

IN THE SOUTHPORT INQUIRY

OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE FAMILIES OF THE PHYSICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY INJURED CHILDREN

Introduction

1. This Opening Statement is made on behalf of 18 families of those children who were physically and/or psychologically injured on 29th July 2024. As the Chair put it in his Opening Statement, what happened on that date was *'an almost unimaginable but nonetheless mercilessly-calculated knife attack at a children's dance event in Southport'*. It was indeed *'one of the most egregious crimes in our country's history'*. The families we represent are extremely grateful to the Chair for his remarks in opening and for his stated intentions in conducting this Inquiry. They are grateful to him for asking the question *'how was it possible for AR to have caused such devastation?'*
2. The families we represent fully support the Chair in his approach. They welcome scrutiny. They yearn for answers. Their hope is that the recommendations that are made at the conclusion of this Inquiry will be implemented.
3. Although the families we represent have been granted anonymity within these proceedings, they ask that this Inquiry remembers not the face of evil but rather their brave daughters. It is they who will bear the scars (both physically and mentally) of that day for the rest of their lives. These families have described this attack as crippling every corner of their lives. It is crucial however, to record the families' enduring and deeply-felt gratitude to the emergency services attending on the day of the attack. Their skills, professionalism and decision-making saved lives. The families also wish to thank the many medical teams from

whom they have received - and continue to receive - outstanding ongoing treatment, care and support.

4. We know that on 29th July 2024 the perpetrator, equipped for mass murder, walked into a dance studio where innocent young girls were enjoying an organised event at the start of their summer holiday. The perpetrator held the fixed intention of taking the lives of as many of those girls as possible. He did not exercise any restraint when faced by adults present. They too felt the force of his blade. The perpetrator – henceforth ‘AR’ - committed the most heinous of crimes. His actions were frenzied yet calculated. This was deliberate and planned brutality.
5. The families we represent do not lose sight of the dreadful fact that the lives of three little girls were extinguished that day. Those who survived are having to come to terms with the enormity of what happened. They ask questions to which the answers are complex, confusing, difficult or simply impossible. The impact of the indescribable and relentless violence at the hands of AR cannot be overstated. The physical and psychological consequences will haunt the families we represent for ever.
6. The evidential picture continues to develop. There is ongoing disclosure of many hundreds of relevant documents from a wide range of material providers. That disclosure process is not yet complete. This Opening Statement has therefore been prepared at a time when the evidential picture is still emerging. This Statement should therefore not be taken as a comprehensive and exhaustive list of the topics deemed to be of importance by those we represent. Rather, it is a summary of many but not all of their key concerns. Whilst of course, the families we represent are acutely concerned about the events on the day of the attack and in important topics such as the security of the Hart Space and safeguarding arrangements, for the purposes of this Opening Statement we have focused on the wider picture.

7. Within the material currently available, common themes have emerged. The evidence suggests that there were a series of highly-significant missed opportunities for public bodies to identify and to respond to escalating risks. At this stage, we highlight missed opportunities in three particular areas: first, AR's propensity for serious violence; second, AR's educational needs; and third, AR's domestic family environment.

AR's Propensity for Serious Violence

8. We turn to the first of those areas of key concern to the families we represent: AR's propensity for serious violence.

9. When sentencing, Mr Justice Goose said that AR had a '*long-standing preoccupation with violent killing and genocide*'.¹ The signs were there long before July 2024.

10. On 7th October 2019, when he was aged 13, AR disclosed to Childline that he wanted to kill a fellow pupil. That pupil was a student at The Range High School. AR admitted that he had been taking a knife to school.² Following a referral to the police, AR was permanently excluded from The Range High School, having admitted that he had taken a knife into that school on 10 separate occasions.³ A staff member remarked on AR's attitude, stating that '*there was a significant lack of emotion and awareness with regards to [him] carrying a knife, [the] implications in using one and the risk posed to himself and the school community*'.⁴

11. AR then moved to Acorns School. There he was asked about these incidents by a teacher at the admissions meeting. That teacher described that AR was '*monotone, emotionless and very matter of fact about his intentions*'.⁵ On 15th November 2019, during a school lesson,

¹ MERP002476 § 23.

