

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Management of Child Sex Offender Information

Melbourne—Wednesday, 26 May 2021

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Fiona Patten—Chair

Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair

Ms Jane Garrett

Ms Wendy Lovell

Ms Tania Maxwell

Mr Craig Ondarchie

Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Dr Matthew Bach

Ms Melina Bath

Mr Rodney Barton

Ms Georgie Crozier

Dr Catherine Cumming

Mr Enver Erdogan

Mr Stuart Grimley

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

Dr Samantha Ratnam

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Lee Tarlamis

Ms Sheena Watt

WITNESS

Mr Robert Jones, Director, Threat Leadership, United Kingdom National Crime Agency.

The CHAIR: Good evening, everyone, and welcome back. As I am sure you are aware, this is the public hearing into the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Management of Child Sex Offender Information. We are very pleased to be joined by Mr Robert Jones from the UK National Crime Agency today. Thank you so much for joining us this evening—or morning to you. I will just quickly introduce our committee. We have Dr Tien Kieu, Tania Maxwell, Mr Ed O'Donohue, Kaushaliya Vaghela, Stuart Grimley, and I am Fiona Patten.

Robert, just to let you know, all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege, and that is provided under our *Constitution Act* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing. Of course, our protection may actually not extend to your own country, but you will be protected in this country. But if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

We are fortunate enough to have Hansard with us tonight, so they will be transcribing the hearing this evening. You will receive a transcript of that, and I would encourage you, if you do not mind, to have a look at that to ensure that we have correctly represented the information that you have provided and your testimony this evening. Again, I very much appreciate your time and the information you have provided us. If you could make some opening remarks, we will then open it up to the committee. Thank you.

Mr JONES: Thank you, Chair. So just very briefly to open, I am one of the operational directors in the National Crime Agency. I have got over 30 years' experience in tackling serious organised crime across a range of threats, both roles in investigations and intelligence. Since 2017 I have been involved in tackling the online child abuse threat, as both the deputy director in CEOP, which had operational competence and had a multidisciplinary environment, dealing with the threat, through to now being a director, still responsible for the leadership of that threat nationally. So that is my role in the agency.

My role in terms of national leadership in the NCA—I will just very briefly give you some context in relation to that. The NCA is responsible for tackling a range of organised crime threats, and we treat them as tier 2 national security threats. That is important in this context, because we tackle child abuse, particularly the online element, as a national security threat. That means that every state level capability that we have is available to us. Since 2013 it has been a national priority, and we have delivered a number of different outcomes against the threat. We have matured our response to the point that we now have a cross-Whitehall strategy, the *Tackling Childhood Abuse Strategy*, which was launched in January 21, which is a Home Office strategy, which defines our national leadership role in leading the fight against child abuse. In reality what that means is that we are responsible for our current intelligence picture, an authoritative intelligence picture, about the threat and the scale of the threat, and we publish details. Only yesterday we published a new assessment, which talked about the scale of the threat in a range between 550 000 individuals and 850 000 individuals. The previous assessment estimated in the region of 300,000 individuals posed a risk to children in the UK, so you can see there as our insight has grown our awareness of the scale of the threat has grown. But what that has given us is the ability to look at how we tackle it. If you cannot get the scale, you cannot right size the response. So as the response matures, our insight and awareness matures, and you can see those numbers have gone up.

What we do with national policing in the UK, we have a national jurisdiction and we also operate in a devolved administration as well. So working with national policing we deliver a response, which has been responsible, in the 9 months up to December 2020 with validated figures, for in the region of over 7000 arrests in the UK and has safeguarded 9903 children in the UK. So you can see there is an industrial scale to the response now, and a golden thread that runs through that is access to data on known sex offenders and sex offenders who are reoffending, but also how we bring that data into the NCA and compare it to the intelligence picture that we get from industry referrals or places like the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children and our own knowledge of the threat from proactive intelligence work.

The NCA tries to do things that other people cannot do, so we tackle the difficult problems. That means that if there is something that is beyond the capabilities of a local police force or region, it is likely the NCA will do it. If there are cross-border dynamics and complexity, the NCA are likely to take that on. And if it is at the high end of high risk, so people like Matthew Falder, who got over 30 years; people like David Wilson, who pleaded guilty recently to 96 different indictments, who got over 25 years in prison, over 500 victims, over 5000 attempts to victimise children. That type of complex case is the type of thing the NCA will do.

