Comisiynydd Plant Cymru
Children's Commissioner for Wales

Witness Name: Rocio Cifuentes

Exhibits: RC/01 – RC/17

Dated: 10 September 2026

THE SOUTHPORT INQUIRY

[FIRST] WITNESS STATEMENT OF ROCIO CIFUENTES

I, **Rocio Cifuentes,** will say as follows: -

INTRODUCTION

1. I am the Children's Commissioner for Wales and I welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to Phase 2 of the Southport Inquiry. This witness statement is made to assist the Southport Inquiry (the "**Inquiry**") with the matters set out in the Rule 9 Request dated 10 August 2026.

BACKGROUND

2. As Children's Commissioner for Wales, my role is to promote and protect the rights and welfare of children and young people in Wales. My powers and functions are set out in the Children's Commissioner for Wales Act 2001. Those functions include reviewing the effect on children of the exercise of functions by the Welsh Government and other relevant bodies, examining the adequacy and effectiveness of arrangements to safeguard and promote children's rights and welfare, making representations to the Welsh Government and other

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We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

bodies, and providing advice and assistance to children and young people. In exercising my functions, I must have regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which provides the overarching framework for my work. My evidence is informed by engagement with children and young people, policy and advocacy work undertaken by my Office, and wider evidence relating to safeguarding, education, wellbeing and violence prevention.

3. My statutory remit focuses on matters affecting children in Wales and the operation of devolved public services. While a number of issues considered by this Inquiry, including policing, criminal justice, youth justice and aspects of online regulation, are reserved matters, they nevertheless have important implications for children's rights, safety and wellbeing. Accordingly, I offer evidence from a children's rights, safeguarding and prevention perspective, reflecting the experiences of children and young people in Wales and the services that support them.

4. I have not undertaken specific work on Violence Fixated Individuals or Non-Ideological Extreme Violence as defined by this Inquiry. However, my Office has undertaken relevant work on safeguarding, behaviour in schools, online harms, mental health and wellbeing, violence prevention and children's experiences of public services. A consistent message emerging from this work is that serious violence is rarely attributable to a single cause and is more often associated with a complex interaction of vulnerability, adversity, unmet need and wider social influences. Any response should therefore be evidence-based, child-centred and focused on prevention.

Identifying and Managing Risk and the Effectiveness of current laws and systems

Safeguarding Arrangements in Wales

5. The terms "Violence Fixated Individual" (VFI) or "Non-Ideological Extreme Violence" (NIEV) are not ones that are much used in Wales. My understanding is that these terms that are not well understood or embedded across agencies working with children and young people in Wales. This may reflect the relatively new emergence of these concepts. However, I recognise the value of shared terminology in helping professionals identify, discuss and respond to patterns of concerning behaviour and escalating violence risk. Any such framework should remain focused on observable behaviours, identified risks and safeguarding needs rather than labels alone.

6. Safeguarding governance and arrangements in Wales are complex, consisting of multiple stakeholders with various roles and responsibilities. In addition to policies and procedures developed and implemented by the Welsh Government and local authorities across Wales, there are also seven regional safeguarding boards (RSBs) and a National Independent Safeguarding Board (NISB) which supports the RSBs to conduct their work to safeguard children, young people and adults. RSBs facilitate multi-agency working to identify safeguarding concerns and work to prevent them from escalating or to respond to them.

7. All the RSBs have regional policies and procedures in place, some of which include information about the use of violence, but these are primarily within the context of Child Exploitation, particularly Child Criminal Exploitation, and Radicalisation. Cardiff and Vale Regional Safeguarding Board uses the Cardiff Help or Harm Referral Guidance (as exhibited in RC/01- **CCW000004**) and the UK Government's 2018 Serious Violence Strategy, whilst the North Wales Regional Safeguarding Board works in partnership with, amongst others, the North Wales Police and Crime Commissioner as part of the 2024 North Wales Serious Violence Response Strategy (exhibited in RC/02- **CCW000005**). The latter RSB also works with two local authorities in north Wales to implement the Gwynedd and Anglesey Community Safety Partnership Annual Plan 2026-28 (exhibited in RC/03- **CCW000006**). Additionally, North Wales RSB has produced a '7-minute briefing' specifically on VFIs (exhibited in RC/04- **CCW000007**).

