

An aerial photograph of Blackpool, UK, showing a dense urban area with residential streets and buildings. The Blackpool Tower is prominent in the lower-left quadrant. The background shows green fields and a coastline. The text is overlaid in white on an orange background.

**Call for an Inquiry into Child
Sexual Exploitation and County
Lines Gangs in Blackpool**

Councillor Paul Galley

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2025

For the attention of:
The Home Secretary: The Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP

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1) Executive Summary

At a meeting of the Full Council in Blackpool on 29 January 2025, a motion (¹) was presented urging the government to establish a National Inquiry into Grooming Gangs, and to include Blackpool in that inquiry. This was rejected by the Labour-led council and a much watered down motion approved².

The motion called for the inquiry to focus on three critical areas:

1. A comprehensive review of grooming gang activity in Blackpool and other coastal areas across the UK.
2. An assessment of the lasting impact on victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation (CSE).
3. An examination of the role of County Lines gangs in the exploitation of children and young people.

In light of this rejection, this document is being presented to make the case for an urgent and independent inquiry into the child sexual exploitation crisis in Blackpool.

1 <https://democracy.blackpool.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=43390>

2 <https://democracy.blackpool.gov.uk/documents/b23984/Amendment+to+Notice+of+Motion+-+Item+11b+29th-Jan-2025+18.00+Council.pdf?T=9>

2) The Urgent Need for an Inquiry

The total number of recorded sex offences against children in Blackpool between January 2021 and December 2024 is 1,746³. Blackpool, like many coastal areas, faces a unique and escalating crisis regarding child sexual exploitation (CSE). The town experiences disturbingly high rates of CSE, a situation compounded by severe deprivation, a large population of looked-after children, and a transient demographic driven by its tourism economy. Blackpool's high levels of poverty, coupled with its reliance on seasonal and temporary work, create a perfect storm in which vulnerable children and young people are particularly susceptible to exploitation.

The disappearances of Charlene Downes (2003) and Paige Chivers (2007), both in Blackpool, paint a deeply troubling picture—not just about the specific cases, but about the town's wider social context. These incidents, while tragic in their own right, highlight broader systemic issues that have plagued Blackpool for years.

The town's abundant supply of low-cost accommodation, amusement arcades, and other unmonitored spaces further exacerbates this issue. These areas, often under minimal surveillance, provide ideal environments for predators to target vulnerable individuals. The high levels of substance abuse, coupled with the presence of criminal gangs, make Blackpool particularly susceptible to child exploitation networks.

Given these vulnerabilities, it is clear that Blackpool requires a comprehensive, independent inquiry to fully understand the scope of the problem and to implement effective solutions. It is not only Blackpool's responsibility to address these issues—it is imperative that the government and all relevant agencies take action to safeguard children in coastal areas, where the unique economic and social challenges make them more vulnerable to exploitation.

This inquiry must be both thorough and impartial, addressing the complex factors that contribute to the continued exploitation of vulnerable children in Blackpool and other coastal towns across the UK. Only by acknowledging the full extent of the issue can we hope to bring about real, lasting change and protect future generations from harm.

3 Confirmed in a Freedom of Information Request from Lancashire Constabulary to Cllr Paul Galley in June 2025

3) The Importance of an External Review

Since 1999, Blackpool has produced numerous reports on child sexual exploitation (CSE), yet, despite these efforts, there has been no coordinated strategy to connect these findings or address the town's long-standing history of abuse. Aside from occasional interventions from Ofsted, there has been little to no systematic follow-up or progress on tackling this issue comprehensively.

There are serious concerns regarding accountability, particularly since a councillor who oversaw children's services during the early 2000s remained Deputy Leader of the Council until May of this year. This raises questions about the effectiveness of leadership in confronting the issue of CSE and whether sound and proper accountability has been ensured.

Moreover, there are ongoing suspicions that discussions concerning CSE may be suppressed for fear of damaging Blackpool's tourism industry, or that a report on such matters could be hijacked by extremist groups, further complicating this serious issue. This has contributed to a culture of silence, where open dialogue and meaningful action are hindered by both political reluctance and economic pressures.

An independent, external review is therefore essential. It would provide the authority to summon participants and ensure full transparency, removing any potential conflicts of interest or undue political influence. Such a review would also bring a coordinated, objective approach to addressing CSE, as well as related issues such as County Lines gangs, which impact not only Blackpool but many other coastal towns facing similar challenges. By establishing an independent inquiry, we would have the chance to break the cycle of neglect and ensure that the protection of vulnerable children is prioritised over economic or political concerns.