So in the context of your inquiry, I understand there will be a number of questions in relation to how we use data on registered sex offenders, so perhaps I will pause there. I am happy to give you some context. If there are any questions about what the NCA does, how we work with policing, I can expand on any of that. But if I pause now, I can take any questions based on the focus of your inquiry.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you, and we have got a little bit of time, so it is great to have that discussion. One who does not have a lot of time is Mr Ed O'Donohue, so I will go directly to Ed if he has a question.

Mr O'DONOHUE: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Mr Jones, for appearing before us today. It is fantastic to have your perspective. I am interested in the notion that the NCA handles the more serious offenders or offences that cannot be handled at the local police level. Whilst our policing structures are different, there is some debate in Australia about a national register or a national scheme for sex offenders. Can you talk about the benefit of a countrywide approach, I suppose, or a countrywide sort of system that you oversee?

Mr JONES: Sure. So there are two things you get from that national approach. The first is a true understanding of the scale of the threat and the complexity of the threat, because much of what we tackle is based in the online world, so there are no barriers—there are no geographical barriers at all. Offenders move around, offenders move between internal and external boundaries, and the ability to be flexible and agile and not recognise false boundaries is really important. The second thing is partnership with national policing, so we deliver the response in partnership with policing. So there are elements of the threat at the high end that we bite off, but the volume element, which is playing out day in, day out, is being tackled by the police forces, the 43 forces in the UK. We have a structure and a strategic governance structure which brings all of that reporting through to an apex in the NCA so we have got national awareness of what is playing out and we are able to work very, very collegiately with police forces to keep that volume response going as well as the lower volume higher complexity casework.

I talked about data, and you have got to call that out in terms of one of the areas where if you have got a national response you have really got some strength, because when you bring it all into the centre, we then have the ability to wash data around individuals that are in our sex offenders register, that have come up in referrals from industry, through NCMEC, that have been reported from members of the public as part of the disclosure regime. When you get that rich picture nationally it allows really good decisions on prioritisation. Because those numbers I talked about show that we cannot arrest everybody, and we certainly cannot arrest everybody at the same time, so we need to target arrest activity at the worst offenders. So it helps with prioritisation, it helps with data and understanding the threat and it means that concurrently we are doing the high-end complex long-running cases as well as the day-to-day churn where we are safeguarding large numbers of children who may be victims of everything from intrafamilial abuse through to online grooming.

Mr O'DONOHUE: Thank you, Mr Jones. And apologies, I have to leave early from the hearing.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ed. I will move to Deputy Chair Tien Kieu

Dr KIEU: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Robert, for your submission and for your presentation here today. It is very early in the UK. I have two questions, but let me see how we go with time with the first question. You said just now that you have moved from a few hundred threats or flags to hundreds of thousands of them, mostly online. So there must be a lot of data analytics, pattern recognition and artificial intelligence in general in order to flag some potentials and also to raise the understanding of the likelihood of offenders to be offending. So can you say a little bit about the algorithms or the artificial intelligence or some of the things that you have been employing online—just what they are?

Mr JONES: Yes. So most of our prioritisation relies on very basic methodology. And we have published, and there is academic research around it. So we use a tool called KIRAT—there are other equivalents which colleagues around the world use, and there is an equivalent in Australia and elsewhere—which is a basic risk

assessment and triage tool. The use of algorithms is an interesting point, because we are not yet at a state of maturity where we can rely on an algorithmic or machine learning approach to prioritising. The figures we talk about in terms of understanding scale come from inside, from undercover officers online; come from what we see with our insight into offending on the dark web, what we know from people that get caught and a whole range of different sources, which stacks up those high figures. We are not yet confident enough to rely on AI and machine learning, and this is part of quite a significant debate with industry at the moment.