8. Returning briefly to the other documents, "serious violence" is included in them, but there is no clear reference to VFIs or NIEV. Of course, that is not to say that VFIs or NIEV are not considered as part of the implementation of these strategies or when using these guidance documents, but it is also true that without clear reference and actions to address VFIs or NIEV involving children, it will not receive the attention and resource that it needs. There also do not appear to be risk assessment frameworks used for identifying signs of VFIs or NIEV.

9. The lack of general or better knowledge and understanding of VFIs or NIEV may be due to a lack of training for practitioners to identify and act when they spot potential signs shown by children and young people. This is something that requires attention and support from the Welsh Government to rectify. In the meantime, greater joined up working could enable different RSBs to share learning with each other so as to raise awareness and share ways of responding. A move away from siloed working should also assist with strengthening information-sharing practices between RSBs and other agencies.

10. I have already mentioned that multi-agency working takes place in Wales, but for multi-agency work to take place to effectively prevent and respond to VFIs or NIEV, better knowledge and understanding of the issue across Wales is required first. The structures to enable this are already in place, such as Multi-agency Safeguarding Hubs in RSB areas.

11. I believe that these structures should be used instead of the "creation of a system in which a specified professional is identified as the dedicated lead for case management in every case (a kind of 'duty holder')," as suggested in Annex A of the Inquiry letter that I received. I would argue that the work that such a system would do could be done within existing structures that are better resourced and would avoid creating additional complexity within already complex safeguarding arrangements. For these structures to be effective, training for identifying and responding to VFIs or NIEV is required, and the subsequent knowledge and understanding that results from such training can be used to make the adaptations to existing structures so as to enable an effective multi-agency response to VFIs or NIEV.

12. The Inquiry document suggests a "single, accessible, national multi-agency risk assessment framework [that could] be developed for children and young people who present risks associated with extreme violence, to be used across the public sector." I see the benefits of such an approach, but I must note that safeguarding is a devolved area, meaning that the development of a single, accessible, national multi-agency risk assessment framework for this purpose would need to be developed by the Welsh Government and stakeholders in Wales, with their counterparts in England working towards a framework for use in England. Learning could, of course, be shared across borders. I also note that consideration must be given to how the voluntary sector could be involved in the development of such a framework and how expertise within that sector could be used to ensure that the framework is as comprehensive as possible.

13. Another element of safeguarding arrangements in Wales is the Wales Safeguarding Procedures (WSPs) and their accompanying practice guides. The WSPs apply the provisions of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWB Act) and detail the responsibilities of stakeholders who identify and respond to safeguarding concerns involving children and young people. The practice guides provide information and guidance to stakeholders regarding specific safeguarding concerns and are to be used in conjunction with the WSPs. The practice guides also serve as resources for specialist safeguarding responses required as interventions into the lives of children and young people who are at risk of harm.

14. As exhibited by RC/05- **CCW000008** , one of the practice guides is on Safeguarding children from Radicalisation and includes definitions of radicalisation, extremism, violent extremism and terrorism. The first three of these terms are defined as being linked with the adoption of an ideology or ideologies and acting on the adoption of those ideologies. The definition of terrorism does not place the same emphasis on ideology, but the link between it and the other concepts is clear in the practice guide. There is no practice guide that addresses specifically VFIs or NIEV.

15. As exhibited by RC/06- **CCW000009** , there is also a practice guide on Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) which addresses the threat or risk of violence in the lives of children and

young people who are experiencing CCE. It is important not to conflate CCE and VFIs or NIEV, however, it is worth considering whether being at risk of CCE or experiencing CCE could contribute to the development of the fixation with violence. Currently, this is not noted in the practice guide for CCE.