4) Blackpool's Challenges and the Need for Action

Blackpool is the most deprived authorities in the England a decline from 24th most deprived in 2004⁴. For years, it has ranked at or near the top of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), reflecting a depth of economic and social challenges that have created an environment where vulnerability, instability, and safeguarding concerns are widespread.

The town's problems are complex and deeply entrenched:

- **In 2019 almost 7,800 (30.7%) children in Blackpool were estimated to be living in income deprived families, compared to 17.1% nationally⁵**
- **A disproportionately high number of children in care, with nearly one in 52 children in care.⁶**
- **A transient population and unstable housing market, including an over concentration of HMOs in a private rented sector that at 28.2% is higher than the national average of 19% with the town having 11,000 housing benefits claimants.⁷**
- **Alcohol and drug driven health challenges. 32 out of 1000 people in Blackpool suffer from a drinking problem, compared to 12 per 1000 in the rest of the country⁸ Blackpool also has the highest rate of drug related deaths in England, with a rate of 22.1 per 100,000 which is four times higher than the England average of 5.0⁹**
- **Gaps in education and opportunity, including high exclusion rates and early disengagement from school, leave many young people at risk of being targeted by gangs or predatory adults. Blackpool has a rate of 6.6 exclusions for every 100 pupils – well above the average of 4.3 across England.¹⁰**

These conditions have placed enormous and persistent strain on public services—particularly children's social care—at a time when those services have been undermined by years of budget cuts, recruitment difficulties, and leadership instability. While such challenges do not excuse safeguarding failures, they provide essential context: Blackpool is not simply a town where individuals failed—it is a town where systemic vulnerabilities have long gone unaddressed.

This report serves as a call to action—not just for Blackpool, but for all coastal towns facing the hidden crisis of child sexual exploitation (CSE). Seaside communities often share these same vulnerabilities, making them fertile ground for abuse to occur undetected and unchallenged.

4 <https://www.blackpooljsna.org.uk/Developing-Well/Children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing/Child-Poverty.aspx>
5 <https://www.blackpooljsna.org.uk/Developing-Well/Children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing/Child-Poverty.aspx>
6 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/apr/17/one-in-52-blackpool-children-in-care-as-poverty-soars-in-north-of-england>

7 https://www.blackpool.gov.uk/Residents/Health-and-social-care/Social-care-for-adults/Documents/Market-position-statement-Supported-housing.aspx?download=DownloadasPDFlink_pdf

8 <https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/lancashire-insight/health-and-care/health/lifestyle/alcohol/>

9 <https://democracy.blackpool.gov.uk/documents/s70178/PUBLIC%20Drug%20Related%20Deaths%20Scrutiny.pdf>

10 <https://www.blackpoolgazette.co.uk/news/people/blackpool-school-exclusion-rates-these-are-the-schools-where-pupils-are-excluded-most-often-last-year-3847721>

Blackpool's long and troubling history of CSE, compounded by a lack of coordinated intervention and accountability, demands urgent and decisive action. An independent inquiry is essential—not only to ensure transparency and hold those responsible to account, but to deliver meaningful change and lasting protection for children.

By acting now, we have an opportunity to safeguard future generations in Blackpool and set a national precedent for confronting exploitation in other vulnerable towns. The time for decisive action is now. An independent inquiry is the crucial first step toward breaking the cycle of abuse, restoring trust, and building a safer future for all children.

5) Child Sexual Exploitation and County Lines Gangs in Blackpool

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) and the activities of County Lines Gangs are critical issues facing Blackpool, driven by the town's high levels of deprivation, transient population, and the vulnerability of its young people to criminal exploitation. The combination of poverty, addiction, and an overburdened social care system creates an environment where gangs can easily prey on children for drug trafficking and sexual abuse. While these problems are particularly acute in Blackpool, they are by no means unique to the town, as many UK coastal communities suffering economic decline face similar challenges.

Despite the severity of the issue, Blackpool has never had a formal inquiry into CSE. This is despite the disappearance of two young girls, numerous reports highlighting failures in safeguarding, and consistently higher-than-average rates of sexual abuse against children. In recent years, County Lines gang activity has escalated, with a 64% increase in cases in 2024-25 alone ⁽¹¹⁾.

Since 1999, multiple local reports have underscored the scale of child abuse in Blackpool. However, no single document has effectively summarised the full history of child sexual and criminal exploitation in the town—until now. While the 2024-25 report only covers a limited selection of reports, the trends are undeniable.

This document aims to consolidate the case for an independent inquiry, bringing together all available information in a comprehensive and transparent manner. By doing so, we can ensure that the public understands the gravity of the situation and commits to preventing future abuse. This approach will not only address Blackpool's problems but also highlight the hidden scale of abuse affecting other troubled coastal towns across the UK, supporting wider efforts to bring about real change.

