Witness Name: Lee Owston
Exhibits: LO/01–LO/54
Dated: 6 August 2026

THE SOUTHPORT INQUIRY

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF LEE OWSTON
ON BEHALF OF OFSTED

I, Lee Owston, will say as follows:

Introductory matters

1. I am employed by Ofsted as His Majesty's Inspector and National Director for Education, a role I have held since January 2024. Immediately prior to this role, I was Deputy Director for Early Education and Schools (November 2022–December 2023), and before this Deputy Director for Cross-Remit Education (April 2020–October 2022). Prior to my role as a Deputy Director, I was a Senior His Majesty's Inspector in the North East, Yorkshire and Humber region at Ofsted, as well as a specialist adviser to His Majesty's Chief Inspector on registered early years provision and schools. I was first appointed as His Majesty's Inspector in 2013 in accordance with section 114 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

2. Before joining Ofsted, I worked as a senior leader within schools, as a chief adviser for early years and primary schools within a local authority, and for central government as National Strategies Regional Director for Primary English and School Improvement in the North East.

3. This witness statement is made in response to the Rule 9 Request dated 24 June 2026 sent by the Southport Inquiry ('the Inquiry'). I will start by setting out Ofsted's role in education and children's social care, before moving on to discuss Ofsted's role in inspecting the identification and management of Violence Fixated individuals (VFIs) by schools and colleges in more detail. I should note at this point that Ofsted's role is not to identify or manage these individuals directly. Before going further,

however, I wish to express – personally and on behalf of Ofsted – profound sympathy for the children, families and staff members affected by this terrible attack.

The role of Ofsted

4. Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. Ofsted inspects services providing education and skills. We also regulate and inspect services that care for children and young people (early years providers, and children's social care providers). We also inspect local authority children's services. In partnership with various other public sector inspectorates, we also inspect local areas' provision for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. Ofsted also inspects other provider types when commissioned, for example education provision in young offender institutes.

5. To begin with education inspection, Ofsted inspects early years providers, schools of all kinds, colleges and other further education providers under the renewed Education Inspection Framework ('the renewed EIF'). I will refer predominately to 'schools and colleges' in this statement (or, in the singular, 'a school or college'). A full list of the types of providers inspected under this framework can be found in the first paragraph of the framework [LO/01-**OFST000001**].

6. The renewed EIF was introduced in November 2025, just over a year after the previous overall effectiveness grade was removed for schools in September 2024. The renewed EIF extended the removal of the overall effectiveness grade to all education inspection types and introduced changes to the areas of practice we evaluate. In schools, these are now as follows: safeguarding; inclusion; curriculum and teaching; achievement; attendance and behaviour; personal development and wellbeing; early years (where applicable); post-16 provision (where applicable); and leadership and governance. There are similar evaluation areas for colleges. Generally, these evaluation areas are graded on a five-point scale. The exception is safeguarding, which is either 'met' or 'not met'. Ofsted inspects how schools and colleges identify and manage VFIs through its inspection of safeguarding.

7. When evaluating safeguarding, we consider whether or not safeguarding is effective, with close reference to Department for Education (DfE) statutory guidance on safeguarding (particularly 'Keeping Children Safe in Education – 'KCSiE' and

'Working Together to Safeguard Children' – WTtSC) [LO/02- OFST000002, LO/03- OFST000003]. The Inquiry should note that Ofsted does not set these standards. It inspects against standards set by the DfE. This was also the case under the previous framework, and it is fair to say that the renewed EIF did not introduce radical changes to the way Ofsted inspects safeguarding in schools and colleges. The main difference is that safeguarding is a standalone evaluation area, decoupled from leadership and management, which arguably strengthened the visibility and prominence of safeguarding in our reporting. The introduction of a standalone safeguarding evaluation area did not create specific inspection criteria related to VFIs, although Ofsted did introduce a specific grading standard on leaders fulfilling their responsibilities in relation to child-on-child violence, one way in which it evaluates how schools and colleges identify and manage VFIs. Hence our toolkit for schools notes that inspectors will evaluate the extent to which leaders "ensure that staff are aware of the signs that pupils may be at risk of becoming involved in violence and understand that early, evidence-based intervention can be key to preventing them from going on to commit violence." [LO/02- OFST000002]. Schools or colleges cannot get a 'met' grade for safeguarding without meeting this standard. Ofsted also continues to consider such risks through wider safeguarding and child protection arrangements relating to children who may present a risk to others. I will unpack Ofsted's inspection of safeguarding in schools and colleges in greater detail below.

8. Ofsted's education inspection is not confined to schools and colleges. We also inspect the initial training of teachers and early years professionals under the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Framework [LO/04- OFST000004]; and providers that deliver training and support to early career teachers and more experienced staff, under the Early Career Framework and National Professional Qualification Inspection Framework [LO/05- OFST000005]. Inspectors consider how effectively leaders ensure compliance with all relevant legislation, contractual agreements and requirements relating to safeguarding, including e-safety and the 'Prevent' duty, where this applies.

9. Under a separate 'Area SEND' framework [LO/06- OFST000006], Ofsted works with the Care Quality Commission to jointly inspect provision for children and young people with SEND in a local area. These inspections consider the effectiveness of the partnership between local authorities, integrated care boards (including the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), education providers and

other relevant agencies in identifying, assessing and meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND. Safeguarding forms part of these inspections, including considering how partner agencies work together to identify children and young people who may be at risk and to ensure that appropriate action is taken when necessary. In February 2026, the DfE consulted [LO/07- OFST000007] on reforming the SEND system with the underpinning legislation not expected to come into effect until September 2029. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission will develop a renewed area SEND inspection framework in line with these reforms. However, this will not come into effect until legislative reforms have been implemented.