We rely on content and seeing content and awareness of content to develop that insight. Without that—your point around patterns, triggers, behaviour analysis—of course, if you cannot train the algorithms on content, you do not get to a state of maturity where you can trust that approach. So we are working hard on robotic process automation to bring through volume in our referrals bureau, we are working hard on developing tools for big data analysis, but we are not yet in a place where we can rely on those tools. I think your question was around prioritising offenders; we are not there yet.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will go to Stuart, then Kaushaliya, then Tania, then me.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Mr Jones, for your time and presentation. It was extremely interesting. I am going to try to narrow down in particular in relation to our terms of reference, which speak about the circumstances in which we can release details of convicted child sex offenders in the public arena. The UK has got what is often referred to as Sarah's law, which has been implemented. You are able to expand for the inquiry this scheme and its effectiveness?

Mr JONES: Yes, sure. So this scheme, and the intent of the scheme, is to allow members of the public—so for instance in a scenario where somebody was engaging in a new relationship with somebody and they were concerned about their history or there were some signs there that raised concerns, rather than informally trying to establish from the community whether that individual is a problem, there is a formalised proportionate route into policing to allow a check to be made. And then if there is a disclosure made, there is effectively—it is not an NDA but there is a restricted disclosure made on the basis of no further disclosure to the individual who made the inquiry. So it is a very valuable tool for people who could be getting themselves into an exploitative relationship or, most worryingly—and we see this all the time—engaging in a relationship with somebody that turns out to be a predatory paedophile who is trying to get to the children of a partner that they have just developed a relationship with. So we see it as a really good, strong tool. If disclosures are made, following the policy and procedure and practice, they should then end up on local police intelligence systems and the police national database. So that point again around data holdings becomes relevant. If we, for instance, had a referral, we checked the police national database and we saw there had been an inquiry about an individual trying to get access to children and that had pinged on that system, that would highlight a problem to us in terms of prioritising threat, harm and risk. So we see it as positive; we see it as a good step forward. It is something that works well and it fills a need that the public were very vocal about in terms of people being able to protect themselves and create resilience in potential victims and survivors.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thank you for that information. Some of the arguments against having such a scheme would include vigilantism as an example. Do you have any reported results of that that you can elaborate upon?

Mr JONES: I am not aware of any issues with Sarah's law, the CSOR declaration regime, in relation to vigilantism. We are concerned around vigilantism in uncontrolled disclosures, but we do see and recognise the need to make disclosures publicly. We do not have a public register in the UK and there is a lot of debate about that. So, for instance, there was some recent media reporting about 100 sex offenders holding Instagram accounts that were spotted by a journalist. The question is: why isn't that being done at scale? Working through the challenges of how you can put people in the best place to protect themselves and make disclosures without an uncontrolled disclosure, which could lead to second-order consequences in the community and vigilantism, is something we are wrestling with now with the Home Office, and the Home Office officials are looking at the future and how we might do it. We are very keen that industry and anybody that is in a position to prevent offending is aware of adverse signs and information and to put in protective measures. So we see the need for it. I am not aware of any issue with vigilantism in Sarah's law.

Mr GRIMLEY: Okay. Just one more quick one before we swing around, and that is the issue around, unintentionally, I suppose, the victims' details being known through a disclosure scheme. Have you had any

feedback about victims that have been caught up in a disclosure at all and being, you know, 'I don't want my details known'. Has that ever been an issue?

Mr JONES: No, I am not aware of any of report indicating that is an issue. And that is because I think we are still wrestling with the challenge of a public register. So we do not see, for instance, victims of familial abuse appearing on a public register, and the Sarah's law disclosures are very controlled. So it is how we get from there to more disclosure without the consequences that you allude to.

Mr GRIMLEY: Okay. Thank you. I might swing back around if that is okay, Chair.

The CHAIR: Yes. No problems, Stuart. Thank you. Kaushaliya.

Ms VAGHELA: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Rob, for your time today. Regarding the child sex offender disclosure scheme, you mentioned if somebody wants to find out about a partner or a person that he or she wants to live with. What happens if somebody moves into a neighbourhood and they find out the neighbour's name and they want to know if the neighbours are on that list? Are they able to find out that information?

Mr JONES: Theoretically yes if there was a safeguarding implication. So if a family were moving in and they believed that somebody next door posed a threat to their children, that is a legitimate safeguarding concern for policing and the local authority. The process is recorded. It is done very carefully. There are a range of disclosures that can be made, and each one is dealt with by local police forces on its merits on a case-by-case basis. There are mechanisms which protect requests for indiscriminate disclosure. There has got to be a reason for it, and ultimately this is about safeguarding and preventing abuse. So that is at the heart of this.

