 March 2014 – briefing paper/key issues
 - c. 19 November 2014 – minutes and background papers
-
- 53** Minutes and supporting papers of governance meetings for Operation Challenger organised crime group (gold, silver etc) plus any subgroups, between 2008 and 2015
-
- 54** All reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications, whether in electronic format or hard copy, held on the various council systems in respect of Offender A, including but not limited to leadership-level conversations
-

-
- 55** All reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications, whether in electronic format or hard copy, held on the various council systems between 20 September 2015 and 2017 in respect of the investigation into the allegations against Councillor T

All emails between GMP and Oldham Council in respect of this investigation, including but not limited to emails in respect of Councillor T and Councillor Z

- a. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] referred to in Leader A's statement appended to the independent investigator's report.

The briefing note mentions [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

-
- 56** All reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications, whether in electronic format or hard copy, held on the various council systems between 1 January 2011 and December 2014 in respect of Offender C, including:

- a. The communication to GMP following his dismissal
b. All communication with Bury Council following Offender C's appointment as a councillor, including but not limited to communications between the LADO and Oldham Council in 2015

-
- 57** All association charts, without redactions, compiled between 2012 and 2014, or confirmation that these were the only ones created between January 2012 and December 2015
-

Fifth request made to Oldham Council, November 2020

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 58 | Minutes and supporting papers of governance meetings (gold, silver etc) for Operation Caminada, plus subgroups, between 2008 and its replacement by Operation Challenger |
| 59 | Minutes and supporting papers of Operation Helena 2 core group and executive meetings, from July 2006 onwards

Note: meetings on Helena 2 were chaired by [chair of LSCB] and it was a subgroup of the LSCB |
| 60 | The minutes of the LSCB, from January 2013 to January 2014 |
| 61 | All reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications, whether in electronic format or hard copy, held on the various council systems in respect of the management of allegations in respect of a Youth Council member elect, believed to be in 2015. To include, but not limited to, the involvement of executive director and Chief Executive B and any elected member |
| 62 | All agenda minutes and background papers of the gold and silver group meetings for Operation Hexagon |
| 63 | Further detail on drivers considered in the 24 September 2014 report to the licensing panel |
| 64 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. The revised statement of purpose following the opening of a specialist resource for young women vulnerable to CSE, as set out in July 2007 cabinet reportb. The revised statement of purpose and date when it ceased to be a specialist resource for young women vulnerable to CSEc. The staffing structure during its time as a specialist resourced. The names of the officers in charge during this periode. CSCI inspection reports during its time as a specialist resource (review team already have the Ofsted reports)f. Regulation 33 reports |
-

Sixth request, May 2021

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 65 | All reports, minutes of meetings, emails and communications, whether in electronic format or hard copy, held on the various council systems on Offender B between 1 January 2011 and 31 December 2014 |
| 66 | A domestic homicide review on [REDACTED] |
| 67 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Copies of all strategy meeting minutes and reports and LADO records in respect of all allegations made against Offender Db. Copies of any notes or records made by chief executive and DCS in respect of a conversation with Offender D in respect of any allegationsc. Copy of the report produced for DCS following the intelligence collection process commissioned by [DCI] in November 2015 in respect of Offender D |
| 68 | An overview report produced by Oldham Council on 'Sophie', cited within our terms of reference |
| 69 | Copies of all correspondence between Oldham Council and Sophie, and between Oldham Council and her representatives or advocate |
| 70 | All information on human trafficking allegation made by a member of the public to the DCS in 2014 |
-

71 A report on the 10 children set out in the child-specific data protection impact assessment (DPIA).

To ensure our approach is proportionate we would like to deploy the same methodology we have used with Manchester City Council and have agreement with Rochdale.

This will ensure that Oldham Council will be able to satisfy the required substantial public interest test on a case-by-case basis. The procedure we propose is as follows:

Information will be supplied electronically to the lead reviewer and will consist of a report in an agreed format containing the following:

Key information for all the cases of interest set out in the DPIA, identifying what support Oldham Council provided at the time and subsequently and how successful this was in addressing the issue of suspected CSE of the young people.

This will include:

- ID number, full name and date of birth
- A chronology of the case with key events
- Was the child placed in Oldham by another local authority?
- Issues identified and support offered
- Was support accepted? and
- Was support child/young person-specific and appropriate?
- Gaps in information
- All records of missing from care episodes
- All evidence of engagement with potential exploiters
- Outcomes and relevant information pertaining to all CSE strategy meetings
- Outcomes and relevant information pertaining to all Section 47 Children Act meetings
- Outcomes and relevant information pertaining to all child protection conferences
- Details of any joint agency decision to close the CSE enquiry.