10. To move on from education, Ofsted also inspects local authority children's services under the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) Framework [LO/08- OFST000008] and social care provision including children's homes, secure children's homes, independent fostering agencies, adoption agencies, residential family centres, supported accommodation and residential provision in schools and colleges under the Social Care Common Inspection Framework (SCCIF) [LO/09- OFST000009 LO/10- OFST000010 LO/11- OFST000011 , LO/12- OFST000012 LO/13- OFST000013 LO/14- OFST000014 LO/15- OFST000015 , LO/16- OFST000016 , LO/17- OFST000017 LO/18- OFST000018]. Ofsted also leads inspections of secure training centres under a service level agreement with the Ministry of Justice and under a joint inspection framework with HM Inspectorate of Prisons and the Care Quality Commission. ILACS focuses on the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection, children in care and care leavers, and evaluates the impact of leaders on social work practice and outcomes for children in an area. SCCIF also focuses on the experience of children and how well children are helped and protected. This includes whether safeguarding arrangements to protect children meet all statutory and other government requirements, promote their welfare and prevent radicalisation and extremism. Although extremism is unlikely to be a routine line of inquiry during inspections of the secure estate and other inspections carried out under the SCCIF, the framework guidance makes it clear that inspectors should be alert to risks of extremism, including any signs of violence fixation. These may include literature, posters, videos or DVDs, or regular visitors to the setting where the purpose of their visit is not clear.

11. Lastly, Ofsted works with other inspectorates (including HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, the Care Quality Commission and HM Inspectorate of Probation) on Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAIs) [LO/19-OFST000019]. JTAIs focus on specific themes relating to the experiences of vulnerable children and evaluate the effectiveness of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and partnership working in an area. Findings from JTAIs contribute to wider understanding of effective safeguarding practice and areas requiring improvement. The themes chosen in the past have been topics of relevance to the Inquiry, including:

    a. joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to the identification of initial need and risk (often referred to as the 'front door') in a local authority area [LO/20- OFST000020]
    b. JTAI of the multi-agency response to children and their families who need help in a local authority area [LO/21- OFST000021]
    c. JTAI of the multi-agency responses to serious youth violence: working together to support and protect children [LO/22- OFST000022]

Inspecting safeguarding in schools and colleges and their role in identifying and managing the risk of VFIs

12. Ofsted is not the regulator of schools and colleges and does not prescribe the standards which they need to meet. It is important to emphasise that Ofsted's expectations of schools and colleges are determined by statutory and non-statutory guidance issued by the DfE and other government departments. When considering safeguarding, the most important of these documents are the DfE's statutory guidance 'KCSiE' and 'WTtSC'. These documents set out the safeguarding duties and expectations that apply to education providers and how they should work with others to keep children safe. Our approach to safeguarding is also informed by other guidance, such as the Home Office's Prevent Duty Guidance [LO/23-OFST000023], but many such documents are either referenced in KCSiE and WTtSC or build on duties and principles that are set out therein. I have exhibited these documents for your reference [LO/02- OFST000002, LO/03- OFST000003]. For the purposes of this Inquiry, the most relevant elements of KCSiE relate to:

    a. identifying children and learners vulnerable to radicalisation and extremism;

b. safeguarding arrangements relating to online safety;
c. the Prevent duty;
d. expectations relating to filtering and monitoring systems;
e. child-on-child abuse;
f. information sharing and referrals to other agencies;
g. schools' powers and responsibilities when pupils are found in possession of knives or bladed articles.

13. These areas collectively form the framework that schools and colleges are currently expected to follow. Although KCSiE does not use or define the term VFI, it sets out the principles of how to identify, manage and respond to risks which may be associated with violence fixation.

14. Ofsted inspectors are expected to take a holistic approach to the evaluation of safeguarding. When inspecting schools and colleges inspectors will:

a. check key safeguarding requirements set out in the guidance I have mentioned above [LO/02- OFST000002, LO/03- OFST000003], such as the provider maintaining an up-to-date and accurate Single Central Record and other processes designed to ensure safer recruitment;
b. review a selection of safeguarding incidents since the previous inspection and whether appropriate action has been taken to deal with safeguarding concerns and to safeguard those affected;
c. consider the effectiveness of referral systems and how the provider works with relevant professional agencies;
d. review any allegations or concerns about adults and the steps taken in response to them;
e. look for evidence of effective safeguarding training and understanding of the setting's safeguarding policy among all staff;
f. consider the wider implications of any qualifying complaints (complaints that meet the threshold for consideration) that may have been made since the last inspection, where they relate to safeguarding (without investigating such complaints or seeking to adjudicate on the specific incident that gave rise to them);
g. if pupils feel unsafe, consider if a school is following their behaviour policy, including the use of suspension and/or exclusion for possessing or carrying knives or bladed articles.

15. The pool of relevant evidence is much wider than documents (such as Single Central Records) that are obviously relevant to child protection. Rather, when determining whether a school or college is safeguarding its pupils effectively inspectors are expected to collect and consider information from a range of sources. This might include evidence from:

    a. children/learner/apprentice and staff surveys and parents' responses to the Parent View survey;
    b. discussions with staff and pupils;
    c. case sampling of pupils who are disadvantaged, have SEND, are or were known to children's social care, or face other barriers to learning or wellbeing;
    d. discussions with governors, senior leaders, those responsible for the management of safeguarding, the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), the SENCo and the designated teacher for looked-after and previously looked-after children;
    e. discussions with the local authority designated officer (LADO);
    f. evaluating any inclusion base, including any resourced provision and/or SEN unit delegated to the school;
    g. evaluating the school's use of alternative provision, part-time timetables, remote education and flexi-schooling.

