Witness Name: KAY DARGUE
Exhibits: N/A
Dated: 18 SEPTEMBER 2026

THE SOUTHPORT INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF KAY DARGUE

I, **KAY DARGUE**, will say as follows: -

Introduction

1. I am employed by Middlesbrough Council in the role of Head of South Tees Youth Justice Service. I lead a multi-agency service which includes police officers, probation officers, social workers and specialists drawn from health and education.

2. In June 2025 I was privileged to be elected Chair of the Association of YOT Managers ("AYM"). Like my fellow directors, I undertake this role voluntarily in addition to my paid role in Middlesbrough. As Chair, I am authorised to make this statement on behalf of AYM to assist the Southport Inquiry (the "**Inquiry**") with the matters set out in the Rule 9 Request dated 10 August 2026.

Background

3. AYM is the professional association representing leaders of youth justice services in England. A youth justice service ("**YJS**") works to prevent offending by children up to age of 18 years, advises courts on sentencing and supervises children in the community under court orders.

4. The AYM is funded by members' subscriptions and led by an executive that represents YJSs across England. There is a YJS for every "first tier" local authority

i.e. a local authority with responsibility for education and social care. We have over 400 members drawn from almost all local services.

5. AYM's purpose is to support and represent those responsible for the management and delivery of youth justice services. It provides a forum through which members can share professional experience, contribute to policy development and consultation, and engage with national bodies on matters affecting children and young people involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, the youth justice system.

6. AYM is not a statutory body and does not itself exercise the statutory functions of a YJS. Its members work within local statutory and partnership arrangements, and their individual roles and responsibilities vary according to local circumstances.

7. My evidence in this statement therefore needs to be understood in that context. Where I describe AYM's position, I am describing the Association's understanding based upon its engagement with members and national stakeholders. Where I describe particular practice within individual YJSs, I will identify the source of that information and distinguish it from an AYM-wide position.

8. My relevant professional background spans 26 years within the criminal justice system. I am a qualified probation officer and began my career working with adult offenders before moving into youth justice in 2004. I have served as Head of Service for South Tees Youth Justice Service since 2016.

9. In preparing this statement, I have drawn upon AYM discussions, meetings with senior executive members, and the Youth Justice Board as well as Government guidance and assessment tools. Where I have not been personally involved in a matter, I make that clear.

The Role of Youth Justice Services

9. AYM's relevance to Phase 2 of the Inquiry arises principally from the role played by YJSs in identifying, assessing and managing risks presented by children and young people, including risks of serious harm to others.

10. The AYM does not produce policies, guidance or documents for members. I can also confirm the AYM has not undertaken any statistical or data-driven work in relation to children and young people fixated on violence.

11. YJSs operate within a wider multi-agency system. Depending on the circumstances of an individual child, this can involve the police, children's social care and safeguarding services, education, health and mental health services, and Prevent and Channel arrangements. They are statutory multi-agency partnerships, currently supported by a national body, the Youth Justice Board, which monitors performance and issues guidance about how things are to be done (for example National Standards). His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation ("**HMIP**") is the regulating body. It reports regularly on the performance of individual YJSs and undertakes thematic inspections of particular aspects of practice. HMIP has consistently praised the youth justice system as a whole as an effective multi-agency model which has dramatically reduced the numbers of children entering the criminal justice system and the numbers going into custody.

12. The effectiveness of multi-agency arrangements is vitally important to youth justice practice. A child may present concerns relating to violence, harmful behaviour, exploitation, mental health, neurodevelopmental needs, harmful online activity or access to weapons without those concerns necessarily falling neatly within the responsibility of one agency. Therefore, AYM considers that an important feature of effective youth justice practice is the ability of agencies to share relevant information, assess risk collectively where appropriate, establish clear responsibility for managing identified risks, and ensure that interventions are proportionate to the circumstances and needs of the child.

13. It is significant to note that whilst members of YJS (including the aforementioned seconded specialists) will predominantly utilise the same recording systems, there are data systems and intelligence models used by policing and health colleagues for example, that are not available to or even shared with YJS staff or leaders. This is particularly apparent when dealing with terrorism related offences.

Violence Fixation and Risk Identification

14. AYM members recognise that the concepts of Violence Fixated Individuals ("**VFIs**") and Non-Ideological Extreme Violence ("**NIEV**") are emerging areas of concern. However, they are not currently supported by a universally agreed definition, assessment framework or national practice model within youth justice. The concepts remain relatively new and are inconsistently understood across agencies and regions. Existing systems have historically focused upon violence linked to offending behaviour, safeguarding concerns or ideological extremism rather than violence fixation in isolation.