² MERP000946

³ RAN000014

⁴ AHCH000120

⁵ ACHC000120

AR was found to be researching mass school shootings.⁶ During one lesson AR requested a picture of a severed head.⁷ The school recorded that AR was *'hellbent on teaching staff and causing them harm'*. The record continued with this note: *'we had to completely block all his internet use...We have major concerns over him.'*⁸ The Deputy Headteacher was extremely worried. She expressed her fears about AR in this pertinent way: *'with a West Lancs address and a Sefton GP, he is going to fall between the cracks'*. She was concerned that without the right support, there was potential for a serious incident.⁹ Those concerns, expressed some years *before* July 2024, are chilling to read. The Inquiry is urged to examine whether and how far those concerns – and others – were acted upon. It is the contention of the families we represent that opportunities for this serious incident to be prevented were missed. In many ways, the Inquiry might conclude that AR did indeed *'fall between the cracks'*. Those cracks should never have been present.

12. On 11th December 2019, AR took a taxi to The Range High School, entering without permission. He was carrying a knife. He was also carrying a hockey stick that had been modified to function as a weapon. He used the hockey stick to strike a pupil at the school. This was a premeditated attack. AR had booked the taxi in advance.¹⁰ He boarded it, armed and intent on violence at a school from which he had previously been expelled. Following his arrest for this offending, AR disclosed that he had intended to kill a pupil who he considered had been bullying him. AR showed no remorse.¹¹ An attending police officer expressed the following view: *'this kind of response presents a risk of horrific escalation'*. The officer also made this observation: *'though AR*

⁶ LCC000010

⁷ LCC000010

⁸ LANC000073 pp4-5.

⁹ LANC000059

¹⁰ LANC000108

¹¹ LANC000004 p4.

*admitted to doing it, he did not seem to fully understand the possible repercussions, nor show any remorse.*¹²

13. On 20th February 2020, as a result of his actions on 11th December 2019, AR was convicted at court of criminal offences including possession of a bladed article on school premises and assault occasioning actual bodily harm. He was made the subject of a Referral Order for 10 months, monitored by the Youth Offending Team.

14. AR's digital media was seized by police. We question whether there was at that stage any meaningful analysis of the contents to develop an understanding of the risks posed by AR. Concluding that he posed a *medium* risk of reoffending, the Youth Offending Team noted that professionals needed to be aware of AR's behaviours and that measures ought to be put in place to reduce the risks he posed. At the same time, AR was noted as being extremely isolated.¹³ The failure by various public services properly to engage with AR and to mitigate the risks he posed is an ongoing theme over the years that followed.

15. It was against this background that AR was referred to PREVENT on three separate occasions, each by the Acorns School, on 5th December 2019,¹⁴ on 1st January 2021, and on 22nd April 2021. The first of these referrals arose from the occasion when AR took a knife to school in order to use it to '*stab someone*'. That referral also was founded upon AR's interest in school shootings and upon his comments about serious violence. As Lord Anderson's review has found, those PREVENT referrals represented '*three opportunities to progress towards Channel a troubled teenager who was already showing signs of an interest in terrorism and some disturbed and violent characteristics*'.¹⁵ We urge this Inquiry to consider whether, as Lord Anderson suggests,¹⁶ there were clear grounds for AR to be referred to the Channel co-

¹² LANC000069

¹³ LCC000452 p6.

¹⁴ LCC000011

¹⁵ Lord Anderson's PREVENT review, p iv, § 9.

¹⁶ Lord Anderson's PREVENT review, p 65, §§ 3.57 – 3.58.

ordinator for further information-gathering at that early stage, despite his lack of a clear ideology.