16. Inspectors will weigh and triangulate all this information to evaluate whether leaders and those responsible for governance and oversight fulfil their specific responsibilities and have established an open culture in which safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and concerns are actively identified, acted upon and managed, so that children and learners are made safer and feel safe.

17. Where disclosures are made directly to inspectors, or where inspectors believe that a school or college has not shared information that they should have with other agencies, the inspector is responsible for making any referrals that may be needed. These processes are set out in Ofsted's own safeguarding concerns guidance [LO/24-**OFST000024**].

18. Inspection activity is not the only route by which concerns about an individual or a school's or college's handling of safeguarding matters may come to Ofsted's attention. These may also come in the form of a complaint to Ofsted or to the DfE.

Complaints are triaged and assessed by the relevant Ofsted region, with oversight from Senior His Majesty's Inspectors. Generally, Ofsted only inspects schools and colleges every 4 years for a few days in a set cycle, but any complaints or concerns that show there are likely systemic issues may result in an inspection outside of these timeframes, either as a focused monitoring inspection or by bringing forward a full inspection. (Complaints about non-association independent schools are the exception, being evaluated by the Department for Education as regulator, not by Ofsted.)

19. Although Ofsted does not use the term VFI in its inspection frameworks or published guidance, inspectors do encounter cases involving children and young people who display behaviours that may indicate fixation with violence, serious violent behaviour, concerning online activity, extremist influences or significant risks to others. Such concerns are generally considered through inspection of safeguarding, including the Prevent duty, behaviour, attendance and child protection arrangements rather than through a distinct VFI category.

20. Ofsted does not currently use the term VFI but would adopt it if it were added to KCSiE and/or became widely used across the education and care sectors. Although neither KCSiE nor WTtSC contain information about VFIs specifically, the approach that Ofsted would expect a school or college to take to the identification and management of VFIs (and other children that may pose a risk to themselves and others) is mostly clear from these documents, although later in this statement I will suggest some changes that could be made. At the time of writing this statement, the DfE is consulting on changes to WTtSC to offer further clarity on extreme violence.

Training and assessment, management of risk, and information sharing

21. Based on current guidance, we would expect that the provider:

    a. provides **preventative education** as expected by the DfE on subjects such as misogyny, radicalisation and online harms (referenced on page 36 of KCSiE) [LO/02- **OFST000002**]. This will form part of the provider's personal development offer and their approach to behaviour. It should reinforce teaching of relationships and sex education [LO/25- **OFST000025**], the fundamental british values [LO/26- **OFST000026**], and teaching of the protected characteristics set out in the Equality Act 2010;

b. **teaches pupils** to stay safe and keep others safe, including online both at school or college and in their day-to-day life (referenced on page 36 of KCSiE) [LO/02- OFST000002]. This teaching could be built into existing lessons across the curriculum, covered within specific online safety lessons or covered using school-wide approaches;
c. **has conducted a risk assessment**, as expected by the Home Office, that is specific to the context of the school/college/setting, that assesses how their learners or staff may be at risk of being radicalised. This is set out in paragraphs 161–164 of the Home Office's 'Prevent duty guidance' (referenced on page 158 of KCSiE) [LO/02- OFST000002];
d. prepares and implements a **safeguarding policy** that is compliant with KCSiE (referenced on pages 34–36 of KCSiE) [LO/02- OFST000002] and that is both well understood by staff and backed up by training (referenced on pages 41–42 of KCSiE);
e. **applies its behaviour policy fairly and correctly** where the behaviour of a child or young person is poor, and follows DfE guidance on suspensions and permanent exclusions if needed [LO/27- OFST000027];
f. **trains staff** on their behaviour policy, including what to do if a student is found in possession of a knife or bladed article, and on their safeguarding policy – for example, on how to handle and report concerns that relate to the Prevent duty, child-on-child abuse, and online safety, amongst other things (referenced on pages 8–9 of KCSiE) [LO/02- OFST000002].
g. **monitors internet use** in the setting (referenced on pages.38– 40 of KCSiE) [LO/02- OFST000002] and meets the DfE's filtering and monitoring standards [LO/28- OFST0000028]. These standards set out that "For monitoring to be effective it must pick up incidents that are of concern urgently, usually through alerts or observations, allowing you to take prompt action and record the outcome." This is likely to be critical in the case of children and young people who are just beginning to access harmful material online or are planning an attack.
h. has established **purposeful and appropriate links with outside agencies** to ensure that they meet their statutory duties. This includes how they engage productively with multi-agency partners to get pupils the support they need (referenced on page 37 of KCSiE) [LO/02- OFST0000002];
i. where there are **concerns** about a child or young adult, follows their setting's safeguarding policy, supporting any subsequent involvement from early help teams, children's social services, Child and Adult Mental Health Services, or the police (referenced on page 37 of KCSiE) [LO/02- OFST0000002];

22. Ofsted's inspection evidence suggests that the vast majority of schools and colleges fulfil this role effectively and therefore identify and manage VFIs as expected. Between 1 September 2023 and 31 May 2026, we found that 39 (0.5%) state-funded schools and 3 (0.3%) further education providers had not fulfilled their safeguarding requirements. Ofsted is commissioned by the DfE to inspect some independent schools, others are inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate. Between 1 September 2023 and 30 April 2026, 32 (3%) independent schools inspected by Ofsted had not fulfilled their safeguarding requirements. This is a higher rate of schools compared to state-funded schools. Ofsted presents its reports to the DfE, which then takes any relevant action. Ofsted has noted the higher rate, and analysis shows that safeguarding failures tend to be due to a range of factors. In the most serious cases this includes the improper use of reasonable force and seclusion; failures to make referrals to the local authority, including where there are concerns about adults working with children; and failures to undertake statutory pre-recruitment checks on staff.