16. As mentioned previously, the WSPs and the accompanying practice guides apply the provisions of the SSWB Act. With regard to whether this act "adequately enables agencies to identify, monitor, manage and disrupt children who are progressing towards acts of extreme violence," as noted in Annex A, I believe that more is needed to achieve this end. One of the ways to do this would be by developing a new practice guide specifically on VFIs or NIEV. The development of a separate practice guide would enable practitioners to better understand what NIEV is or how children and young people can become fixated with violence; what the indicators might be; and how they should respond to children and young people who may be VFIs or have an interest in NIEV. A separate practice guide would also contribute to the learning required by stakeholders across Wales about VFIs or NIEV – a need that I have noted more than once in this response. Such a practice guide would be a national, Wales-wide resource, meaning that stakeholders across Wales would have access to it and would contribute to improved understanding of the issue across the country – not just in some areas.

Mental Health

17. Mental health policy in Wales is another way of identifying and managing risk. Last year, the Welsh Government published its 10-year mental health and wellbeing strategy (RC/07-**NHSW000036**) and its accompanying three-year delivery plan. The delivery plan noted how the strategy's objectives will be achieved, which includes, amongst other things, improving "access to psychological interventions & therapies" and organising mental health support in its different guises more strategically – such as CAMHS and mental health and psychological support provided in non-clinical settings.

18. I am not aware of the effectiveness of current mental health support existing and the interventions that they conduct in managing or reducing the risk posed by children with a fixation on violence. I suspect that there will be pockets of good practice in Wales

undertaken by practitioners who can identify and respond to risks, but I do not believe this to be the case across Wales. As I mentioned above, this will be due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of VFIs and NIEV.

19. Mental health providers are an integral part of a multi-agency response to safeguarding risks faced by children and young people. But for an effective multi-agency response to VFIs and NIEV, all agencies involved need training to learn about VFIs and NIEV and how to better respond to it, as well as the required resources. In the case of mental health service providers, better understanding of the issue could lead to better psychological support to prevent early signs from developing into something more serious and to support children and young people with an established interest in extreme violence, doing so as part of a multi-agency response that is child-centred and trauma-informed.

Single Unified Safeguarding Review

20. So far, I have placed emphasis on the need to improve stakeholders across Wales's knowledge and understanding of VFIs and NIEV and to do so by providing training. I suspect that much of the required training will draw on information not currently available in Wales, but the training could also use existing resources. One such example is the Single Unified Safeguarding Review (SUSR) (RC/08- **CCW000011**). The SUSR aims to create a single review process following an incident that has caused abuse, harm or death, and to remove the need for families to repeatedly provide information to agencies. The SUSR replaces previous review processes, such as Child Practice Reviews, Mental Health Homicide Reviews and Offensive Weapons Homicide Reviews.

21. Completed SUSR reports, as well as previous Child Practice Reviews and Adult Practice Reviews, are stored in the Wales Safeguarding Repository (the Repository), the purpose of which is to provide learning opportunities to prevent future incidents. I believe that the Repository could be key in developing training for practitioners on VFIs and NIEV, in the way that it could be used for learning opportunities for preventing other forms of harm, abuse or death. As well as training for practitioners, reviews stored on the Repository and learning based on those reviews could inform a national, Wales-wide approach to VFIs and

NIEV. For example, information from the Repository could be used for developing a separate practice guide on VFIs and NIEV, as I suggested above.

Schools and Education Settings

22. Schools should be safe, inclusive and supportive environments in which all children can learn, develop and participate free from violence, fear and harm. While incidents of serious violence in schools remain rare, they can have profound and lasting consequences for pupils, staff, families and communities. As exhibited in RC/09- **CCW000012** , children consistently tell me that feeling safe is fundamental to their experience of education. Recent discussions in Wales regarding behaviour and safety in schools have highlighted growing concerns about aggression, violence and behavioural issues within some educational settings. Evidence, as exhibited by RC/10- **CCW000013** , demonstrates that such behaviours rarely arise in isolation and are often linked to a complex combination of factors, including trauma, adverse childhood experiences, poverty, family instability, unmet mental health needs, additional learning needs, social isolation and wider community influences. These factors should not be viewed as predictors of violence but as potential indicators of vulnerability and unmet need.