Ms VAGHELA: So are there any limits? If a family with two children are moving to a new neighbourhood and if they know the names of five or six other neighbours, is there any limit on how many people's information they can apply for?

Mr JONES: Yes. I am not aware of a limit, but I think in those circumstances there would be significant pushback around large-scale checks on the community. That is for policing to be aware of and do. It is not for individuals to create their own sex offenders register by seeking disclosure. So I cannot see a scenario where requests like that would make the cut.

Ms VAGHELA: And just a quick one regarding this international child protection certificate. How effective is it in preventing a child sex offender from obtaining inappropriate employment?

Mr JONES: We see it as a really valuable tool. Since 2012 there have been 81 735 checks that have gone through the system. It is a two-part disclosure regime, so ACRO are responsible for the first part, which is effectively a criminal records check, and that will give you a certificate, which if your employer has requested it, you would have to disclose. So obviously that puts you in a bind if you are an offender. The second part of that regime is more interesting to me, in that there are lower numbers of disclosures there. So we have done, I think, 22 of those. What we see with sex offenders quite often before they get caught is below-the-line behaviour which is on the threshold of criminality, which is clearly wrong and may lead to an arrest or an intervention to safeguarding but does not get them a conviction. Now, we very, very carefully, and we agonise over this, make part 2 disclosures, which means that if you have not been through the criminal justice system but we are satisfied that your behaviour is such that you pose a threat to children, we will come up with a form of words for a part 2 disclosure which you will then have to disclose to your employer. Now, that is quite controversial but extremely important, because the real problem with sex offenders is that they are very driven, very determined, they reinvent themselves and many of them hover below the line of conviction for many years before they get caught, and being able to disclose that criminal intelligence or reporting that is below the line is important, and it is one of the strengths of ICPC.

So it has got widespread take-up now—things like Camp America, Camp Canada. There are lots of people now who are requesting these checks, and we see it as a really useful tool to prevent offenders getting access to children.

Ms VAGHELA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Tania.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Jones, for joining us—this evening for us, this morning for you. I am just wondering whether with the disclosure scheme you have actually had any sort of vexatious claims. So, for example, somebody may have a partner moving in and have young children. They ring up or contact the relevant authorities to have a bit of a background check done on this person to see if they are on the disclosure scheme. It may be that yes, they are, but they have never actually perpetrated against those children that this person is moving in with. Have you had any experience of false vexatious claims made against that sex offender?

Mr JONES: No, and to be honest I cannot envisage a scenario with the way the scheme works that you would be able to make a vexatious claim, because it is based on a hit on the register. You know, I am trying to think of a scenario where it could be vexatious, because there would not be a disclosure made or a safeguarding intervention unless there was some basis for it. So, you know, if somebody has offended and it is seen as a conviction that is relevant from a safeguarding perspective and there is a statutory basis for that, then that would be the basis for the disclosure.

Ms MAXWELL: Okay.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and I think following on a little bit from that, presumably if an offender who is on the sex offender register in the UK moves, changes jobs, changes their residential status—they move in with someone—they are required to report that to the local police station?

Mr JONES: The status of individual offenders and their reporting regime will depend on the level of control that is being exercised over them, so with the worst offenders there is a very strong and good hand off if people move. If they are the subject of a sexual harm prevention order or a sexual risk order and they want to register, there are reporting restrictions for those individuals. But it varies. It is not one size that fits all; it is based on the risk assessment and the local offender management team.

The CHAIR: Right. I think it is similar to us, but certainly the higher risks would then need to report any internet programs that they have or any Instagram accounts, for example, that they would have. We spoke to a witness previously who was talking about—and Stuart touched on this—where the offending was intrafamilial and how you protect and not expose the victim-survivor when providing details to someone about that offender. I would like to hear more about how you do that.

Mr JONES: It is a challenge. I think at the moment we do not actually do it, because we have not got a public register.