23. For the reasons set out previously, Ofsted does not collect or analyse inspection data using a category described as VFIs, and therefore cannot provide quantitative information about the prevalence of VFIs or trends over time. Inspection evidence may include references to serious safeguarding concerns, Prevent referrals, serious violence, exclusions, child-on-child abuse or online harms, but these are not recorded through a distinct VFI classification. We can however provide insights about safeguarding practice.

24. In the very small number of state-funded schools (39) that failed to meet safeguarding requirements at the time of their inspection, we found that this was due, in order of prevalence, to:

    a. poor oversight of safeguarding from those with responsibility for governance, including a lack of understanding on how to check on the effectiveness of safeguarding policies and processes;
    b. lack of training for and communication with staff; insufficient training to help staff understand the local contextual safeguarding risks that impacted on pupils and to ensure that staff knew how to report concerns and who to report them to;

c. weaknesses in information sharing, particularly with relevant external agencies; including significant weaknesses in record-keeping and leaders not securing timely help and expertise to follow up on reported safeguarding concerns;
d. pre-employment checks on adults being suitable to work with children not meeting statutory requirements;
e. weaknesses in how the school followed up when pupils were absent from school, including the most vulnerable pupils, and in its oversight of part-time timetables;
f. the school not dealing with dangerous or poor behaviour effectively.

25. Should the Inquiry wish to refer to how Ofsted inspects schools and colleges, it may be helpful to look at our inspection toolkits, which contain the standards against which inspectors make their evaluations, and our inspector operating guides, which set out how inspectors conduct inspections and evidence gathering activities [LO/29- **OFST0000029** LO/30- **OFST0000030** LO/31- **OFST0000031** LO/32- **OFST0000032** LO/33- **OFST0000033** LO/34- **OFST0000034**

26. I am not aware of any centrally mandated process or framework other than WTtSC and KCSIE that schools must use when risk-assessing concerns posed by an individual pupil or learner (e.g. when considering whether to make a referral to local authority children's social care or to the police). However, the DfE has published non-statutory guidance on 'Managing risk of radicalisation in your education setting' [LO/35- **OFST0000035** and on 'Understanding and identifying radicalisation risk in your education setting' [LO/36- **OFST0000036** These are useful documents and the addition of similar material to KCSiE [LO/02- **OFST0000002** (e.g. to Annex B) would give it more prominence.

27. On the subject of whether there should be a standard, national framework for assessment of the risk that a child or young person may pose to themselves and others, I would defer to experts in the policing context, where risk assessment and decision-making frameworks have been adopted nationally. I am referring to the 'THRIVE' risk-assessment matrix which is used to triage calls to the police and the National Decision-Making Model adopted across the profession. The National Prevent referral form [LO/37- **OFST0000037** gathers much of the information that would be needed to adequately assess risk. If schools and colleges were obliged (under law or guidance) to follow any such process or framework, I expect that this would become part of Ofsted's inspection of safeguarding in schools and colleges.

Teacher training

28. Ofsted does not determine the content of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. As with the inspection of schools and colleges, expectations of ITE providers are based on statutory and non-statutory guidance and mandatory requirements issued by the DfE.

29. During our inspections of ITE providers, inspectors evaluate the ITE curriculum and what trainees are taught about safeguarding and the Prevent duty, as well as providers' compliance with the Prevent duty. As I mentioned earlier, the relevant statutory documents do not contain specific references to VFIs. The ITE curriculum is specified by the DfE for each of the phases of ITE [LO/38- **OFST0000038** LO/39- **OFST0000039** LO/40- **OFST0000040** LO/41- **OFST0000041** LO/42- **OFST0000042**

30. The Inquiry has referred me to an article from *Schools Week* that reported on discussions taking place between Ofsted and teacher trainers regarding Prevent. The Inquiry has stated that these discussions took place in November 2025. According to the publication date of the article, however, the discussions in fact took place in June 2015 [LO/43- **OFST0000043**]. I cannot identify any such discussions taking place in November 2025. It seems, given the publication date of the article in 2015, that the discussions are more likely to have taken place in June 2015 [LO/43- **OFST0000043**]. The named individual has left Ofsted employment, and their emails were deleted according to Ofsted's archiving processes in December 2022. Unfortunately, I'm not able to further explain the discussions that are said to have taken place in 2015, beyond observing that it is likely they were prompted by the introduction of the duty, which took place in 2015.

31. It is not the role of Ofsted to set out whether teacher training should incorporate additional information regarding Prevent or the management of VFIs. We inspect and ensure that the relevant statutory and non-statutory guidance is being followed by the ITE provider within their curriculum, and that trainees are suitably knowledgeable about this. Within the ITE inspection framework, as part of grading 'achievement', to reach expected standard providers must ensure "Trainees are well prepared for the realities of teaching their subject(s) and phase and are largely ready for their next stage of employment. They understand their statutory safeguarding duties as set out

in 'Keeping children safe in education', 'Working together to safeguard children' and the 'Prevent' duty, as they apply to their phase."

Multi-agency working and information sharing with local authority children's services

32. In most cases, information sharing is clear and effective. However, in some of the most critical cases, ineffective information sharing is the main reason that children come to harm. For example, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's Annual Report, 2024 to 2025, has found, in serious child safeguarding practice reviews where children have experienced significant harm or have been killed, "Key information being shared too late or not at all..." (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Annual Report, 2024 to 2025, page 16, paragraph 2.31) [LO/44-**OFST0000044**]. This finding is also borne out in the National Review into the Murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson (2022), where appropriate information sharing and seeking is identified as a systems and process issue. The National Panel found that there was "a lack of timely and appropriate information sharing, limited information seeking; and evidence not being pieced together in the round..." (Child Protection in England National Review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo Hughes and Star Hobson, page 92, paragraphs 12.31–12.33) [LO/45-**OFST0000045**]

33. Learning from internal and external safeguarding practice reviews highlights the importance of information sharing. This includes not only ensuring that information is shared, but that the significance of the information is understood by the individual or agency receiving the information. It also includes ensuring that this understanding is confirmed with the person who has shared the information and that there is a shared agreement about what action is to be taken and who will be responsible for this action.