23. I am cautious about approaches that seek to identify a particular type of child who may become seriously violent. The evidence does not support simple profiles or assumptions about which children may present a risk. In my view, safeguarding systems should focus on observable behaviours, patterns of concern, escalation and context rather than on diagnosis, identity or background. Future approaches should therefore be behaviour-based, developmentally and trauma-informed and consistent with children's rights. Particular care should be taken to avoid conflating neurodevelopmental conditions with violence risk. Autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions are not predictors of serious violence, and the overwhelming majority of neurodivergent children pose no risk to others. Assessment of concern should therefore focus on behaviour, circumstances and support needs rather than diagnosis.

24. Although the terminology of "Violence Fixated Individuals" is not routinely used within Welsh education or safeguarding systems, schools are frequently required to respond to behaviours that may indicate escalating concern. Teachers and school staff are often among the first professionals to observe changes in behaviour, increasing social isolation, preoccupation with violence, deteriorating wellbeing, difficulties in relationships, concerning online activity or expressions of harmful intent. Importantly, many children may display one or more of these behaviours without ever presenting a serious risk of violence. Equally, children who later engage in serious harmful behaviour may not always fit an obvious pattern. This reinforces the importance of professional judgement, information-sharing and early intervention rather than reliance on rigid categorisation.

25. The Inquiry may also wish to consider the relationship between serious violence concerns and experiences of exclusion, disengagement from education and social isolation. Evidence reviewed by the Children's Legal Centre Wales (as exhibited by RC/11- **CCW000014**) highlights the association between serious youth violence, victimisation, trauma, exclusion and wider social and economic disadvantage. Children who become involved in serious violence are often themselves children who have experienced adversity, exclusion or unmet need. Schools provide not only education but access to trusted adults, safeguarding oversight, support services and positive peer relationships. Where children become persistently absent, disengaged or excluded from education, opportunities to identify and respond to emerging concerns may be reduced. This reflects a broader theme within the evidence on violence prevention. Children who display concerning behaviours are often viewed primarily through the lens of risk. However, a child-rights and safeguarding perspective requires equal attention to the vulnerabilities that may sit behind those behaviours. Experiences of victimisation, trauma, exploitation, neglect, mental ill-health, family difficulties and social isolation may all contribute to increased vulnerability. Recognising these factors does not diminish the seriousness of risk or harmful behaviour but it does help shape more effective responses.

26. Schools cannot and should not be expected to manage serious risks in isolation. Where concerns emerge about a child whose behaviour appears increasingly concerning, effective safeguarding depends upon timely collaboration between education, children's services,

health services, mental health services, youth services, safeguarding partners and, where appropriate, policing partners. One of the clearest lessons from safeguarding practice is that individual agencies often hold only part of the overall picture. Risks may only become fully apparent when information is brought together, assessed collectively and considered over time. The challenge is often not an absence of information-sharing powers but ensuring that professionals are confident in using them appropriately and that systems support effective collaboration.

27. Concerns about workforce capacity and access to support services are also relevant. Schools are increasingly expected to respond to a wide range of behavioural, emotional and safeguarding needs, often while facing pressures in accessing specialist mental health support and other services. Effective prevention depends not only on identifying concerns but also on the availability of timely interventions when concerns are identified. Delays in accessing support can increase the risk that difficulties become more entrenched and harder to address.

28. Recent incidents that have involved pupils attacking teachers with a knife has prompted significant concern regarding weapons in educational settings across Wales. Although such incidents remain exceptional, they reinforce the importance of ensuring that schools have clear, consistent and effective responses when concerns arise relating to weapons or serious violence. I therefore welcome Welsh Government's commitment, as exhibited by RC/12- **CCW000015** , to develop all-Wales resources based on Cardiff's Weapons in Schools and Education Settings (WISES) protocol. The emphasis on consistency, safeguarding and trauma-informed practice reflects the need to protect school communities while ensuring that children involved in weapon-related incidents receive appropriate assessment and support.