11 10.4 <https://democracy.blackpool.gov.uk/documents/s98587/Item%204%20-%20CSP%20Year%20End%20Report%202025.pdf>

6) Evidence of the Problem

a) There is a long and shocking history of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in Blackpool

Blackpool Council's children's social care services have faced long-standing and serious challenges in protecting vulnerable children. In 2012, an Ofsted inspection judged the Council's overall effectiveness in safeguarding children as *inadequate* ⁽¹²⁾, prompting the Department for Education to issue an official Improvement Notice. The inspection highlighted widespread failings in the protection of children, identifying 34 areas requiring urgent improvement.

Despite efforts to reform, a subsequent Ofsted inspection in 2018 again found the services to be *inadequate* ⁽¹³⁾. It reported significant weaknesses in the experiences and progress of children who needed help and protection, as well as in the leadership and oversight of social work practice. These persistent failings indicated that children in Blackpool remained at serious risk due to systemic issues in the Council's approach to safeguarding. Whilst the most recent Ofsted inspection in 2022 noted some progress—particularly for children in care and care leavers, which was rated as *good*—key areas such as leadership and the protection of children continued to *require improvement* ⁽¹⁴⁾. These findings reflect more than a decade of ongoing concern, raising critical questions about the effectiveness of the response to child sexual abuse and exploitation in the town.

These inspection findings are reinforced by local data presented in Blackpool's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) ⁽¹⁵⁾, which highlights the severity and scale of the issue. Abuse and neglect are identified as the greatest areas of need within local safeguarding efforts, with significantly higher rates of children in need compared to the national averages. In 2015/16, 14% of all children in Blackpool (4,202 in total) were identified as being in need, with a local rate more than double that of the national figure. During the same period, there were over 2,500 referrals to Children's Social Care, and notably, 20.7% were repeat referrals—indicating that initial interventions were frequently insufficient.

At the end of that year, 364 children were on child protection plans, with 7% of those plans including sexual abuse as a contributing factor. Many of those cases involved multiple forms of abuse, reflecting the complex and often overlapping vulnerabilities experienced by children in the town. Across every stage of the safeguarding process, Blackpool consistently recorded figures well above both national and statistical neighbour averages. Taken together with the repeated failings identified by Ofsted, this data paints a deeply concerning picture of risk and unmet need—emphasising further the urgent requirement for an independent inquiry into how child sexual abuse and exploitation has been handled in Blackpool.

Early 2000's

12 [https://democracy.blackpool.gov.uk/Data/Executive/201207191700/Agenda/\\$Report-Exec%20Ofsted%20July%202012.doc.pdf](https://democracy.blackpool.gov.uk/Data/Executive/201207191700/Agenda/$Report-Exec%20Ofsted%20July%202012.doc.pdf)

13 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d35c9bbed915d0d0b7d3050/Blackpool_review.pdf

14 <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50206631>

15 www.blackpooljsna.org.uk/Developing-Well/Children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing/Child-Sexual-Exploitation.aspx

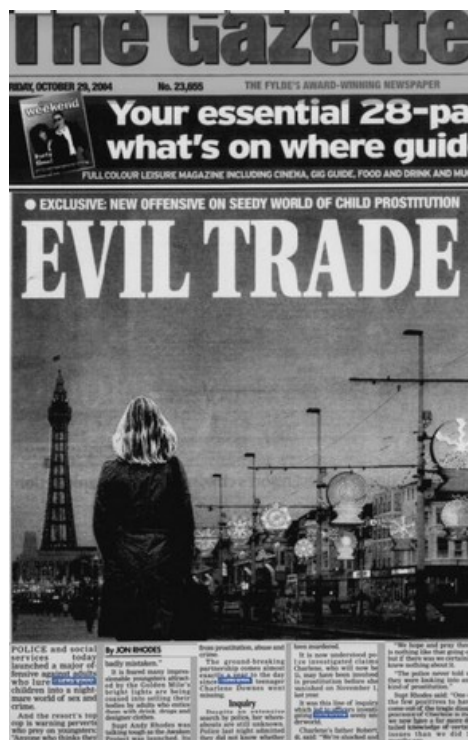
Headline: “Whitewash claim in child services row” — *Blackpool Gazette*, early 2000s

In response to growing concerns, Blackpool Council initiated a specialised review of children's services. However, opposition councillors raised doubts about the credibility of the process. Conservative Group Leader Cllr Peter Callow criticised the inquiry's terms of reference and claimed that Labour councillors were making key decisions in advance, effectively excluding opposition voices. “This is just being run like a normal committee,” he warned.