34. The DfE has consulted on the draft statutory guidance on information sharing, and Ofsted has contributed to this consultation. Our response is exhibited as LO/46-**OFST0000046**.

35. I would like to draw the Inquiry's attention to evidence from our JTAIs (that we also included as part of our consultation response) [LO/46- **OFST0000046**] that highlights the main themes and challenges that contribute to ineffective information sharing:

    a. Professionals' understanding of information, its impact and its relevance to promoting children's welfare and safeguarding, including a cumulative understanding of risk and need.
    b. Insufficient focus on children, including recognising children as victims in their own right.
    c. The separation between adult services systems and children's services systems can make it difficult to identify children who are known to, or in contact with, adults who may pose a risk to them.
    d. The quality of information sharing, specifically the quality of referrals to children's social care.
    e. Sharing information on outcomes from referrals and other decisions regarding a child.
    f. Involving or gathering information from key agencies.
    g. Different thresholds for sharing information, including:
        i. Organisational capacity affecting the ability of agencies to share information
        ii. Information-sharing systems that are not working effectively
        iii. cultural issues relating to how information sharing is conceptualised
        iv. strategic management, including the need for effective protocols and systems, and building staff confidence.

36. I would also like to inform the Inquiry that Ofsted are working to help improve information sharing between agencies. Ofsted are currently:

    a. working with the DfE to ensure there is greater clarity about information sharing and our role working with Local Authority Designated Officers (LADOs);
    b. working to launch a pilot with LADOs in the southwest region, to learn more about improving information sharing and engagement with LADOs and Allegation Management Meetings;
    c. making progress with the development of an information-sharing agreement with NSPCC to improve information sharing between Ofsted and the police;
    d. working closely with – and on behalf of, in some instances – the joint inspectorates to inform the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel about our

JTAI findings (our findings support the panel's aims to uncover patterns, highlight good practice, and pinpoint where local and national improvements are needed in safeguarding);

e. working closely with the DfE on the development of the Child Protection Authority, which aims to address persistent issues within the child protection system;
f. meeting regularly with the DfE to discuss developments to WTtSC, including the addition on managing extreme violence.

37. I also welcome the new Information Sharing Duty, introduced by the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, which will enable better and more timely sharing of information, which will hopefully help with some of the above. Relevant proposed statutory guidance has been put out for consultation by the DfE at the time of writing this statement. I believe that this guidance could be strengthened by providing more clarity on information sharing with regulators, an aspect that is not covered by the new Information Sharing Duty, but also by:

a. Addressing how well professionals understand information, its impact and its relevance to promoting children's welfare and safeguarding, including a cumulative understanding of risk and need, and recognising children as victims in their own right. This is critical, and it would be helpful to reference and reinforce it, for example in relation to the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.
b. Making clear that the quality of information shared is critical to getting children the right support at the right time and should emphasise the importance of sharing outcomes from referrals and decision-making by children's social care.
c. Bringing more attention to the cultural barriers to information sharing and how these can be overcome.
d. Highlighting the need for effective information sharing in relation to LADOs' functions, particularly where concerns span more than one local authority area.
e. Giving more attention to agencies understanding the importance of early years settings and ensuring their inclusion in relation to information sharing.

38. To build on the work on the new Information Sharing Duty, the Inquiry may be considering whether a standard template should be developed to assess risk

consistently. I believe that a single, shared multi-agency risk-assessment tool that is clear, accessible and suitable across public sector services could be introduced and would be beneficial by supporting timely and effective information sharing across public sector agencies. The advantages of such a risk-assessment tool would include:

a. public sector services working with children and vulnerable adults would have a common framework for analysing and assessing risks;
b. the tool could support shared understanding and identification and assessment of risk.

39. The potential challenges with the implementation of a single, shared multi-agency risk-assessment tool include the following:

a. Information governance across public sector agencies can be a barrier to timely and effective information sharing. For example, a GP may have some information about a child's mental health including VFI, however, the GP's Integrated Care Board's information governance processes may restrict what can be shared with relevant agencies working in education or children's social care. I hope that the new Information Sharing Duty will help remove this barrier.
b. Individual agencies' behavioural biases, which can impede effective information sharing – these include the tendency of practitioners to fail to act on information due to the assumption that another person or organisation is responsible. Other forms of bias include the tendency to interpret information based on the source of the information rather than the substance of information. A related challenge includes individual and organisational risk aversion where practitioners are reluctant to share information due to anxieties about GDPR, although the new Information Sharing Duty should help to overcome this.
c. If such a risk-assessment tool were to be implemented, it would need to be supported by statutory multi-agency guidance outlining how the tool should be used.
d. The risk-assessment tool would also need to be supported by multi-agency and multi-disciplinary training for those practitioners with responsibility for using the tool. Joint training would support a common understanding and a shared approach. In addition, multi-disciplinary training would enable practitioners from health, the local authority, the police, and education to work together on solutions to emerging practice dilemmas and problems.

40. There is also the risk that a standardised assessment process could be applied too mechanistically, reducing professional curiosity and judgement if practitioners focus primarily on completing the assessment rather than considering the wider context and available information. Any future tool would therefore need to support, rather than replace, professional decision-making.