The CHAIR: Sorry, can I just clarify that. Sorry to interrupt, Robert. Under Sarah's law, assuming for the sake of the question that the people that can be disclosed under Sarah's law are on the public list, who is on that?

Mr JONES: There is not a public list. So what Sarah's law does is deal with the fact that there is not a public list, because you cannot research people through open sources. However, their convictions are a matter of public records, so you can see traces, scrape the web and get details on sex offenders. That is the reality of the situation. But the actual sex offenders register is not published in the UK or shared in the UK. What Sarah's law does is individual checks are done for individual reasons, and there is an authorised purpose for that within the legislation to allow forces, if they see a risk, to make a disclosure on a case-by-case basis. So in that scenario, to put a victim-survivor of intrafamilial abuse scenario at risk, what would have to happen, I guess—and I am not aware of any scenarios where this has happened—is it would go something along the lines of a disclosure being made back to the person that requested the check, and then that individual researching that family name and then coming up with details potentially of the spouse and the children.

The CHAIR: I guess the scenario that I am considering in this is if a woman with children is entering into a relationship with someone and she has some concerns or there is some niggling concern, so she contacts the police and asks whether her gut instinct is correct, and then if she is correct and that person has offended but he has offended in an intrafamilial offence, by disclosing that information does that put the offender's victims at risk?

Mr JONES: I understand the question. The purpose and the way the act is actually dealt with operationally is that entire details of the incident may not be disclosed, so the minimum necessary to provide the safeguarding

response is likely to be what is disclosed. For instance, in your scenario, the local police force would not have to tell the individual it was intrafamilial. It would be, 'There's a problem and there's a risk', and depending on the case would be the level of disclosure. But then it would not stop that individual from doing their own research, finding something in the media and then working back from that. So it is hard, and the availability of social media, the internet and all of these things makes open-source research really, really easy. So it is difficult; it is a risk. I have to say, in the work that we did preparing for this, this was not identified as a big issue to us. But we will check, and if there is anything we can add, we will write to you with any more data on it. But it is not something that we have seen.

The CHAIR: No. Thanks, Rob. I think what we had heard from one of the other witnesses was that maybe for some intrafamilial offenders it would be very rare for them to be disclosed.

Mr JONES: Yes. I think in the US they do publish, but I do not think they publish intrafamilial abuse offenders. So it is challenging, but what we have is a way of dealing with breaking information out to people to prevent them from becoming victims. That is the heart of this. How you develop that and disclose more is a challenge.

The CHAIR: Of course. Thank you so much. I will move back to Tien. Do you have any questions? Great. Stuart, then Kaushaliya and then Tania.

Mr GRIMLEY: Thanks, Chair. Thanks again, Rob. Just a couple of quick ones. You may or may not be able to answer these here and now—I am happy to provide them on notice if that suits you—because they are in relation to some statistics as to how many times the disclosure scheme has been accessed and how many disclosures have been made from those times. I am not too sure if you have ballpark figures or anything specific.

Mr JONES: We will have to come back to you. I am happy to speak to police and colleagues and come back in relation to that.

Mr GRIMLEY: Just following on from that, I would be really interested to know how many times disclosures have been made that have resulted in people being protected or moving from that relationship and have potentially prevented an offence from occurring, which would be fantastic.

My other question is in relation to the reporting tool, the Click CEOP online reporting tool, which I am finding really fascinating. You have got the primary objective of making it as easy as possible for children to report abuse perpetrated against them or against other children they know. Is this particular reporting tool a criminal process or mechanism, or is it more for intelligence only, or can it be both?

Mr JONES: It is primarily safeguarding. One of the outcomes from it is there may be a dividend in terms of intelligence or criminal investigation, but it starts with safeguarding, particularly because it is meant to appeal to children themselves or parents, carers or professionals. So that disclosure regime—in 2020–21 there were over 1200 children safeguarded as a result of that reporting tool. If you look at the figures that we talked about with arrest activity, we are doing so much to arrest people. One of the things that, however you look at the problem, is really uncontroversial is the positive safeguarding outcome as a result of that arrest activity. This adds to it. Our focus with this reporting tool is to give somebody who is in a really difficult situation the ability to reach out and report to get them safeguarded. It is not a crime-reporting tool; it is not out there to generate criminal intelligence. It is out there to safeguard children, and at the end of that reporting tool we have got child protection advisers who work in that multidisciplinary environment in CEOP who have got investigative insight. But their sole purpose is safeguarding children, not necessarily investigating perpetrators, if that makes sense.