16. On 17th March 2022 AR went missing from home. Yet again, he was in possession of a knife. He was found on a bus a few hours later.¹⁷ The police attended. AR admitted that he was planning to stab someone. He also referred to having attempted to make poison. It was noted that AR *'did not seem to understand the seriousness of this and did not think he was doing anything wrong'*.¹⁸
17. The attending police officer concluded that no further action was required. This was at least in part on the basis that AR had not in fact attacked anyone whilst on the bus.¹⁹ The Inquiry will wish to examine whether there was any proper consideration of the fact that this was the *third* instance of AR carrying a knife with the intent to commit a serious violent offence in as many years.
18. At home, AR's behaviour continued to worsen. On 3rd May 2022 during a home visit, AR's father was reluctant for professionals to see AR because he was concerned about a violent reaction.²⁰ On 14th May 2022, a 999 call was made by AR's mother because of AR's behaviour.²¹ On 1st June 2022 at the Sefton CAMHS meeting it was hypothesised that AR was exerting control by refusing to attend school and by refusing to eat.²²
19. It is in this context of an ongoing propensity for serious violence that AR made a series of concerning purchases online. In January 2022, he purchased the raw materials necessary for producing ricin. Those materials were delivered to a next-door neighbour and to an Amazon hub, addressed to AR's father.²³ On 28th March 2022, AR purchased a bow and a number of arrows, delivered to his address in

¹⁷ LANC000088

¹⁸ LANC000088 p.4

¹⁹ LANC000019

²⁰ SEF000069

²¹ LANC000093

²² AHCH000109 p42

²³ MERP000577

his name.²⁴ In June and October 2023, AR purchased two machetes, using a driving licence in the name of a third party on both occasions.²⁵ The first of these was intercepted by AR's father, who kept it hidden on the top of a wardrobe. Of particular concern, AR threatened his father with a knife demanding to know where the machete was. AR's father did not inform the police or take any other action.²⁶

20. On 22nd July 2024, AR's father helped his son clear boxes from his bedroom. He noticed a bow and arrow. He noticed chemicals. He did not challenge AR.²⁷

21. Later that same day, AR attempted to leave his home address in a taxi having asked his father whether The Range High School had broken up for the summer. This was a clear red flag given AR's history with that school. Having found the weapons and chemicals in AR's room hours earlier, AR's father was sufficiently concerned that he successfully 'begged' the taxi driver not to take his son.²⁸ Yet even then, the family did not seek advice, help or guidance from external sources. They did not contact the police despite clear warning signs that AR was *once again* intent on violence. The horrific events of 29th July 2024 were now just seven days away.

22. The families we represent consider that the matters set out above present a clear and obvious pattern of escalating risk. Over a number of years, AR plainly displayed a propensity for serious violence. He had demonstrated a willingness to carry and to use weapons. The evidence suggests that opportunities to identify and respond to that pattern were missed. We invite the Inquiry to examine, in detail, what more could have been done to mitigate the clear and increasing risks posed by AR's interest in, and propensity for, serious violence. The Inquiry is also invited to consider the ways in which public services work together when responding to children posing a risk of violence, to identify ways

²⁴ MERP000577

²⁵ MERP001282, MERP001253

²⁶ MERP001060 p4.

²⁷ MERP001060

²⁸ MERP001060 p5

in which the whole system might be strengthened. This would ensure that clear and obvious patterns of escalating risk are identified and acted upon swiftly with coordination and with vigour.

AR's Special Educational Needs

23. The second theme of particular concern to the families we represent is the extent of engagement by professionals with AR's special educational needs (SEN) and his reports of anxiety.

24. At the point when AR was excluded from The Range High School, (a mainstream school), the Deputy Head and Special Educational Needs Coordinator at his new school (Acorns) noted that they had received '*no information from [the] excluding school*'²⁹. Acorns School sought to refer AR for an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) assessment as early as 22nd November 2019.³⁰ However, a formal diagnosis appears not to have been made until January 2021.³¹ The Inquiry is invited to consider whether an earlier diagnosis might have resulted in more effective steps to reduce the risks posed by AR, particularly given what is known about AR's diagnosis of ASD. The Inquiry may consider that some individuals with ASD often do not understand the implications of their behaviour and due to their difficulties with social imagination often do not learn from past experience. Some may repeatedly offend if not offered the correct support and intervention.