At that time, the chair of the Council's Management Committee defended the review process, describing it as intended to be as objective as possible. Curiously, that same individual had previously held responsibility for Lifelong Learning and Children's Services between 2003 and 2006—a period during which some of the most serious failures in child protection were beginning to surface. Today, this figure remains a senior councillor in Blackpool.

Headline: “London of the North” — *Blackpool Gazette*, 4 February 2003

The weaknesses in local safeguarding systems coincided with a growing number of vulnerable children arriving in Blackpool from across the country. The case of 12-year-old runaway Alicia Tomsett—who travelled alone from Plymouth and was found in a Blackpool arcade—highlighted the town's growing reputation as a destination for vulnerable youths. Jackie Crooks of the Streetlife Centre explained that Blackpool's “bright lights” often attracted children seeking escape, only to find themselves homeless, penniless, and at risk of exploitation.



Headline: “Evil Trade” — *Blackpool Gazette*, 29 October 2004

In 2004, police and social services launched the Awaken Project in response to growing concerns

about child sexual exploitation in Blackpool. Superintendent Andy Rhodes described it as a major offensive to tackle adults who lured vulnerable children into prostitution and crime. The initiative came one year after the disappearance of 14-year-old Charlene Downes, a Blackpool girl whose case shocked the community and intensified scrutiny on how well – or not - authorities were protecting at-risk children.



Headline: “A murky world of child prostitution” — Blackpool Gazette, 29 October 2004

The Downes case prompted broader reporting on what the *Gazette* described as Blackpool’s “seedy underbelly.” Journalists uncovered a hidden world where children were being exploited in exchange for clothes, money, or jewellery—some as young as 13. “Children attracted by the excitement of the resort’s bars, arcades and piers are sometimes dragged unknowingly into a criminal world,” the article warned, adding that authorities had little prior understanding of how widespread and organised the exploitation had become.

Headline: “Kids as young as 13 can be persuaded into sex” — Blackpool Gazette, 2 November 2004

In follow-up coverage, the *Gazette* continued to expose the scale of the issue, with direct testimony describing how vulnerable children were being manipulated and abused.

These early 2000s articles, combined with the structural weaknesses in local services at the time, demonstrate that Blackpool has had a serious and ongoing problem with the protection of children for over 20 years—one that successive reforms have struggled to resolve.

b) Grooming gangs and County Lines Email from the Police to the public

On 22 January 2025, a *Stay in the Know* email from the Police in Blackpool to the public was released, raising awareness about the presence of grooming gangs and county lines in Blackpool.

From: Stay In The Know <alert@neighbourhoodalert.co.uk>
Date: 22 January 2025 at 12:42:26 GMT
To: *****@hotmail.com
Subject: Grooming Gangs / County Lines [#380769581]
Reply-To: reply@neighbourhoodalert.co.uk



Grooming Gangs / County Lines

Good Afternoon,

You may have seen a lot in the media about **Grooming Gangs** recently.

We would like to make you aware that grooming gangs and county lines operate in your area and how to protect yourself, your friends and your children

Grooming is when someone pretends to be your friend or someone you trust so that they can gain something from you.

They can do this by gaining your trust by:

- Convince you that they love you and that you are their boyfriend/girlfriend
- Give you expensive gifts or clothes
- Give you a place to stay
- Offer you protection from others

These gangs may threaten you or someone you love, hurt or hit you, ask you to prove you are loyal by doing dangerous things and stop you going out.

You are also at risk from:

- Drug Trafficking
- Violence
- Exploitation
- Sexual abuse
- Cuckooing

If you suspect any suspicious activity please call us on 101. Remember if you or someone you know is in urgent danger, you can dial 999

Stay Safe

Your Local Neighbourhood Policing Team



Message Sent By
Clare Brereton
(Police, PCSO, Blackpool North)

Conclusion:

This public message calls attention to the urgency of addressing the rise in county lines exploitation and child sexual exploitation in Blackpool and the need for a comprehensive response to protect Blackpool's young people from these dangerous networks.

c) Recorded sexual offences against children in Blackpool 2021 - 2024

Between 2021 and 2024, there were 1,746 recorded sex offences against children in Blackpool¹⁶.

Blackpool's population in the 2021 census was 141,100. Of that number: 23,200 are aged 0 to 14 and 3600 15 to 19 year olds. If we approximate the figure of 0 – 16's to be 25,000 it means for ever recorded sex offence against children in Blackpool represents 1 in 14 children in the town.