29. Evidence relating to knife crime and serious youth violence suggests that children may carry weapons for a range of reasons, including fear, previous victimisation, exploitation, coercion, peer influences and concerns for their own safety. Understanding those factors is essential if interventions are to be effective. Safeguarding responses should therefore seek not only to manage immediate risk but also to understand why a child has obtained or carried a weapon and what support may be required to address the underlying causes.

30. I also believe that youth work has an important preventative role to play. The available evidence suggests that children and young people involved in or affected by violence often benefit from sustained relationships with trusted adults, opportunities to participate positively in their communities and access to support before concerns escalate. Relationship-based youth work can help identify vulnerability, build resilience, increase trust in services and connect children to education, training, mental health support and other forms of assistance. While youth work is not a substitute for safeguarding or specialist interventions it can provide an important protective factor and should form part of a wider public health approach to preventing serious violence.

31. Ultimately, I believe the most important question is not whether future violence can be predicted with certainty but whether concerns can be identified early enough to enable effective intervention. The evidence does not support simplistic predictive models or single explanations for serious violence. Rather, it points towards prevention through strong safeguarding systems, trusted adult relationships, educational engagement, family support, mental health support, relationship-based youth work and effective multi-agency working. In my view, a child-rights based and safeguarding-led approach offers the best prospect of identifying risks early, preventing escalation and ensuring that schools remain safe environments for all children and staff. Such an approach recognises both the need to protect others from harm and the reality that children whose behaviour causes concern may themselves require support, protection and intervention. It is through early identification, coordinated safeguarding and sustained support, rather than prediction alone, that the greatest opportunities exist to prevent serious harm.

Youth Justice

32. The Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales, as exhibited by RC/13- **NHSW000045**, provides an important policy foundation for identifying and responding to children whose behaviour may present a risk of serious violence. It is based on a Child First, rights-based and trauma-informed approach, with a strong emphasis on prevention, early intervention and coordinated multi-agency working. The Wales Without Violence Framework (exhibited by RC/14- **NHSW000044**) and associated Violence Prevention Principles have been integrated into this approach. These reinforce the principle that violence is preventable and that

effective responses should be evidence-based, trauma-informed and informed by partnership working and multi-agency information. This is particularly relevant to the identification of VFIs and NIEV because information about escalating concerns may be held across education, health, social care, police and Youth Justice Services. Bringing that information together may reveal patterns of behaviour or escalation that would not be apparent if concerns were considered in isolation.

33. The Blueprint also adopts a tiered approach to prevention, moving from universal prevention, through early targeted support, to more intensive intervention and diversion where concerns are greater. This creates opportunities to identify and respond to emerging risk before a child reaches a criminal justice threshold. It also provides a structure through which concerns can be escalated as the level or complexity of risk increases. Alongside this, Enhanced Case Management provides a psychology-led, multi-agency approach for children with complex needs, supporting practitioners to develop a shared understanding of a child's behaviour, experiences, trauma and wider needs and to use that understanding to inform intervention. Together, these arrangements provide a potentially valuable basis for identifying children whose behaviour is becoming more concerning and for coordinating a proportionate response.

34. However, the Youth Justice Blueprint was not developed specifically to identify VFIs or NIEV. It does not provide a dedicated definition, screening mechanism or assessment framework for violence fixation or pre-attack behaviour. The existing Welsh framework therefore provides a strong preventative and multi-agency structure but there remains a need for greater clarity about the indicators that should trigger escalation between tiers, when specialist VFI or NIEV assessment should be sought, how relevant information should be brought together across agencies, and which professional or agency should take responsibility for coordinating the response. Any further arrangements should build on these existing youth justice and safeguarding arrangements rather than duplicate them, while ensuring that trauma, neurodevelopmental conditions, mental health needs, social isolation or school exclusion are not treated in themselves as indicators of a propensity for serious violence.