On a case-by-case basis, the lead reviewer will undertake additional due diligence by examining the source documentation on the case file (under supervision of the data controller) where the lead reviewer requires further information and/assurance from the data controller.

72 Investigation report, professional standards branch complaint from [REDACTED] on Sophie, May 2018 (redacted)

73	Reports in respect of Operation Takeaway, undertaken in November 2011. This was a disruption exercise in respect of CSE hotspots including shisha bars
74	Meeting on 10 May 2013, chaired by Chief Inspector A, agreed the following action: <i>“Schools would be requested to notify parents that these premises were not what they are being portrayed as and not necessarily as safe as they are led to believe.”</i> A copy of the subsequent communication with schools
75	The media protocol that was in place in 2013 governing relationships and responsibilities with the media
76	Information in respect of the child Offender A potentially had contact with
77	All details in respect of Offender A’s taxi licence application approval and the termination of this licence
78	Record of interview undertaken with colleague of Offender A
79	The Offender D chronology supplied refers [REDACTED] [REDACTED] a. [REDACTED]
80	Further information on Councillor T
81	Blogs written by Leader A
82	Independent report on allegations in respect of Rivendell children’s residential home
83	<i>Review of GMP’s response to allegations of child sexual exploitation in shisha bars in Oldham 2011–2014, and involving private hire drivers employed by Telecars 2008–2010, October 2020</i>

Information shared by Greater Manchester Police

A data processing agreement with Greater Manchester Police was not finalised until November 2021. The following documents were provided to support our work. In addition, GMP responded to questions set by the review team through a series of emails..

83	<i>Review of GMP's response to allegations of child sexual exploitation in shisha bars in Oldham 2011–2014, and involving private hire drivers employed by Telecars 2008-2010, October 2020</i>
84	Investigation report, professional standards branch complaint from [REDACTED] on Sophie, May 2018 (redacted)
85	All GMP records pertaining to offences against Sophie, including Operation Solent records
86	All GMP records in respect of Offender A

Appendix D

Chronology of key events

Date	Event
1988	Offender A appointed as council employee
2003/04	Operation Helena launched following concerns that children were missing from care
July 2006	Operation Helena 2 launched
2006	Offender A left the council on redundancy terms
October 2006	Sophie was subjected to serious sexual abuse
December 2006	Report in <i>Manchester Evening News</i> highlighted the Messenger team and impact of child sexual exploitation in the borough of Oldham
March 2007	Rivendell House developed as a specialist resource for child sexual exploitation
June 2007	Councillor Y arrested on suspicion of rape
July 2007	Oldham Council cabinet approved additional finance to set up multi-agency Messenger service
May 2008	Leader A appointed as leader of Labour group
October 2008	Chief Executive A commenced as Oldham Council chief executive
2010	Role of Rivendell as a specialist child sexual exploitation resource ceased
November 2010	Offender C suspended following concerns that he was accessing inappropriate websites during working hours
17 January 2011	Meeting held on community impact of publicity around sexual exploitation of young girls by Asian men, attended by representatives of Oldham Council, Greater Manchester Police, colleges and faith communities

19 January 2011	Oldham LADO notified by Rochdale Council of investigation into Offender A and Offender B for allegations of historic sexual abuse
13 January 2011	Oldham by-election attracted national media attention. A British National Party (BNP) candidate was standing, and BNP campaigning materials focused on the child sexual exploitation issue, with headings <i>Muslim Paedophile Gang Scandal</i> and <i>Our children are NOT halal meat</i>
2011	Operation Messenger was provided with a detective sergeant dedicated only to the Messenger team; previously the sergeant was responsible for other staff
March 2011	<i>Safeguarding children in madrassahs and supplementary schools' guidance</i> developed in partnership with Oldham Mosques Council, Oldham Interfaith Forum, Oldham Council and Oldham Safeguarding Children Board
May 2011	Leader A elected as council leader
6 July 2011	<i>Gold strategy – child sexual exploitation investigation</i> produced by Greater Manchester Police divisional commander
19 July 2011	The LSCB established a child sexual exploitation and missing from home group, chaired by the Children's Society. This group went on to develop the child sexual exploitation and missing strategy
November 2011	Keeping Our Girls Safe (KoGS) founded
February 2012	Ofsted safeguarding and looked after children (SLAC) inspection published and judged Oldham to be good
May 2012	Criminal prosecution of offenders from Operation Span concluded in respect of the Rochdale grooming gang. Greater Manchester Police apologised for the multiple failures <i>"that allowed the abuse of young girls"</i> in Rochdale. Nine men (including Offender A and Offender B from the Oldham area) were convicted of a number of serious sexual offences against five victims
June 2012	Offender A sentenced for a further 30 offences of rape against one child
July 2012	Operation Messenger developed into Greater Manchester Police-wide Project Phoenix