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse in it's Child sexual abuse in 2023/24 report states "it is important to recognise that agency data relates to only a small minority of the child sexual abuse that occurs in our society. We estimate that at least one in 10 children in England and Wales are sexually abused before the age of 16", so the Blackpool figures may well be even higher.¹⁷

Of the sexual abuse recorded offences during 2023/24. Spread across 339 English and Welsh Authorities that averages at 298 per authority. Blackpool's figures even when divided by four to cover every year between 2021 – 2024 at 433 are disproportionately high.

Blackpool has been recognised as a high risk area for CSE due to a combination of socioeconomic, demographic and systemic vulnerabilities.

Known risk factors of CSE in Blackpool high levels of deprivation, transient population and hidden communities, lack of safe recreational spaces.

Failures in Early Intervention:

Blackpool has faced criticism for weak safeguarding responses in past cases, e.g. particularly around Charlene Downes and Paige Chivers cases.

What this means:

CSE in Blackpool is not random it thrives in conditions of poverty of neglect and silence. The high figures of CSE carry deep and uncomfortable meaning both about the town itself and about the systems meant to protect children. Its not just about numbers its about what those numbers say about who is at risk, who is listened to and who gets left behind.

16 Freedom of Information Request from Lancashire Constabulary to Cllr Paul Galley

17 <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2025/03/Child-sexual-abuse-in-2023-24-Trends-in-official-data.pdf>

d) County Lines Gangs in Blackpool

- Data on gang-related activity, arrests, and child involvement
- Impact on local communities, schools, and vulnerable families
- Evidence of children being trafficked for drug operations
- Testimonies from local law enforcement and social workers

In addition to Blackpool's long history of child sexual abuse, recent years have seen a troubling rise in the exploitation of children by County Lines criminal gangs. These gangs have become an increasingly prominent threat to the safety and well-being of young people in the area, capitalising on vulnerabilities such as poverty, family breakdown, and school exclusion.

The most recent data released by Blackpool Council for March 2025 highlights this concerning trend. Comparing the 2023/24 and 2024/25 periods, there has been a staggering 64% increase in cases of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), with 78 more investigations being initiated. This significant growth evidences the expanding presence and reach of County Lines gangs in Blackpool, further exacerbating the challenges and risks faced by young people.

County Lines gangs exploit children by grooming them to transport and sell drugs across regions, manipulating and coercing them into criminal activities. Blackpool's coastal geography and transport links make it a particular target for these operations, with children frequently trafficked into and out of the town. The tactics used by these gangs are brutal and manipulative, often involving threats, violence, and emotional control to keep young people trapped in their grip.

This rise in criminal exploitation not only fuels drug-related crime but also places immense pressure on local services, including social care, education, and the police. The increase in CCE cases reveals significant gaps in the protective measures intended to safeguard vulnerable children, and an urgent inquiry is needed to examine how these criminal networks have taken root in Blackpool. It is crucial to understand what has gone wrong and how agencies can collaborate more effectively to prevent further exploitation.

e) Failures in the Current System

Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse - Analysis Summary

Recent analysis from the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse reveals troubling trends regarding the response to child sexual abuse in England. While the number of individuals charged and convicted for child sexual abuse offences has risen, the number of children with a protection plan for sexual abuse has fallen to its lowest level in thirty years. In 2023/24, only 3.5% of all new protection plans were related to sexual abuse ⁽¹⁸⁾.

This decline in protection plans is particularly concerning given that it is estimated that 500,000 children will experience some form of sexual abuse each year across England and Wales. The data suggests that the number of children identified by local authorities represents only the "tip of the iceberg," with the gap between the children who need support and those receiving it continuing to widen.

Additionally, there has been a significant rise in the number of individuals incarcerated for child sexual offences. Between June 2015 and June 2023, the population of people serving immediate custodial sentences specifically for child sexual offences increased by 28%, reaching a total of 9,017 people. As of June 2023, 13% of the total prison population in England and Wales had been convicted of child sexual offences.

18 www.csacentre.org.uk/research-resources/research-evidence/scale-nature-of-abuse/trends-in-official-data/

f) Crime and Safety in Blackpool

According to CrimeRate.co.uk, Blackpool is the most dangerous major town in Lancashire and ranks among the top 20 most dangerous major towns in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The most common crimes in Blackpool are violence and sexual offences, with 10,378 offences recorded during 2023. The crime rate for violence and sexual offences stands at 73 reports per 1,000 people, which is 4.06 times the national average. This high incidence of violent and sexual crimes further highlights the need for urgent action in tackling these issues.

g) Impact on Blackpool's forgotten victims

Given the high prevalence of sexual offences and violence in Blackpool, alongside national trends, it is clear that there are significant gaps in how cases of child sexual abuse are identified and addressed. The recent research by the Children's Commissioner highlights that adult survivors of childhood abuse often only become aware of the abuse many years after it has occurred. In fact, 26% of respondents admitted they did not realise they had been sexually abused until they were adults. This delayed awareness demonstrates further the complexities involved with addressing abuse and the absolute need for a dedicated inquiry into Blackpool's local response to these issues.

