INDEPENDENT INQUIRY
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

The serious threat of online-facilitated child sexual abuse

Robbie Kent
Deputy Secretary, The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

Contents

- Introduction to the Inquiry
- Review of the Inquiry’s Internet Investigation Report
- Insights from the Children and Young Person engagement report
- Conclusion of the Inquiry

About the Inquiry

- Set up in 2015 to investigate organisations and institutions that have failed to protect children from sexual abuse
- Led by Chair, Professor Alexis Jay OBE and three Panel members - Professor Sir Malcolm Evans, Ivor Frank and Drusilla Sharpling CBE
- Supported by a Victims and Survivors' Consultative Panel
- Independent of government
- Does not have the power to convict people of criminal offences, determine civil liability or award compensation

Terms of Reference

- consider the extent to which **state and non-state institutions** have failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation
- consider the extent to which those failings have since been addressed
- identify **further action needed** to address any failings identified
- consider the steps which are necessary for state and non-state institutions to take in order to **protect children from such abuse in the future**
- **publish a report with recommendations**

Inquiry Core Projects

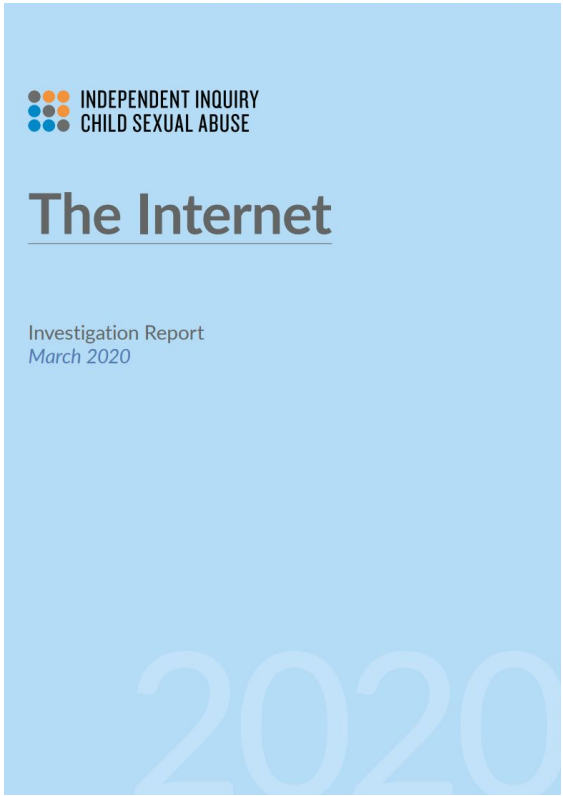
Investigations	15 investigations, leading to 19 investigation reports
Truth Project	Listened to over 6,000 victims and survivors
Research	24 reports on primary research, rapid evidence assessments and Truth thematic reviews
Engagement	Three reports based on discussions with particular groups.
Victims and Survivors' Forum	Consultation with over 1,600 victims and survivors across England and Wales.

The Internet Investigation

Investigation report examined:

- The scale of online-facilitated child sexual abuse
- Indecent images of children
- Online grooming
- Live streaming of child sexual abuse
- The response of industry and government

It also looked at recent cases, age verification, education and the views of children, and technical areas such as encryption and pre-screening for known material and images of children.



The Internet Investigation

- 15 days of hearings in 2018 and 2019. The report was published March 2020
- Witnesses included:
  - Apple, BT, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Internet Watch Foundation, NSPCC
  - victims and survivors
  - Law enforcement: 7 police forces, 1 regional serious organised crime unit, the National Police Chiefs' Council, College of Policing
  - Home Office
- There were 4 recommendations, all accepted

The Internet Investigation
Findings

- Highlighted ease of access to indecent images - The increase in detection and the removal of images is important but it is possible to access images in only “three clicks”. Internet companies must do more to pre-screen material before it is uploaded.

- There has been a rapid escalation in the number of children being groomed on the internet, particularly on social media platforms.

- The Inquiry is not confident that internet companies are doing all they could to tackle online grooming. Deploying existing technologies is not enough and many will not work in encrypted communications.

- Detecting live streamed abuse is difficult because of the real-time nature of the broadcast.

The Internet Investigation
Findings

- The Inquiry is unconvinced that internet companies fully understand the scale of the problem of live streaming on their platforms - such that they can properly assess whether they employ sufficient numbers of moderators.

- We repeatedly heard from industry witnesses that their companies were committed to prevention. Sometimes the response was reactive or motivated by the desire to avoid reputational damage.

- The Online Safety proposals are wide-ranging but the timetable for implementation is unclear.