The role of the Online Environment

35. As exhibited by, respectively, my Office has carried out several engagement exercises exploring children and young people's experiences of the online environment including online safety (exhibited by RC/15- **CCW000018**), misinformation (exhibited by RC/16- **CCW000019**) and social media (RC/17- **CCW000020**). I have not undertaken specific research into VFI and NIEV online, however, this work provides relevant evidence about how the online environment can expose children and young people to harmful content, reinforce existing interests and behaviours, and shape their understanding of the world.

36. Digital environments are now a central part of childhood. Children tell me that they use online platforms to communicate, maintain friendships, learn, access information, seek support and express themselves. However, they also consistently report exposure to content and interactions that they find harmful, distressing or inappropriate. My Office's engagement has highlighted concerns about violent content, contact from strangers, bullying, discrimination and material that negatively affect children's wellbeing.

37. In the context of the Inquiry, one of the most significant concerns is not that violent or disturbing content exists online but that digital platforms can actively reinforce interest in such material over time. Online platforms provide ready access to content, communities and information relating to violence, previous attacks, weapons ad harmful behaviours. For some individuals (who may already be vulnerable for a variety of reasons), the online environment can provide opportunities for those interests to deepen and become reinforce.

38. I am particularly concerned about the role of recommendation systems and algorithms. These are designed to maximise engagement, often by presenting users with content similar to that which they have previously viewed or interacted with. Children and young people have told me that it is too easy to come across violence and other harmful content online and that platforms repeatedly show them comparable content once they have engaged with it. In practice, this means that someone displaying an interest in violent or disturbing content may be exposed to increasing amounts of similar material over time. Recommendation

systems are therefore not neutral. They contribute to the reinforcement of interests, grievance or behaviours by repeatedly amplifying the same themes and content.

39. Niche online communities may also play a role in reinforcing harmful interests. While many online communities provide positive support and connection, others can validate grievances, normalise harmful attitudes or create spaces where violent fantasies and behaviours are discussed without challenge. The combination of algorithmic amplification and communities that reinforce particular beliefs create environments in which harmful ideas become normalised.

40. My Office's engagement with children also demonstrates that online environments can encourage behaviours that would be less likely to occur offline. Children frequently report experiences of bullying, harassment and abuse online. The distance, anonymity and reduced accountability present within some online environments can contribute to behaviour becoming more extreme or harmful. While anonymity serves legitimate purposes and can support privacy, there are circumstances in which it may also facilitate harmful conduct and reduce opportunities for intervention.

41. At the same time, professionals working with children often face challenges in identifying and responding to concerning online behaviours. Online cultures, platforms and technologies evolve rapidly and safeguarding systems do not always keep pace. Behaviours may take place across multiple platforms, within private groups or through encrypted services, making them difficult to identify and assess. As a result, agencies may not always have the confidence, capacity or expertise required to understand how online activity is contributing to wider safeguarding concerns.

42. My Office's work also highlights concerns about current reporting and moderation arrangements. Children frequently express limited confidence that harmful content will be removed or that concerns reported to platforms will be acted upon effectively. This is particularly significant where content relates to violence, intimidation, harmful behaviour or other serious safeguarding concerns. In my view, a greater burden of responsibility must sit with technology companies themselves. Children, parents, schools and public services

should not be expected to compensate for weaknesses in platform design or moderation systems.

43. The Inquiry has also asked about mechanisms for identifying concerning patterns of online behaviour, including browsing activity, purchasing behaviour and attempts to evade safeguards using VPNs or multiple accounts. I recognise the public protections considerations that arise in this context. However, any response must be consistent with children rights, including their rights to privacy, expression and access to information. Measures that involving monitoring surveillance or information gathering should be demonstrably necessary, proportionate, evidence-based and subject to appropriate safeguards and oversight. I would caution against viewing VPNs as the central issue. Children and young people are often highly digitally capable and will likely find ways to circumvent restrictions. The more fundamental issue is whether age assurance systems and online safety protections are effective, enforceable and capable of reducing children's exposure to harmful content.