In response to what support is available to victims of CSE, the following answer was provided from Children's Services:

In terms of the support given to CSE victims in Blackpool, that is tailored to the individual needs of the child through nationally recognised assessments which we refer to as a CE1 and CE2. The CE1 is an initial assessment with the CE2 being a more in-depth assessment. The initial support is always around immediate safety and disruption of any risks if they remain present.

"In terms of the wider support that's directed both at the child and also with their family. We have a worker that works with parents to support them specifically. In terms of the child themselves, our work is very much based on awareness raising and them understanding what they have been through. Children who have been groomed can need support to understand that process. We also focus on their health needs and education needs, those are key positive elements we want to build into their lives and we have health workers as part of the teams. Then its about how we support them into wider pro-social activities."

The lack of any real evidence of coordinated support for all the victims of child sexual exploitation underpins one of the core reasons why an inquiry is needed in Blackpool. An inquiry would help ensure that Blackpool's response to child sexual abuse is robust, targeted, and reflective of the unique challenges faced by coastal towns. It would also play a crucial role in restoring public confidence in the authorities' ability to protect vulnerable children and hold offenders accountable.

h) The role of Awaken in Blackpool

Blackpool Council established the Awaken project in 2004 following the disappearance and suspected murder of schoolgirl Charlene Downes. The initiative, a collaboration between the council and Lancashire Police, aims to prevent child sexual exploitation in the area.

Awaken operates under the governance of the MASA arrangements. It involves a contextual safeguarding strategic group, which includes key partners such as the Police, Health, and Blackpool Children's Social Care. This strategic group ensures that resources are appropriately allocated to support the Awaken Team's work and that its strategic goals align with current policies at the national, regional, and local levels.

In February 2025, written questions were sent to Blackpool's Children's Services Team to gather up-to-date data on the impact of Awaken, as there has been limited public information released about their work in recent years.

The questions were as follows:

(1) How many children have been supported by Awaken each year since it was set up?

Answer: The initial response is that accurate data from the early years of Awaken is unavailable, as it was recorded on paper files. However, reliable data can be pulled from the CE2 assessment, which went live on Mosaic in 2020. From January 2021 to December 2024, Awaken supported 374 children.

(2) How many children are Awaken currently supporting?

Answer: As of now, the Awaken team is supporting 37 children, including 2 individuals receiving post-18 support.

(3) How many people have been prosecuted each year due to work undertaken by Awaken?

Answer: Unfortunately, this question could not be answered by Blackpool Children's Services and needed to be directed to the police.

In response to a written enquiry, the police advised submitting a Freedom of Information request. The response to this Freedom of Information request clarified that the police do not hold the relevant data and suggested contacting the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) for further information.

It has since been confirmed that the CPS do not hold the data on prosecutions as a result of the work undertaken by Awaken.

Conclusion:

Established in 2004, Awaken was the town's primary multi-agency safeguarding unit for tackling child sexual exploitation. However, officials stated that only records from 2020 onward are available in digital format. Earlier data is paper-based, stored in archives, and reportedly inaccessible. As a result, nearly two decades of the team's work cannot be properly evaluated,

raising serious concerns about accountability, transparency, and the ability to assess the effectiveness of one of Blackpool's most critical safeguarding initiatives.

Without evidence of how many children have been protected, how many perpetrators successfully prosecuted as a result of their work, how do we measure the effectiveness of Awaken?

I) Residential Care homes in Blackpool

There has been a sharp rise in the provision of residential child-care placements from the private sector within the town. In July 2024 it was described by Lancashire Live as the “the children's home capital of Britain”¹⁹, where one in 52 children are currently in care.²⁰

This compares to an England average of one in 140 across *England*²¹

Initially placement costs were competitive ²² allowing the local authority to engage with small, local providers within the financial constraints and place local children in high quality suitable placements that met their needs. Capacity increased when large companies, backed by venture capitalists, some based outside the UK, saw the potential for growth and profit. Of the 34 children’s homes in Blackpool by 2024 all but one were operated by the private sector.²³