41. The first phase of the Inquiry noted a "disturbing lack of clarity as to who, if anyone, was the lead agency" in the case of AR. I expect that the Inquiry will consider (a) what the role of schools should be in managing and owning risk, and (b) whether to recommend that a 'lead agency' should coordinate support from different agencies for children like AR in future.

42. On the first of these questions, it is commonly said that the role of schools in society has expanded in recent years. As true as this is, I believe that the core expectation is still that schools will provide their pupils with the best education they can, and ensure that they are safe, well-supported and ready to learn *during school hours and on the school site*. This will always involve:

    a. management of pupils' behaviour where it is a potential danger to others on a school site;
    b. referrals to other agencies that lead on law enforcement, mental health or child protection and that have a round-the-clock responsibility for the welfare of vulnerable children;
    c. referrals to other professionals whose expertise does not exist within the school (which may be particularly common in small schools).

43. Where a school is meeting that core expectation, I do not believe that it can be accused of failing its pupils, failing to own risks, or 'simply referring a problem on' to other agencies.

44. On to the question of whether there should be a statutory lead agency for managing VFIs, my view is that mainstream schools or colleges would not be best placed to discharge this role. This view is based on Ofsted's insights and inspection evidence relating to safeguarding practice, school leadership, multi-agency working and alternative provision. Some schools, particularly Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and other alternative provision (AP) schools, may have the necessary expertise to fulfil

this role and may even be performing something like it already (albeit without a formal 'statutory' convening role). However, many will have neither the expertise nor the capacity and by the time that many children are involved with children's social services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Youth Offending services, and the police, a significant number will have ceased to attend a mainstream school or (as in AR's case) any school at all. It would be a significant extension of the role of a school to make them responsible for the wellbeing of children who have not attended regularly for several years and accountable for seeking input from other agencies whom they cannot compel to engage to a reasonable timescale. The widespread delays to needs assessment by CAMHS and local authority educational psychologist services are well known and something we frequently observe in our area SEND inspections – I note that according to the timeline set out in Volume 1 of the Inquiry, when AR was referred by his GP for ASD and ADHD assessment, the first appointment available was in nearly a year (46 weeks), and the assessment and diagnosis was not completed for well over a year (77 weeks). More widely, it should be remembered that VFIs (and other individuals who may be a risk to others and who need support from several different agencies) may not be of school age, and handing the convening role to schools could lead to a 'cliff edge' between child and adult support services if a school was to hand over responsibility to another agency. In my view, in terms of both expertise and experience of being a convening agency for child protection, the role of 'lead agency' sits more coherently with local authority social care services, not least because they have experience of working with families in cases like AR's, where parents seek to frustrate the services that are trying to help, or where family dynamics are complicated or dysfunctional. However, the current legal position on significant issues such as parental consent would need to be clarified and WTtSC [LO/03-**OFST0000003**] – as well as related statutory guidance – revised, including how this change impacts on the expectations of other agencies to work under social care's convening powers.

Areas where there are gaps and where the Inquiry may make recommendations for improvement

45. Turning to the future, I know the Inquiry will be considering what changes could be made to minimise the chance that an atrocity like the Southport attack could occur in future.

46. Online safety is likely to be one area where the Inquiry will consider making recommendations to strengthen practice, both for schools and colleges to adopt (and that Ofsted already inspects and could, dependent on scale and funding, inspect the expansion of) as well as broader recommendations for government and parents, regulation of which is likely to fall in the remit of the Office of Communications (Ofcom). We know through inspection activity that schools and colleges identify concerns relating to online misogyny, extremist material, violent content, conspiracy theories and harmful online influencers. Leaders report that many of these concerns arise outside school networks and outside school hours, limiting the extent to which schools can monitor and address behaviour directly. Schools' and colleges' filtering and monitoring systems mean that access to this material during the day is unlikely, where they are set up correctly. There are systems in place designed to prevent access, including measures intended to restrict the use of Virtual Private Networks and other methods of circumventing filtering arrangements. There also should be procedures in place for monitoring internet use and reporting concerning behaviour where it arises [LO/28-**OFST0000028**]. The government's moves to prohibit the use of mobile phones throughout the school day from September 2026 [LO/47-**OFST0000047**] will reduce the likelihood of children accessing material at school during the school day on their personal device. Schools and colleges often only become aware of concerns about internet use outside the school or college environment after changes in behaviour, peer reports, safeguarding disclosures or parental concerns emerge. Effective parental engagement and timely information sharing remain important safeguards where concerns exist regarding violent fixation or harmful online behaviour.

47. Within our area of expertise, I suggest the following changes could be made to support schools and colleges.

48. Throughout this witness statement I refer extensively to KCSiE. In general, this guidance document is useful and is well understood by schools and colleges. Given the complexity of modern safeguarding and child protection, it will never be a 'one-stop shop', but it should remain the main source of information for education settings on these issues, the portal through which other sources of information on specific topics can be accessed, and the standard against which Ofsted evaluates schools and colleges.

49. In light of the findings of the Inquiry to date, it seems to me that KCSiE could be stronger on how to identify children and young people who may be a risk to others at an early stage. The document does contain information on child-on-child abuse, and it is good that this information is located in Part 1 (the element of the guidance that should be read by all staff in schools and colleges) [LO/02- **OFST0000002**]. However, the information given is focused on challenging abusive behaviour that has already occurred, not on spotting signs that a child may come to pose a serious threat to others.

50. The question of how Prevent (and terrorism legislation generally) should accommodate the threat of those with no ideological motivation has been a subject of debate for several years. I would defer to other government departments and experts such as Jonathan Hall KC or Lord Anderson of Ipswich KBE KC on these overarching questions. I am however well-placed to comment on the communication of government policy to schools and other frontline services through statutory guidance.