25. When making the referral for ASD assessment on 22nd November 2019, the Deputy Head at Acorns School emailed the Community Paediatric team at Alder Hey, saying '*I really need some help with a referral for a young man...The mainstream school referred him to CAMHS at Alder Hey but they turned him down and referred him towards a scheme aimed at anti-social behaviour and gangs. I do not believe he meets the criteria for referral to this service. We now have serious safeguarding concerns*'.³² In 2019, we know that AR, then aged 13

²⁹ AHCH000090 P. 67

³⁰ AHCH000092

³¹ NHS000314 p7

³² AHCH000092

years, was displaying violent and aggressive character traits. This was identified following the incident in 2019. The resulting police report described AR as ‘*high risk*’. It is of concern to the families that Lancashire Social Care stepped AR *down* to ‘early help’ and that Social Services stepped AR *down* to Level 2 in March 2020. This, it appears, was in large part because AR was open to the Youth Offending Team. Yet it would have been known that that Team’s intervention was due to last only a few more months. This inconsistency in approach to the level of risk AR posed is something that continued throughout his interaction with professionals.

26. On 21st January 2020, a meeting took place between CAMHS, social workers and AR’s school. However, rather than working *together*, the approach appears to have been parochial. It did not engage effectively with the school’s concerns about the risk of serious harm to pupils if AR were allowed to return to school. Within the disclosed material provided to us by the Inquiry Team is evidence that a CAMHS representative offered a £5 bet to anyone who could predict what happened next. This may provide, we suggest, an insight into a rather complacent approach adopted by some of those who had been tasked to work with AR. The Social Services representative at that meeting appears to have been focused on passing the responsibility for conducting a risk assessment from herself to the school.³³

27. Throughout the rest of 2020, Covid restrictions meant there was no meaningful progress in AR’s Early Help plan with Social Services. It was impossible to address AR’s isolation and poor social skills due to a lack of face-to-face engagement.³⁴ The Children and Families Wellbeing Team withdrew support in June 2020 on the basis that they could only re-engage once schools reopened. This led to Acorns School expressing concern that this would leave AR without *any* provision over the

³³ LCC000020

³⁴ LCC000060

summer, making it harder to re-engage with him in September.³⁵ AR appeared to have fallen off the radar.

28. Once schools re-opened, AR's pattern of attendance declined very significantly. Having started at Presfield School on 19 April 2022, AR's attendance for the rest of the school year³⁶ was so poor that the school sought to remove him from their roll for the 2022-23 school year.³⁷ The school was unable to get a meaningful response to this request from Lancashire County Council, and made repeated attempts to see AR at home. However, AR's parents prevented those school staff from seeing him. By March 2023, Presfield School staff were very concerned because they had not seen AR since 25th May 2022.³⁸ Police had declined to conduct a welfare visit. Social Services were unwilling to visit. School staff expressed their frustrations in this way: *'the red tape is frightening...short of breaking in I don't know how to see this kid'*.³⁹ One staff member made this significant remark: *'no-one is picking this unseen child up'*.⁴⁰ Over the 26 months of AR being on the roll at Presfield School, his attendance was 0.7%. Once again, we suggest that AR had fallen off the radar.

29. An Education Health Care Plan review completed by AR's father in January 2023 made clear that he wanted to get AR back into education. However, he pointed out that since 1st September 2022 the inclusion team had not been responding to the concerns that AR was out of education. The family felt *'abandoned'*. They noted that *'in 5 months nothing has happened and it feels no one cares'*.⁴¹ By January 2024, AR made clear that he had no interest in returning to Presfield School. AR's Education Health Care Plan was closed by the Local Authority in March 2024, apparently with no consultation. This was on the basis that AR had not been in education for over two years.⁴² He

³⁵ MERP000230 p51.