Changes in focus nationally from the use of larger placements to more bespoke, family care model single and dual placements – fuelled by the need to accommodate more and more complex and traumatised children also fed the potential for growth. Blackpool Council did respond by implementing measures to prevent further developments including a rule that no childrens home could open within 400 metres of another , but the Town was left with more single and dual placements than children in need of them, or within the financial affordability of the town. This also provided also for a spike in residential placement costs as the providers were able to fill the beds with children from out of area. <https://www.lancs.live/news/uk-world-news/life-care-capital-britain-children-29315550>

The “importation” of children from other authorities including the London Boroughs and inner cities allowed for the almost viral spread of CSE and CCE. Whilst for some authorities it made perfect sense to remove children from their home area to break the links with their exploiters, it exacerbated the problem on two fronts. Without the safeguards of more secure accommodation, a mantra from Ofsted to maintain links for children and allow unfettered freedoms, it rendered the local children placed alongside them into further vulnerability from afar, and allowed the introduction of the newly placed children to potential exploiters in Blackpool.

The following questions (highlighted in black) were asked of Blackpool’s childrens services in February 2025:

(4) How do we ensure that all children’s residential care homes operating in Blackpool are known to Blackpool Children’s Services?

Answer:

Blackpool Council must be informed if a Child Looked After (CLA) is placed within our area. It is a statutory duty of the placing authority to notify us of the placement, providing details about the

19 <https://www.lancs.live/news/uk-world-news/life-care-capital-britain-children-29315550>

20 <https://www.healthequitynorth.co.uk/app/uploads/Children-in-Care-Report-2024-FINAL-2-1.pdf>

21 <https://www.blackpoolgazette.co.uk/news/in-this-lancashire-town-one-in-every-52-children-is-in-care-4596339>

22 <https://democracy.blackpool.gov.uk/documents/s98503/Appendix%20j%20M10%202425%20Childrens%20Services.pdf> Appendix 2 (j)

23 <https://www.lancs.live/news/uk-world-news/life-care-capital-britain-children-29315550>

child and the address of the care home. Additionally, the placing authority must inform both the Police and Blackpool Children's Services if the child meets one or more of the following criteria:

- Is a victim of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)
- Is believed or suspected to be at risk of CSE
- Has past episodes of going missing/absent from care or home
- Has gang involvement or association
- Is a trafficked child
- Is an unaccompanied asylum seeker

Each child is logged into both a spreadsheet and MOSAIC, Blackpool Children's Services' central recording system. The child's name, age, address, and risk factors are recorded, and any incidents or contacts with the Police can be logged. However, a challenge arises when we are not notified if a child is no longer in care or has moved to a different address. In 2024, 85 children were placed in Blackpool, of which 57 are believed to still be residing in the area.

According to the guidance, when a child is placed in Blackpool by another authority, the authority must notify Children's Social Care. Notifications are received regularly for both new placements and those that come to an end. While the majority of placements involve children living with extended family or foster families, as of February 2025, there are 239 children placed by other local authorities in Blackpool. Of these, 56 are in regulated children's homes, while 183 are in placements such as foster care, semi-supported care, or with parents. The council is confident this data reflects the placements accurately. However, there may be times when a child moves back to their home area without notification.

Children's Homes and Semi-Independent Supported Living are regulated by OFSTED. Blackpool Children's Services receives regular confidential information from OFSTED about regulated provisions within the local authority area. This information includes the capacity of each provision and details of the providers. In cases where OFSTED identifies an unregulated provider in Blackpool, they will notify the council. Likewise, if the council becomes aware of any unregulated settings, it will inform OFSTED.

The council's response to our inquiry does not cover the issue of unknown children's homes. We know of one example where the Council did not know the Home was being run as a Children's home.

j) Leisure Industry Safeguarding

What measures are in place to safeguard children and young people in the leisure industry in Blackpool (including amusement arcades and tourist attractions)?

Answer:

Each attraction or venue in Blackpool has its own safeguarding processes in place. It is the responsibility of individual businesses to ensure compliance with legal requirements, and VisitBlackpool does not intervene in these matters. The question is broad and difficult to answer comprehensively as there are many different types of businesses and services that could be considered part of the leisure or tourism sector. These vary in their level of regulation and the best practices they follow, depending on the nature of the business. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of each individual business to ensure it adheres to industry standards and safeguarding practices.

Conclusion

It is concerning that is left to individual businesses to ensure compliance with legal requirements around safeguarding.

k) Home Schooling in Blackpool

The number of children being homeschooled across the country has increased dramatically since the Covid pandemic. Blackpool has also seen a substantial increase in children homeschooled. In February 2025, Blackpool Children Services Team were asked the following highlighted questions:

How many children living in Blackpool are currently recognised as being ‘home schooled’?