Mr GRIMLEY: Yes, absolutely. Wonderful. Thanks very much for that. I will pass it on, thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will go to Kaushaliya, then Tania.

Ms VAGHELA: Thanks, Chair. Rob, for child sex offences which are committed online, is there any trend with how many are committed in the UK and out of the UK? Do you think it is easier to detect if they are committed in the UK, or is it difficult if they are committed in the UK?

Mr JONES: With both live streaming and transnational child sex offenders that travel, we see a combination of scenarios where they offend, and we treat them all the same. So we have got extraterritorial legislation; section 72 of our *Sexual Offences Act* means that if somebody travels to offend and we can get evidence of that, we will prosecute them in the UK, and we will also bring them back if we need to do that. With the online threat and live streaming in particular we do our best to target those individuals who are promoting abuse in places like the Philippines and elsewhere, and inciting abuse. That is one of the more complex cases that we will tackle. It is not so much that it is easier to detect in the UK, but we have got very good processes for safeguarding, for targeting offenders, and we have got a developed societal response to this. With developing countries we know that sex offenders target them deliberately because there are not those protective measures, and they exploit the vulnerable very, very effectively and successfully, unfortunately. So we really focus on the people that are doing that and exploiting that vulnerability. I am not sure if I have answered the question.

Ms VAGHELA: Yes. I just wanted to know if the offenders think, ‘Oh, if we do it overseas, you know, it’ll be difficult to probably detect or maybe even down the track to face the consequences’. That is what I wanted to know.

Mr JONES: Yes, for sure. Some of them do, and we have prosecuted some of the worst. We have found things like manuals which have promoted abuse and exchanged tradecraft between offenders on how easy it is to get to a child overseas, so they definitely think it is. We want to make it as hard as we can, and those people come to the top of the list very quickly in terms of priority.

Ms VAGHELA: Kids spend more and more time online. Do you think parents have enough awareness and knowledge in terms of how to protect and safeguard children? What goes through your mind if you see a child logged on in their room playing with a gadget? What instantly goes through your mind?

Mr JONES: We have got the Thinkuknow website and an education campaign that builds upon our investigative insight to deliver education products. We have had to go now to an education campaign which goes from ages four to seven, eight to 10, 11 to 13 and then 14-plus, because younger and younger children are getting access to the internet. So absolutely parents and carers need the skills to be able to tackle this, because children cannot function now without devices. You know, when my children were young, I could control their access; it was easier. To try and do that now, your child is not going to have a life—they cannot play sport, they cannot interact socially. They are forced to work and live in the digital world. So parents, carers do need help. Our awareness and understanding of the internet is getting better. Lockdown has pushed loads more children onto the internet without a lot of preparation for protective measures for those children. So we anticipated that the threat would go up and pushed hard with the Online Safety at Home campaign, and we got a series of educational products out there.

We have seen access by parents increase by 200 per cent since 2019, to those tools. Now, that shows there is a market for it. It shows it is really, really important. What is most important is that parents not only understand the online world, understand the threat, but that they can have positive conversations with their children when their children may have made a mistake. So if a child has shared an image innocently with a peer—if a child has done something and made a mistake—all of our educational products promote a positive conversation between a parent or carer and a child when they reach out to prevent victim blaming and to encourage and empower children so there is more resilience.

To summarise, this needs to be mainstream education; it is now in the UK. Initiatives like ours need really to be pushed very, very hard to increase people’s awareness, because parents do not like talking about child abuse. We do lots of media, we do lots of education work, and this is not something that people hold onto and process. They do not want to hear about it, they do not want to talk about it at dinner parties, they do not want to hear it at the end of a busy day at work, but this is here and now and it is at an industrial scale. These education products are key to making it harder for offenders to offend, so they are really, really important to us. That is why we are involved in it. Some might think, ‘Law enforcement—why do you do education?’. It is because we really understand the bad guys. Developing an education product with operational insight from investigations gives you a really good tool to target the areas of vulnerability that offenders will target.