51. My understanding of the government's policy position is that:

    a. The Prevent duty focuses on the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.
    b. Ideological motivation is a necessary element of the legal definition of terrorism set out in s.1 of The Terrorism Act 2000.
    c. Because Prevent is an early intervention programme, no clear ideological motivation needs to be present for a professional to make a referral, provided there is good reason to think that the person concerned may be susceptible to radicalisation.
    d. However, where it is clear that a person is not susceptible to radicalisation, they are not eligible for Prevent support and no Prevent referral should be made – even if they appear to be capable of committing terrorist-style offences (such as a mass casualty attack) for non-ideological reasons (e.g. to revenge perceived slights or grievances, or simply to gain notoriety).

52. The Home Office Prevent duty guidance [LO/23- **OFST0000023**] does make this point (in paragraphs 26, 27 and 44), but more direct drafting could be lifted from the government's statement of the 'Key Principles of Prevent' (April 2026):

3. While ideology is an important consideration, a clear identifiable ideology is not mandatory to make or adopt a Prevent referral. As the Independent Prevent Commissioner noted, 'adherence to an extreme ideology is in law neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for entry into Prevent or Channel'. As an early intervention programme, Prevent must consider susceptibility to terrorist ideology or involvement, rather than limiting Prevent to cases where a terrorist ideology has already taken hold. For some people, it might take spending time and building trust with a professional before an ideology becomes clear. It is important to consider that emerging movements could evolve to meet the definition of terrorism, and to remain alert to new potential threats.

53. The exact relationship between these two documents may be unclear to some users of them, and the Home Office may also wish to consider whether the 'key principles' of Prevent should be covered within the main Prevent duty guidance rather than in a satellite document.

54. I would moreover like to see the Prevent duty guidance contain a clear statement of the referral pathway and support services for people who may have a fascination with violence but who are not considered at risk of being drawn into terrorism and therefore are not suitable for Prevent. The clearest statement on this point appears not in the Prevent duty guidance or in the 'key principles' but in an accompanying Q&A document, which appears to have been privately circulated by the Home Office. It can be found on the website of the Cheshire & Merseyside Training Hub but not on gov.uk. [LO/23-**OFST0000023**]. I have exhibited this document because it goes further than other government guidance I have seen on this issue, but its status as official Home Office-sanctioned guidance is not clear to me [LO/48-**OFST0000048**].

55. Revision of these documents would support the appropriate referral of VFIs, which already make up approximately 5% of Prevent referrals, according to the most recent statistics (April 2024 to March 2025: 'Five per cent (469) of referrals were due to concerns regarding 'Fascination with extreme violence or mass casualty attacks (where no other ideology)' [LO/49-**OFST0000049**].) Relatedly, more information could be added to Annex B of KCSiE so that schools and colleges are aware of VFIs and how this fixation could lead to serious incidents. Some material can be extracted from the first phase of the Southport Inquiry and the contents of existing non-statutory guidance on Prevent [LO/23-**OFST0000023**]. However, more research would add to our knowledge of how fixation on violence can be identified and what

part VPN-use, anonymity, online disinhibition and other factors play when a child or young person is becoming fixated on violence. This would surely improve the quality of the guidance that can be given in KCSiE [LO/02- **OFST0000002**] and the training for staff in schools and colleges so that they can spot early signs and assess risk appropriately.

56. I also believe that further guidance may be helpful for schools and colleges on how to assess risk and manage referrals where children have (or are believed to have) SEND and/or a mental health condition. As outlined in phase one of the report, though AR was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and posed an increased risk of harm to others as a result of his own individual form of this condition, multiple agencies tended to use this diagnosis to explain away difficult or violent behaviour or to dismiss concerns about the danger he posed to others. It is important to emphasise that there is no general association between autism and violent behaviour. However, some children and young people may have individual vulnerabilities or characteristics that should be considered as part of a broader professional assessment of risk. Without such guidance there is clearly a risk that concerns about a child's or young person's mental health or any SEND they may have could prevent schools (or other agencies) from sharing information with others when there is an urgent need to do so. A fair, academically robust statement of the research in this area and its implications for the Prevent programme, child protection and risk assessment would, in my view, be helpful to schools and colleges, local agencies and public bodies such as Ofsted.

57. One further observation arising from Ofsted's inspection evidence is the importance of meaningful engagement with education. Schools and colleges are often the public service with the most frequent and sustained contact with children and young people and their families, where children attend. As a result, they can play an important role in identifying emerging concerns, changes in behaviour, attendance issues, safeguarding risks and wellbeing needs. Conversely, where children and young people become persistently or severely absent from education or disengage from services altogether, opportunities for professionals to identify escalating concerns and coordinate support are reduced. In that respect, education attendance and engagement can be important protective factors within the wider safeguarding system.

58. According to the timeline set out in Volume 1 of the Inquiry, AR's attendance at Presfield High School was 0.7% over the two years he attended. Unfortunately, severe absence from education is a known and rising issue since the pandemic [LO/50- **OFST0000050**] and schools and colleges can only assist in multi-agency working where children attend. For the most vulnerable pupils, regular attendance is an important protective factor and the best opportunity for needs to be identified and support provided. Statistics published by the DfE show associations between regular absence from school and crime (the proportion of children that had been cautioned or sentenced for any offence that had ever been persistently absent was 81% and for serious violence offence was 85%) [LO/51- **OFST0000051**]. Presfield High School could not mandate AR's attendance given AR was above compulsory school age, despite the law requiring young people to continue in education or training until their 18th birthday. The inquiry may want to consider if further powers are required in respect of attendance for 16- to 18-year-olds.