³⁶ SEF000155

³⁷ MERP000789

³⁸ LANC000095

³⁹ PRE000511

⁴⁰ PRE000233

⁴¹ LCC000174

⁴² MERP000789

was removed from the roll at Presfield on 12th June 2024. ⁴³ We submit that it is not without significance that this was only some six weeks before the tragic events at the Hart Space.

30. Pausing there, the evidence suggests that AR was lost to the education system for significant periods of time. He was a teenager with acute special educational needs and an anxiety disorder. The families we represent invite the Inquiry to consider carefully whether there were missed opportunities to intervene sooner, and more effectively, to deal with the risks posed by AR's mental health conditions and/or his neurodiversity. These issues must of course be viewed against the background of AR's escalating pattern of violent behaviour as set out above.

The Family Home

31. The third theme of concern to the families we represent is whether Social Services took sufficient steps to engage with AR in the context of his family and his home environment in order to identify and mitigate the risks he posed.
32. We invite the Inquiry to consider this fundamental issue: the social care system is configured to protect children from serious harm, but is it adequately equipped to respond to children who themselves pose a risk of causing serious harm to others? The emerging evidential picture suggests not. First, the role of AR's parents was not adequately addressed. Second, the assessment of AR himself appears to have been seriously deficient.
33. After the assault at The Range High School in late 2019, AR's parents were noted as being '*in denial over how serious this actually is*'.⁴⁴ By the end of that year Social Services professionals felt that AR's father was not fully taking on board the significance of the concerns about his son.⁴⁵ It was thought that AR's father may be '*reluctant again*

⁴³ MERP000789 p9

⁴⁴ LANC000107

⁴⁵ LANC000175 p.84

to engage in family therapy'. On 15th October 2021 it was recorded that *'AR is often violent towards him [his father] in the home*'. It was recorded that the *'CAMHS case worker surmised [that] AR [was] trying to seek justice following dad's treatment of him when he was younger*'.⁴⁶

34. AR's parents were clearly struggling: a home visit identified that AR was *'quite a force in the household*', shouting at his parents, who were unable to challenge him⁴⁷. In November 2021, AR's parents were noted as having *'concerns regarding [AR's] escalating aggression, verbal threats and intimidation*'. They reported feeling *'disempowered*'⁴⁸.

35. Following his arrest for the incident on the bus in 2022, AR requested that any contact should be made to his mother rather than his father *'as AR does not like his dad*'⁴⁹. His mother called 999 later that year. It was recorded that AR was *'getting older and stronger. His parents are struggling to cope with him...any help would...greatly assist the family*'.⁵⁰

36. In the first half of 2023, the relationship between AR's family (on the one hand) and the various institutions (on the other) appears to have been deteriorating. A member of CAMHS team recorded on 14th May 2023 that *'communication with parents can be a bit challenging*'.⁵¹ A CAMHS psychiatrist had already reported that she did not feel safe working with AR's father given his behaviour towards professionals.⁵² The Lancashire Safeguarding meeting on 13th September 2023 noted that AR's parents were asking for the police to work with AR about not going to school. They were told that *'at his age, he has a choice*'.⁵³ It seems that the professionals agreed that there were no safeguarding

⁴⁶ AHCH000209 p.33

⁴⁷ LANC000004 p6

⁴⁸ AHCH000109 p.

⁴⁹ LANC000088 p. 1

⁵⁰ LANC000096 p.15

⁵¹ AHCH000076

⁵² AHCH000169

⁵³ AHCH000109 p.64

risks to AR. The family requested that support remain in place at level 3. However, the team stepped the support *down* to level 2.⁵⁴

37. During this time, medication was prescribed for AR *without* him being medically-examined and *without* any discussion with AR. Sporadic family therapy sessions took place *without* AR in attendance. The notes from the community dietetics service demonstrate a level of apathy. It was recorded that AR had '*not left the home in 4-5 months*' and that he had '*erratic eating patterns*'.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, AR was discharged from that service.⁵⁶