- Our recommendations aimed to encourage greater collaboration between industry, law enforcement and government to put in place a strengthened and more rigorous regime to address the harm caused by online-facilitated child sexual abuse.

The Internet Investigation
Recommendations

1: Pre-screening of images before uploading

The government should require industry to pre-screen material before it is uploaded to the internet to prevent access to known indecent images of children.

2: Removal of images

The government should press the WeProtect Global Alliance to take more action internationally to ensure that those countries hosting indecent images of children implement legislation and procedures to prevent access to such imagery.

3: Age verification

The government should introduce legislation requiring providers of online services and social media platforms to implement more stringent age verification techniques on all relevant devices.

4: Draft child sexual abuse and exploitation code of practice

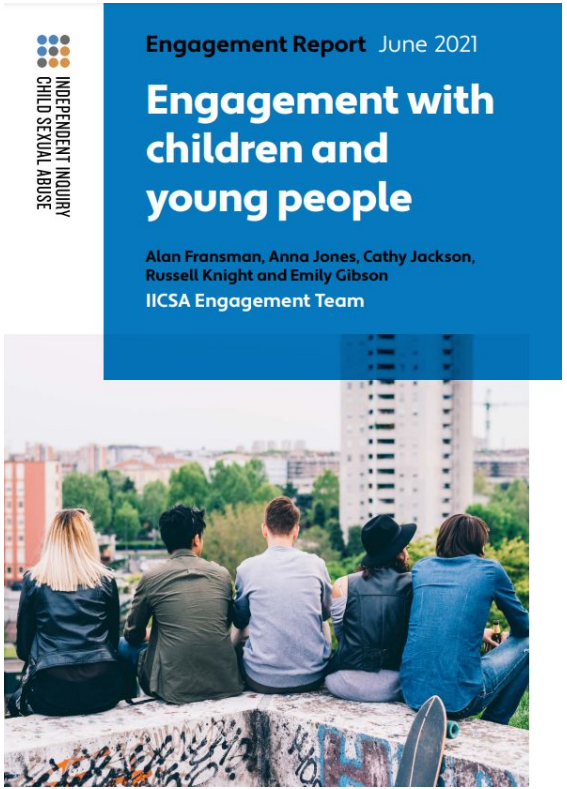
The government should publish, without further delay, the interim code of practice in respect of child sexual abuse and exploitation as proposed by the Online Harms White Paper (published April 2019).

Engagement with children and young people
June 2021

- The engagement team heard from 56 victims and survivors of child sexual abuse between the ages of 11 and 21, and 77 specialist child sexual abuse support workers.

- The host organisations facilitated informal discussions with young victims and survivors in safe and supportive settings.

- Young victims and survivors and support workers responded to open questions about:
  - the internet and social media
  - societal attitudes to child sexual abuse
  - institutional responses to victims and survivors.



Engagement with children and young people
Key findings

- Young victims and survivors face delays in accessing support
- Young victims and survivors told us that the introduction of mandatory reporting could discourage children from disclosing their experiences of child sexual abuse.
- Statutory bodies should improve their response to child sexual abuse and exploitation.
- There needs to be a cultural shift, so that talking about sexual abuse becomes more acceptable.
- Relationships and sex education (RSE) in schools does not reflect current challenges facing children, and is mostly inconsistent and inadequate.
- Creators of social media apps and internet platforms must take greater responsibility.

Engagement with children and young people Social media and online harms

- Young victims and survivors told us that they generally feel less safe using social media and other apps than they do when accessing the internet

- We heard about social media apps targeted at young people, which are similar to dating apps. The young victims and survivors we heard from were concerned that these apps could be harmful and match young people with potentially dangerous people.

- We heard that children who were labelled and exposed as having been sexually abused are sometimes re-stigmatised through social media.

- Some of the most difficult experiences shared with us were online comments from people who knew that the child had been sexually abused and encouraged them online to self-harm.

Engagement with children and young people

Responsibilities of social media platforms

- Many of the young victims and survivors we heard from were surprised that technology is not being used to strengthen identity verification controls.
- The clear message was that social media companies, who generate a significant income, are responsible for keeping the people who use their apps safe.
- Some young victims and survivors suggested that social media platforms should set stricter privacy settings by default and tighten identity verification.
- We heard that more needs to be done when inappropriate content is reported, because sexually explicit pictures of young people have been shared widely before being removed.

Conclusion of the Inquiry

- The Inquiry's Final Report will return to these issues.
- LGBTQ+ Engagement Report to be published in May 2022.
- The Inquiry distributes a six-weekly e-bulletin with updates and summaries of its reports.
- Final Report later this year

INDEPENDENT INQUIRY
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

For further information please visit our website: iicsa.org.uk

Contact: engagement@iicsa.org.uk