59. On the topic of absence and its links to crime, I would like to draw the Inquiry's attention to Ofsted's report 'Safeguarding children and young people in education from knife crime: Lessons from London' [LO/52- **OFST0000052**]. Although completed in 2019, many of the issues highlighted in this report persist and may be of interest to the inquiry. In addition to this, I would like to draw the Inquiry's attention to our JTAI report 'Multi-agency responses to serious youth violence: working together to support and protect children'. This gives further and more recent recommendations. The extent and impact of serious youth violence are more far-reaching than many adults realise. Too many children, including some as young as 11, are carrying knives because they feel unsafe and see this as a form of protection. Serious youth violence has a wide impact across communities. In some localities in the areas inspected, carrying a knife is the norm for some children. A failure to consistently identify serious youth violence as a safeguarding issue is leaving too many children at serious risk of harm. Lack of comprehensive guidance from the government on how partners should address harm outside the family, including serious youth violence, is exacerbating this, as is a lack of focus by Local Safeguarding Partnerships (LSPs).

60. The government and local agencies must prioritise the needs of children who are disproportionately at risk of harm from serious youth violence. This includes children with SEND, in particular those who are neurodivergent. The government should equip local agencies to ensure these children have access to timely assessment and

appropriate support. Some children from specific ethnic groups are disproportionately represented among those harmed by serious youth violence. Partnerships need to target interventions to support those most in need, and to better understand and address the underlying causes of serious youth violence. We found examples of local partnerships doing effective work to reduce harm to children from serious youth violence, but this is not happening in all areas. Despite the expectation set out by the Home Office in the Serious Violence Duty, not all local partnerships are sufficiently focused on serious youth violence. This leaves some children at risk of harm. Local partnerships need to do more to evaluate approaches to addressing serious youth violence, to use available research about what works and to share learning across areas to drive improvement in practice. Children's access to support to address serious youth violence varies too much between local areas. Some areas have violence reduction units (VRUs) and some VRUs were making a positive difference for children. But not all areas have this additional resource.

61. There are of course other proposed policy changes that would impact on the risk only marginally, indirectly, or to a small extent, but which are important in their own right. An example might be the recommendation made by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (in their report on residential special schools) that the government should "amend the Independent School Standards to include the requirements that there is an effective system of governance, based on three principles of openness to external scrutiny, transparency and honesty within the governance arrangements, and the ability of governors to have difficult conversations both internally and with those providing external scrutiny" [LO/53-**OFST0000053**]. DfE have not, to date, actioned this recommendation. It strikes me as an important one, though the impact on the task of identifying and managing VFIs is likely to be indirect.

62. In summary, my view is that schools and colleges have an important role in identifying concerns, delivering preventative education, sharing information and contributing to safeguarding assessments. They should be engaged in LSPs. However, the effective management of individuals who may present a significant risk to others requires a genuinely multi-agency response. Inspection evidence suggests that the key enablers of effective practice are early identification, professional curiosity, timely information sharing, clear ownership of risk and coordinated intervention between agencies. These themes are consistent with wider safeguarding learning and, in my view, are likely to be central to reducing the risk of similar

incidents in the future. The Inquiry should look at the total assurance system, including national and local assurance mechanisms.

63. Finally, I would like to draw the Inquiry's attention to the fact that Ofsted only inspects schools and colleges for a few days every 4 years, and therefore any reassurance given on inspection would be point-in-time and given every few years. If the Inquiry wanted more reassurance on safeguarding from Ofsted, it could recommend that the government takes forward its manifesto commitment to commission and fund Ofsted to complete annual safeguarding inspections.

64. It goes without saying that Ofsted will consider very carefully any recommendations made by the Inquiry.

Other matters to draw to the Inquiry's attention

65. Much of this witness statement has been concerned with Ofsted's inspection of registered education providers and known entities such as local authorities and local area partnerships. Before concluding, I should mention that Ofsted has the power to inspect suspected unregistered schools under section 97 of the Education and Skills Act 2008. As part of this work, we frequently visit settings that are not registered with government or regulated, but which provide alternative provision on a part-time basis, and other educational settings that Ofsted suspects might meet the legal definition of an independent school but have failed to register.

66. After being excluded, AR began to attend (and then stopped attending) a PRU, a form of alternative provision that is subject to regulation and regular inspection by Ofsted. He could equally have been referred by his school, his PRU or by the local authority to unregistered alternative provision (AP) – that is, a provider of alternative provision for children with poor behaviour that is entirely unregistered and is not inspected or regulated by any independent government agency. While the law currently requires that a setting must be registered if it provides full-time education to a child with an education, health and care plan (or who is looked after by a local authority), AR could in theory have spent Monday to Wednesday in one such setting, and Thursday and Friday in another, thereby spending little or no time in a registered school or PRU. When you consider the expertise that would be needed to educate a child like AR effectively, this is a very sobering thought. Ofsted has long had serious

concerns about the use of unregistered alternative provision to provide education to vulnerable children who have exhibited poor behaviour.

67. In our view, all alternative provision (part-time or full-time) should be registered, regulated and subject to regular inspection. It cannot be right that some of the most vulnerable children and young people in the country – including those with complex needs – end up in the parts of the education system where there is least oversight. These children deserve to be in properly regulated provision. This is why we believe the best solution is a system of national and robust regulation.

68. The DfE has published voluntary national standards for unregistered AP (referred to as non-school AP by DfE) [LO/54- **OFST0000054**]. Although we support much of what is set out in the standards, we believe that this does not go far enough to ensure there is adequate oversight of this type of provision. We can only ensure that the provision is safe and providing a good quality of education through regulation and inspection activity.

Statement of Truth

69. 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: 6 August 2026