38. In this context, one of the crucial opportunities to engage with AR in the domestic setting was his referral to the Transitions Service within social care. This service aims to identify the care and support needs of teenagers prior to their 18th birthday. A post-incident review conducted by Lancashire County Council has identified serious flaws and failings in the Transitions Service in AR's case:⁵⁷

- a. AR was initially allocated to a case worker on 21st February 2022. That case worker appears to have taken no action for 6 months.⁵⁸
- b. AR was then reallocated to a new case worker on 10th August 2022. She made introductory email contact with the family on 14th August 2022. She conducted one visit with the family on 9th November 2023, but did not see AR.⁵⁹
- c. No general assessments or risk assessments of AR were completed in the 2 years and 5 months between the date of his allocation to a Transitions case worker and the date of the incident on 29th July 2024.⁶⁰
- d. That new case worker did not access AR's Children's Social Care records at any time prior to 29th July 2024.⁶¹ The reviewer found

⁵⁴ AHCH000084

⁵⁵ AHCH000001 p1

⁵⁶ AHCH000089

⁵⁷ LCC000593

⁵⁸ LCC000593, p7

⁵⁹ LCC000593, p10

⁶⁰ LCC000593, p11

⁶¹ LCC000593, p13

that, had the records been accessed, there could have been a heightened awareness of the significant risk of harm posed by AR to others.⁶²

- e. The reviewer identified minimal evidence of the new case worker engaging other professionals to inform a holistic picture of AR's life.⁶³

39. The system as a whole appears to have failed in respect of assessing AR in the transition from childhood to adulthood. There were missed opportunities to identify and mitigate the risk of serious harm he posed to others, and to support his family. The Inquiry is respectfully invited to consider each of these missed opportunities in detail and to identify what steps might be taken to improve the approach to children who do or who may pose risks to others. The crucial aim of such analysis would be to prevent the same failings from happening again.

Conclusion

40. The families we represent are acutely concerned that the evidence presently available already indicates a series of system failings, complacency, a lack of curiosity and inadequacy. Phase 1 of this Inquiry will hear evidence not only about the events of 29th July 2024 and the consequent human suffering, but also evidence that warning signs were missed, support was inconsistent and that opportunities to intervene were lost. The Inquiry may well conclude that there has been a collective failure and one which is not only of concern to the families we represent but will be of profound concern to every member of society.

41. The families we represent ask that the Inquiry considers the position of professionals, authorities and institutions by beginning with the following questions:

- a. Did they comply with their statutory duties?
- b. Did they follow policies?

⁶² LCC000593, p16 § 5.4.3

⁶³ LCC000593, p13

- c. Did they communicate with all the appropriate parties adequately?
 - d. What regard (if any) was had to AR's diagnosis of ASD?
 - e. Did AR have psychological problems and if so, what were they and what was done to reduce them?
 - f. Were adequate steps taken to seek to ensure that AR was safe from himself?
 - g. Were adequate steps taken to seek to ensure that that the public was safe from AR?
42. What AR did was catastrophic, inhumane and heartbreaking. Of that there can be no doubt. But there are many questions the families we represent wish to be posed to those who must be held accountable for errors and failings. It was known that AR required support, structure and routine.⁶⁴ Had he received that support, structure and routine, and had the appropriate organisations acted when they should, we submit that the horrifying attack on 29th July 2024 might have been preventable.
43. As the Prime Minister has said: *'Southport must be a line in the sand'*. By that remark, it was made clear that this Inquiry is expected to be an engine for change.
44. For the 18 families we represent, there are a range of views and a range of points that are important to them. However, common to all of those families is their deep-rooted wish that their experiences are not repeated in the future.
45. Accordingly, in finishing our opening submissions to the Inquiry, we adopt the words of the some of those we represent: the Inquiry must confront the systemic failures that allowed such a horror to unfold. *'Accountability matters. Change is not optional. Change is urgent'*.

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EXCHANGE CHAMBERS, LIVERPOOL, MANCHESTER & LEEDS
5th September 2025

⁶⁴ ACHC000105 p.8