15. AYM's members may encounter children whose behaviour gives rise to concerns about fixation on violence even where there is no apparent ideological motivation. Such cases may involve a combination of factors and may cross the boundaries between youth justice, safeguarding, policing, education and health.

16. In AYM's view, this makes clarity about roles, thresholds and responsibility particularly important. A concern may otherwise be passed between agencies because it does not fall clearly within the threshold or statutory responsibility of any one service. It is here that the point relating to recording and intelligence systems (paragraph 12) is highlighted.

17. The identification and assessment of risk involving children and young people needs to take account of the whole circumstances of the child. This includes offending behaviour and patterns of behaviour, safeguarding concerns, family and social circumstances, education, peer relationships, exploitation, mental health and neurodevelopmental needs, and other relevant factors.

Assessment Frameworks and Practitioner Capability

18. AYM members utilise current tools such as the Youth Justice Board ("**YJB**") approved 'AssetPlus' to assess a broad range of risk, safety and wellbeing factors. This tool was not specifically designed to identify violence fixation or NIEV-related concerns. Existing tools do not routinely ask the questions necessary to distinguish violence fixation from other forms of risk. As a result, there are limitations in the ability of current assessments to consistently identify VFIs.

19. AYM members would support the development of a shared multi-agency assessment framework. Benefits would include national consistency, common thresholds and language, improved information sharing and earlier identification of risks. Barriers to such a development relate to reaching a common agreement across agencies on definitions and on implementation of an agreed framework as well as the costs and timeframe requited to create such a tool.

20 While YJSs remain committed to robust risk assessment practice, members would not consider current resources sufficient to effectively identify and assess VFIs without national guidance, specialist training, assessment tools and access to mental health expertise. AYM consider that there are significant gaps in national strategy, guidance and governance relating to VFIs. Improvements to the system might include a nationally agreed framework, agreed thresholds, a dedicated assessment process, and clear accountability arrangements for ownership and coordination.

21 Youth justice practitioners are highly experienced in assessing risk generally but have not received consistent training in identifying violence fixation, pre-attack behaviours or NIEV. Current barriers include a lack of national guidance, limited training opportunities and the absence of specialist assessment resources. Additional national training and guidance would be required to improve practitioner confidence and capability (beyond that which may already exist in some police forces).

Mental Health and Neurodevelopmental Considerations

22 AYM members recognise the importance of understanding children's mental health and neurodevelopmental conditions within any assessment of risk of violence. Indeed, the prevalence of both need and risk factors is over-represented within the YJS cohort of children. However, a number of barriers currently exist. These include long waiting times for specialist assessments, inconsistent local mental health provision, limited access to forensic mental health support and delays which can result in missed opportunities for intervention. It is therefore our view that mental health and psychological expertise should be embedded within any future VFI assessment framework.

Information Sharing and Multi-Agency Working

23 YJSs in England have the authority to share information to prevent offending under their founding legislation, the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. They also have a duty to share information in relation to safeguarding children under the statutory guidance "Information sharing to safeguard children and young people". This is statutory guidance for all safeguarding organisations and their practitioners and is governed by the Children Act 2004. The Crime and Disorder Act places a requirement on local partners (police, health, probation and local authorities) to cooperate and share data to prevent youth crime. However, these arrangements were not designed specifically for VFIs and AYM believes that information sharing could be improved if expectations were explicitly stated in guidance.

24 In relation to the role YJSs play within existing multi-agency arrangements in the management of risk posed by VFIs, they do not operate in isolation when managing a child who presents a serious risk of harm to others. The appropriate response will depend upon the nature and level of risk and may require involvement from a number of agencies.

25 The AYM is aware of but does not directly work with multi-agency arrangements such as multi-agency safeguarding hubs ("**MASH**") and other local safeguarding arrangements, multi-agency public protection arrangements ("**MAPPA**"), and the Government's Prevent and Channel programmes. However, individual YJSs would engage in those arrangements locally and indeed have a duty to do so. The AYM would need to conduct consultation activity with its members to ascertain a collective view of the effectiveness of those arrangements and whether identification, assessment and management of VFIs should be addressed through existing structures or the creation of a new structure. AYM would also need to seek member views to be able to express a collective view on whether a single 'duty holder' should be identified and whether YJSs could or should undertake that role.