44. Overall, online environments can contribute to the reinforcement of harmful interests, grievances and potentially violent fixations. Effective responses are unlikely to be found through surveillance and restriction alone. Rather, stronger safety-by-design requirements must be placed on social media platforms to prevent exposing children and young people to harmful and violent content. Stronger corporate accountability and criminal liability are likely to offer more sustainable improvements to children's online safety. Children consistently tell me that they do not want to be excluded from digital life; they want digital environments that are safer, better regulated and designed with their rights and wellbeing at their core.

The Effectiveness of Current Laws and Systems

45. My statutory remit does not extend to policing, criminal justice, youth justice or wider public protection legislation. Accordingly, I am not best placed to provide a detailed assessment of the effectiveness of specific criminal or civil powers. My observations are therefore limited to the extent to which existing arrangements support the identification, safeguarding and management of children and young people who may present a risk of serious harm.

46. I am not persuaded that the principal challenge is necessarily the absence of legislative powers. Rather, many of the concerns raised by this Inquiry appear to relate to the identification of risk, information-sharing, access to specialist support, professional confidence, and the coordination of responses across agencies. Existing safeguarding frameworks in Wales already provide mechanisms for agencies to share concerns, undertake assessments and coordinate interventions when children present risks to themselves or others. However, the effectiveness of these arrangements depends on consistent implementation, workforce capacity, access to timely support and the ability of agencies to work together effectively.

47. I therefore consider that there may be greater benefit in strengthening existing safeguarding and multi-agency arrangements than in creating entirely new statutory powers or legal frameworks. In particular, attention should be given to ensuring that professionals are confident in recognising and responding to escalating concerns, that information is shared appropriately, and that children and families can access timely support and intervention.

48. As noted elsewhere in this statement, I am also cautious about approaches that seek to manage risk primarily through enforcement or control measures. Children whose behaviour causes concern may themselves be vulnerable, traumatised, exploited or experiencing unmet needs. Effective responses should therefore balance public protection with safeguarding responsibilities and the rights of the child.

49. With regard to civil orders or other legal mechanisms, I do not hold evidence that would enable me to assess the effectiveness of particular powers in managing risks posed by Violence Fixated Individuals. However, any mechanism used in relation to children and young people should be developmentally informed, proportionate and consistent with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Measures that focus solely on restriction, without addressing the underlying causes of behaviour or providing access to support, are unlikely to deliver sustainable outcomes.

50. In my view, any future reforms should focus not only on whether agencies possess sufficient legal powers but also on whether they have the resources, expertise, information and

support necessary to intervene effectively before risks escalate. The greatest opportunities to prevent serious violence are likely to come from early identification, effective safeguarding, multi-agency working, family support, mental health provision and sustained engagement with education, youth work and other protective services, rather than from additional legal powers alone.

The sale and possession of offensive weapons

51. My Office has not undertaken specific research into the routes through which children and young people access weapons, nor do I hold evidence that would enable me to assess the effectiveness of particular legislative or regulatory controls governing their sale or possession.

52. From a children's rights and safeguarding perspective, it is important that children found in possession of weapons are not viewed solely through a criminal justice lens. While public protection must remain paramount, responses should also seek to understand the circumstances that led to the behaviour and identify any underlying vulnerabilities or safeguarding concerns. Children carrying weapons may themselves be experiencing exploitation, violence or significant harm.

53. As referred to earlier in the Statement, I welcome the work being undertaken in Wales to develop consistent approaches to weapon-related incidents in schools through the All-Wales resources being developed from Cardiff's Weapons in Schools and Education Settings (WISES) protocol. The emphasis on safeguarding, support and trauma-informed practice reflects the importance of balancing the safety of the wider school community with appropriate intervention and support for the child involved.

54. Overall, I believe the greatest opportunities to reduce children's involvement with weapons lie in prevention, early intervention and effective safeguarding. This includes addressing the underlying factors that increase vulnerability, maintaining engagement with education, providing access to trusted adults and support services, and ensuring that concerns are identified and responded to at the earliest opportunity.

Improvements

55. I believe that the most meaningful improvements would build on existing safeguarding, education and youth justice structures rather than creating entirely new systems.