November 2012	Sophie provided evidence to Home Affairs Select Committee investigation into child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs
November 2012	MP asked Oldham Council to review Sophie's case
7 February 2013	Chief inspector A flagged up concerns about shisha bars and safeguarding at LSCB meeting
January 2013	MP asked Greater Manchester Police to review Sophie's case
14 March 2013	Email from Chief Inspector A to Assistant Director A, copied to Councillor V and Chief Superintendent A, stated: <i>"This is the premises I mentioned at the last LSCB. This is a real emerging safeguarding issue. We are arranging for patrols with police and college staff at key times ... We have had multiple meetings and discussions which really do not come up with a plan. The risks around CSE are massive."</i>
April 2013	Missing from home and child sexual exploitation multi-agency strategy 2013–14 produced
10 May 2013	Meeting about unlicensed premises held, flagging up the concerns in respect of shisha bars
May 2013	Multi-agency meeting on shisha bars
20 May 2013	Councillor V replaced as cabinet member for education and young children
22 May 2013	Murder of Lee Rigby
4 June 2013	BBC report highlighted concern that shisha bars being used by paedophiles to groom children <i>"as young as 13"</i> in Blackburn and Darwen
5 June 2013	Email by Chief Inspector A setting out what was known about shisha bars. He stated: <i>"These premises pose a significant safeguarding risk."</i> Email subsequently leaked by Councillor V and passed to BBC
6 June 2013	Email from Journalist A to Oldham Council press office
13 June 2013	Letter from Chief Inspector A to police and crime commissioner and Michael Meacher MP, suggesting Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill be strengthened

2 July 2013	Greater Manchester Police/partnership meeting on 'unlicensed businesses', chaired by Chief Superintendent A
12 July 2013	Funeral of Lee Rigby in Middleton
23 July 2013	Chief Inspector A produced unregulated premises problem profile position statement. This concluded there were no current organised crime group (OCG) links with shisha bars although they did previously exist in one bar
29 July 2013	Written complaint submitted by Leader A and the police and crime commissioner, referring Councillor V to the standards committee for formal investigation
7 August 2013	Email from Journalist A to Leader A: <i>"You assured us that this issue wasn't being ignored, that you were monitoring the situation, and should action be taken we would be first to know. On this basis, I agreed to hold any story on the private clubs for the time being. I have been true to my word."</i>
6–8 December 2013	Operation Waterloo concluded: <i>"Neither the Oldham nor Manchester operations found any evidence of CSE taking place in the bars from their visits. This however is not a guarantee that the premises are free from those sorts of activities."</i>
January 2014	Chief Executive B appointed as interim chief executive for Oldham Council
January 2014	Inception of ROSE project
January 2014	CSE problem profile created by Greater Manchester Police. No mention of shisha bars
February 2014	BBC Five Live broadcast a report by Journalist A identifying threat of shisha bars in Oldham and referencing report by Chief Inspector A
30 March 2014	Councillor V resigned from the Labour group
May 2014	Chief Executive B appointed as permanent chief executive for Oldham Council
September 2014	Independent audit commissioned on CSE, to report back in December
2 September 2014	Allegations posted on social media about child sexual exploitation at Rivendell

September 2014	Briefing for cabinet member on taxi drivers holding criminal offences
1 October 2014	Report by Chief Inspector A to Ofsted on shisha bars
October 2014	Ofsted child sexual exploitation thematic inspection in Oldham
December 2014	Results of child sexual exploitation audit reported to LSCB
December 2014	Report by independent consultant produced on investigation into allegations at Rivendell
13 January 2015	Review of private hire/hackney driver licences by licensing committee commenced
15 January 2015	Offender D disclosed allegations
March 2015	Oldham Council reported it had passed concerns in respect of Offender C to Bury Council
16 September 2015	Police charged Offender D for three sexual offences
21 September 2015	Councillor Z reported concerns about Councillor T to Councillor W
December 2015	Independent consultant reported follow-up audit on child sexual exploitation to LSCB
December 2015	Leader A elected as Member of Parliament
January 2016	Councillor W elected as leader of Labour group and council
May 2016	Councillor Z submitted standards complaint in respect of Councillor T
June 2016	Councillor T submitted standards complaint in respect of Councillor Z
10 May 2017	Report completed by independent law firm on allegations against Councillor Z
May 2018	Greater Manchester Police professional standards branch investigation into complaint by Sophie

Confidential appendices – not for publication

Appendix E:

Confidential report on Offender A

Confidential report on Offender B

Confidential report on Offender C

Confidential report on Offender D

Confidential report on Councillor Y

Confidential report on Councillor T

Appendix F:

Confidential report on the allegation that Councillor Z was punished for being a whistle-blower

Appendix G:

Confidential report on detailed case studies of ten children

End of published report.