Ms VAGHELA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Tania.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you, Chair. Rob, I am just wondering: if you could find three ways or prioritise one way out of three, what would be your three recommendations to help reduce or to stop child abuse?

Mr JONES: The first of all is to prevent the normalisation and rationalisation of something that is just plain wrong. So we live in a world now where we are all tolerating the fact that online, on any search engine, with just three clicks you can access category A images of child abuse. Now, that cannot be right, and that is something that the world is tolerating. That needs to stop. And the reason it needs to stop is that it presents no bar to offending. So if somebody is expressing an interest and they are at the start of a journey towards contact abuse, if they can obtain images that easily, it is sending a message to them that it is right. It is sending a message to them that it is normal—and it needs to stop. And it can stop, and I just do not buy the excuses that I hear around why it is all too difficult in preventing access to these images. Because most of them are known and most of them are hashed, and we can stop it. And that needs a big, big push across society to make sure that it is no longer normal and it is no longer accepted that you can get child abuses online.

The second point is around recognising children and their online presence. So again, what we now have everywhere is a range of different platforms where children masquerade as adults because they want to—so they put in fake details, they are not age verified, their device is not fixed, there are no protective measures around that child at all—and then they are onto an adult platform where adults can masquerade as children and develop relationships with them and then start grooming them ultimately towards either inciting contact abuse or meeting them and perpetrating that contact abuse themselves. So you would not get a child and say, ‘Go and cross a busy motorway’ without putting something around them to protect them. What we are doing is allowing unfettered access without recognising children’s presence on the internet. And they need to be on the internet and they need to be on all these platforms, so we need to protect them.

And then the third thing is really—and we have just touched on that—the resilience in children. So give children a chance. When they are learning—and they are learning in school and they are learning at home—the reason we are trying to appeal to four-year-olds is because that is when people are now getting tablets. You know, you see toddlers in prams with iPads. You know, give them a chance really early on, get in early and start good, positive conversations about how you function in the digital world without being exploited. And empower children so that if they make a mistake and somebody does get something off them that the child should not give them, they can reach out to a parent that is not going to blow up and blame the child but that is going to empower that child and get them safeguarded. Because the minute that happens the offender has lost any power over that child. It is the secrecy in the coercion that creates all the harm.

I could go on. But it is the normalisation thing. I just cannot see why we have not got to a tipping point yet with this threat, where we say, ‘No, enough. We’re not going to tolerate this anymore’. Because this illegal imagery—if you had it out on the street, you would be locked up. But it is sitting out there and available on the internet, and it is an illegal commodity that moves digitally, and we need to stop it.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you, Rob.

The CHAIR: Yes, thank you. Rob, just listening to what you were saying then and the advice that you were providing us, what we have been hearing is—and I think it is just what I have always generally understood—that most abuse against children happens from someone that they know and that the stranger abusing a child is far less common. But are you saying that that is wrong, that in fact what you are seeing is far greater abuse of children outside the family home, outside their teachers, Scout leaders, preachers et cetera?

Mr JONES: I think the detail is important in relation to that. So access for contact abuse, of course, because the family setting is an ideal place for that to happen, and other closed settings and positions of trust will always give high incidences of abuse because offenders gravitate there and they seek children. What the online threat has done and has created in the new typologies that we see is the ability to remotely cause abuse, and that is incredibly damaging. We see this repeatedly: offenders who will blackmail a child and coerce a child and say, ‘We need a new first generation image’, and that will cause and incite contact abuse in a familial setting because some of that abuse is against their siblings. We see this regularly. We see cases where children are forced to abuse their friends or siblings to produce new images, send those back to a perpetrator, so we get contact abuse created by proxy. And the type of offenders that we see—we get hundreds of victims in these

cases now, and we have got large numbers of cases coming through where one individual has been able with false accounts on social media to reach out and trigger contact abuse. So that challenges the scenario where you have got a position of trust and familial abuse, because you can no longer keep a child safe in your home unless you can produce resilience and safety through online awareness because the threat is also coming externally, from outside the home or the school or the Scout pack or football team, where we have seen people in positions of trust create abuse.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Rob. That is just too horrendous to consider. Asking for a friend, as in the team behind us, they were also very interested in the questions that Stuart had asked around that online portal for children to report, and we were wondering if you might take on notice to provide us with some statistics around the outcomes around the traffic on that portal? That would be of great interest to us.