56. There is a clear need to improve awareness and understanding of Violence Fixated Individuals (VFIs) and Non-Ideological Extreme Violence (NIEV) across education, health, safeguarding, youth justice and other children's services. These concepts are not widely understood or used in Wales. Practitioners need access to training and guidance to help them identify concerning behaviours, understand risk factors and respond appropriately.

57. Safeguarding is a devolved matter and any future arrangements in Wales should be developed within the Welsh safeguarding framework. The Wales Safeguarding Procedures already contain practice guides on issues such as radicalisation and child criminal exploitation. I believe there would be value in developing a dedicated Wales-wide practice guide on VFIs and NIEV to support greater consistency, understanding and appropriate intervention across Wales.

58. Existing multi-agency arrangements should be strengthened rather than replaced. Regional Safeguarding Boards, Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs and Youth Justice Services already bring relevant agencies together. The priority should be ensuring that these arrangements are equipped to identify, assess and respond to concerns relating to violence fixation through effective information-sharing, clear referral pathways and access to specialist advice.

59. Schools should remain central to prevention. School staff are often among the first professionals to observe escalating concerns, changes in behaviour, social isolation or deteriorating wellbeing. Schools should have access to training, safeguarding expertise and timely support from wider services, particularly mental health, youth justice and children's services.

60. There should be continued investment in prevention and early intervention. The evidence consistently points to the importance of addressing trauma, victimisation, social isolation, exclusion from education, exploitation and unmet mental health needs before concerns

escalate. Relationship-based youth work also has an important role to play in building resilience, creating trusted relationships and identifying vulnerability at an early stage.

61. Stronger action is needed to reduce children's exposure to harmful and violent content online. In my view, this should focus on safety-by-design requirements, greater transparency around algorithms and recommendation systems, and stronger accountability for technology companies. Consideration should also be given to stronger and criminal sanctions where companies fail to protect children from foreseeable harms. Children, families and public services should not be expected to compensate for failures in platform design, moderation or risk management.

62. Overall, I believe the most effective approach is one that combines public protection with a safeguarding-led, rights-based and trauma-informed response. Improving professional understanding, strengthening existing structures, investing in prevention and increasing accountability for online platforms are likely to make the greatest difference in preventing serious harm.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings many brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.

Signed: **SIGNATURE**

Dated: 8 September 2026

Appendix: Index to the Witness Statement of Rocio Cifuentes

Exhibit No.	Inquiry Reference No.	Document Description
1	CCW000004	Cardiff Children's Services: Cardiff Help or Harm Referral Guidance
2	CCW000005	OPCCNW: North Wales Without Violence
3	CCW000006	Gwynedd and Anglesey Community Safety Partnership Annual Plan 2026-28
4	CCW000007	North Wales Safeguarding Board: 7 Minute Briefing Violence Fixated Individuals
5	CCW000008	All Wales Safeguarding Procedures: Practice Guide Safeguarding children from radicalisation
6	CCW000009	All Wales Safeguarding Procedures: Practice Guide Safeguarding children from child criminal exploitation
7	NHSW000036	Welsh Government: The Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2025–2035
8	CCW000011	Welsh Government: Single Unified Safeguarding Review Statutory Guidance
9	CCW000012	Children's Commissioner for Wales: Ambitions for Wales Survey Results
10	CCW000013	Welsh Government Social Research: Behaviours that challenge and disrupt in schools across Wales: effective strategies and mitigations
11	CCW000014	Children's Legal Centre Wales: Tackling 'Child Knife Crime' in Wales: We Need an Evidence-Based Response
12	CCW000015	Welsh Government Press Release Development of all Wales resources to support school safety I GOV.WALES
13	NHSW000045	Youth Justice Blueprint for Wales
14	NHSW000044	Wales Without Violence A Shared Framework for Preventing Violence among Children and Young People
15	CCW000018	Children's Commissioner for Wales: Monthly Matters Online Safety
16	CCW000019	Children's Commissioner for Wales: Monthly Matters What's real and fake online?
17	CCW000020	Children's Commissioner for Wales: Monthly Matters Social Media Ban