26 AYM considers that effective multi-agency working requires more than the existence of formal structures. There needs to be a shared understanding of the nature of the risk, timely access to relevant information, clarity about which agency is responsible for what action, and sufficient capacity within the agencies involved

to undertake that action. AYM considers a clear framework for identification, assessment and management essential in relation to the children identified as a VFI to ensure there are clear lines of accountability and ownership of risk.

27 YJSs may be involved in cases where a child presents a serious risk of harm but does not meet the relevant threshold for prosecution (which may potentially result in custody or some other form of criminal justice restriction or supervision), MAPPA or mental health detention They would have a key role in ensuring concerns relating to risk are discussed in the relevant multi-agency forum and in supporting work to formulate a robust safety management plan. YJSs currently have a statutory responsibility to manage children subject to 'Out of Court' resolutions, where, for example, police officers decide that the offending can be dealt with in a less formal way, and children under supervision in the community under court orders and on release from custody. We take enforcement action where a child does not comply with their set conditions.

28 AYM does not conduct research, nor has any formal practice forums in which examples of good practice are shared. AYM does not have an agreed view on the YJB Case Management Guidance. AYM does not produce policies and guidance for members, although we do have an agreed set of broad statements setting out where we stand on key issues affecting our work with children, their families and the victims of youth crime.

Online Activity and Risk Management

29 AYM members recognise the growing influence of online activity in relation to violence risk. However, youth justice services do not routinely monitor online activity and do not possess powers to restrict internet access. Where a child presents a serious risk of violence, there may be circumstances where internet monitoring or restrictions should be considered. However, any such measures would require clear legal authority, robust thresholds and oversight from agencies with appropriate enforcement powers. Further guidance for practice would be recommended within this area of delivery.

30 AYM recognises that children's online activity is increasingly relevant to the assessment and management of risk. Online activity may provide information about a child's interests, relationships, behaviour and potential exposure to harmful material, but the significance of such activity needs to be assessed within the wider circumstances of the individual child.

31 AYM would support restrictions that promote the safeguarding of children although YJSs do not currently have either the powers or the technical ability to apply such restrictions. Such restrictions would need to be led by agencies with relevant enforcement powers following consideration of potential protective benefits and the practical, legal, safeguarding and proportionality issues involved.

Improving the Current System

32 The AYM has not conducted any analysis to identify any gaps in law, policy, procedure, data or guidance, nor raised any issue with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) directly relevant to the Inquiry's Phase 2 Terms of Reference.

33 However, the AYM considers that the current systems to support youth justice practitioners in identifying, monitoring and disrupting children assessed to be VFI as inadequate. Assessment tools have historically focused upon violence linked to offending behaviour, safeguarding concerns or ideological extremism rather than violence fixation in isolation. Information from other agencies can be limited thus limiting the wider considerations for risk management and disruption activity. Clear guidance on VFI indicators, a specialist assessment tool and a multi-agency assessment would support front line practitioners in identifying and managing risk. Importantly, input from policing and forensic health specialists would be needed.

34 YJSs can utilise local multi-agency contextual safeguarding arrangements as part of efforts to identify, assess, manage and disrupt risks associated with vulnerable children and young people. The Government's Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit sets out a range of proactive and reactive measures that agencies may consider when responding to exploitation-related risks. The development of similar guidance in relation to VFIs could benefit practitioners and partner agencies by

providing a clear and consistent framework for disruption activity, risk management and multi-agency decision-making.

35 YJSs have a statutory role in working with children and young people who have entered the criminal justice system, ordinarily following charge or conviction and in some 'Out of Court' resolutions as outlined at Paragraph 24. Outside of this remit, YJSs do not generally have the legal authority to engage with children unless they participate voluntarily in an approved prevention programme, such as Turnaround, which operates in accordance with eligibility criteria set by the Ministry of Justice. In some areas of the country, YJSs provide additional early intervention and prevention activity; however, the availability and scope of such provision varies between local authorities and is influenced by factors including local need, service priorities and available resources.

36 Whilst YJSs may contribute to multi-agency risk assessments and safeguarding discussions where concerns about weapon carrying or weapon acquisition are identified, they do not have a lead responsibility, dedicated powers or a specific statutory remit in relation to the acquisition of weapons by children.

37 This statement has been produced by the Chair of the AYM, on behalf of its members to support the Inquiry with its investigation.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be 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: _____18.9.2026_____