Mr JONES: Sure. There are some limitations to that data because it is primarily around safeguarding, so we are not collecting the criminal justice outcomes connected to that activity. So we will definitely take that away and come back to you with whatever data we have, but it will be focused on safeguarding.

The CHAIR: Which is great. I mean, if that is actually prevention, then that is obviously really key.

Ms VAGHELA: Just a quick one. Rob, you mentioned about children putting their images online. How often do you see parents putting their children's images online on social media, what does that lead to? How many times does that end up in a child getting abused?

Mr JONES: So images of abuse that are posted as a result of familial abuse do unfortunately, very sadly, feature in what we see. So there are parents who will abuse their children and then exchange those images and give those images to others. I think there may be a wider point that you are alluding to around more widespread posting.

Ms VAGHELA: Yes.

Mr JONES: That is a tough one. Camera-enabled devices are ubiquitous now, everybody posts everything, everybody lives their life online. What we try and do with our education is get people to think twice around what they are posting, and this is really, really difficult. But sexualised images of children—you know, an innocent parent will not necessarily see what we would see in some of that imagery. And so there are some good, commonsense things that parents can do in terms of following their gut with what they post, and they need to. Because we all see stuff—and I am sure you are alluding to this—where we think, 'Really? That is not a good decision you have made there in posting the pictures in that way', because somebody else can see that as a sexualised image of a child. And if we were trying to classify it in an investigation, we would actually probably say it was indicative material—and that is really unhelpful.

But it is difficult. It is difficult, but the best thing is to provide as much education and awareness of what is out there online. And we are not advocates of not being online. You know, trust me, this is all the negative, glass-half-empty side of the online world. It is brilliant, it is really important to us, it does loads of good things, but there has not been enough education. You know, this hit parenting 20 years ago. Nobody was prepared for it, and we have been trying to catch up ever since. That is the challenge of this. It is not all negative—and I do not want people to think that when they hear our evidence—but it is just important that people think and think and think. The Thinkuknow point—that is why it is our strapline in terms of education, because very few people really do know unfortunately. It is only people in this type of role that really understand the detail.

Ms VAGHELA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: And for the final question we turn to Tania.

Ms MAXWELL: Perhaps not so much of a question—thank you, Chair—but, Robert, I just wanted to say that I had a girlfriend up in Queensland who posted a picture of her daughter, who is a mother. She was walking through an orchard, and she had a photo of her little daughter, who was only two. It was from behind, and she was holding Mum's hand, but the little girl was naked, and they thought, you know, that was so cute that here is this little baby's bare bum. And I rang her and said, 'Oh, my God. Get that off there', because my mind went straight to what our discussions are tonight. She thought, 'What a beautiful image to put out there', and I said, 'You've just posted that online. That is a paedophile's playground. Please take it down'. As you said

before, this is not the conversation that people have at the dinner table, this is not the conversation that people often have. And for some of us who have either worked in that space or are working in that space, that is where we go—that is where our mind goes. But there are so many parents out there who would never even consider that, and I guess we can only create awareness through education. Do you think that?

Mr JONES: Yes, for sure. It is about education, because that is not a scenario or a problem that you want to throw at law enforcement. The innocence and naivety of some people never ceases to amaze me across all of crime and serious organised crime, but those scenarios—you can only engineer that out with education. That is ultimately it—education, awareness, understanding, engagement. You know, we do not want to be chasing people for that. But you are absolutely right, other people will see that very, very differently.

Ms MAXWELL: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much for a really illuminating and informative hearing this evening. On behalf of the committee, we very much appreciate your time. We appreciate the work that you are doing, and no doubt our crime agencies are talking to you and working together, which hopefully means that in years to come we may not be having these conversations. As I mentioned at the outset, you will receive a transcript of today's hearing. Please do have a look and make sure that we have not misheard you or misrepresented you in any way. Again, thank you so much for today. It has really helped us, and the transcript will form part of our inquiry, but no doubt the evidence you have provided tonight will as well.

Witness withdrew.