Answer:

As of now, there are 628 children living in Blackpool who are recognised as being home-schooled.

It is concerning that this number is so high in a town with so many documented challenges around sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation of children.

How many school-age children living in Blackpool are currently not attending school or another educational establishment full-time, for any reason other than home-schooling, and what are those reasons?

Answer:

As of February 1st, 2025, there are 74 children in Blackpool who are not attending school or another educational establishment full-time, for reasons other than home-schooling. These children have recently moved to Blackpool, and the council is working with their parents and schools to facilitate their admission into appropriate educational establishments.

National comparisons:

As of Autumn Term 2024 / 2025: 111,700 children are in elected Home education (Home Education). In the north west this figure is: 12,920 which means Blackpool represents:

0.56% of Englands Homeschooling figures

4.56% of the North West of Englands homeschooling figures.

Conclusion:

In a town with high numbers of home school children, concern around their safeguarding and vulnerability is high.

This conclusion is supported by the research undertaken by The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel: Safeguarding Children in Elective Home Education Report May 2024

“While the number of electively home educated children who are harmed or are at risk of serious harm is comparatively low, the protective factor that school can offer was missing from their lives and this had serious, and sometimes fatal, consequences for their safety and welfare.”²⁴

24 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66febd0630536cb927482bec/CSPRP_Elective_Home_Education_Oct_2024.pdf

“The Panel has seen evidence that the home educated children who were the focus of safeguarding reviews were less visible to safeguarding agencies than those who attend school.”²⁵

25 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66febd0630536cb927482bec/CSPRP_Elective_Home_Education_Oct_2024.pdf

L) Registered number of Child Sex Offenders in Blackpool.

There are currently 1,555 registered sex offenders in Blackpool.²⁶ Nationally, there were approximately 67,000 registered sex offenders in 2023²⁷. This means Blackpool accounts for around 2.3% of the total, despite representing only about 0.2% of the UK population. This stark imbalance highlights a disproportionately high concentration of registered sex offenders in the town.

While Lancashire Police hold data on the proportion of these offenders who have committed offences against children, retrieving this information would require manually checking each case file. This task exceeds the 18-hour time limit set by the Freedom of Information and Data Protection (Appropriate Limit and Fees) Regulations 2004, and therefore cannot be completed under a standard FOI request.

Understanding this key area, should be a key area of the Inquiry.

²⁶ Freedom of Information response from Lancashire Constabulary to Cllr Paul Galley in June 2025

²⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-64624921>

7) The Case for an Inquiry Council Debate 2025

On 29 January 2025, I proposed a motion²⁸ to Blackpool Full Council addressing important issues surrounding child sexual exploitation. The original motion called for:

1. A comprehensive review of gang activity in Blackpool and other coastal areas across the UK.
2. An assessment of the lasting impact on victims and survivors.
3. An examination of the exploitation of children and young people by County Lines gangs.

However, the Blackpool Labour councillors amended the motion²⁹ to the point where it would result in minimal action, rendering it worthless. The Labour Group of Councillors voted against the original motion and passed their own amended version instead.

Members of the public respectfully attended and held posters with the image of missing teenager Charlene Downes and the headline “Break the Silence on Child Abuse.”



Tensions erupted when, at the end of the vote, Deputy Leader of the Council, Cllr Ivan Taylor—who was the Portfolio Holder for Children’s Services when Charlene Downes disappeared—cheered and shouted, “We’re doing it.”

This sparked significant upset among the public, and some attendees were asked to leave the meeting.

28 <https://democracy.blackpool.gov.uk/documents/g7518/Public%20reports%20pack%2029th-Jan-2025%2018.00%20Council.pdf?T=10>

29 <https://democracy.blackpool.gov.uk/documents/b23984/Amendment%20to%20Notice%20of%20Motion%20-%20Item%2011b%2029th-Jan-2025%2018.00%20Council.pdf?T=9>

Following complaints, Cllr Taylor, through the Monitoring Officer, issued an apology:

“I recognise that child sexual exploitation is an important issue and also acknowledge the strength of feeling by everyone who attended the meeting, including myself. When the result of the vote was declared, which agreed to the amendment we put forward for the actions of the independent inquiry to be implemented, I felt strongly that the right course of action had been decided, and I expressed that in my reaction. In hindsight, I realise how this may have come across, and I apologise to anyone who was offended or upset, as this was not at all my intention.”

While Cllr Taylor’s apology is noted, it does little to address the core issue: the ongoing concern that no inquiry has ever taken place in Blackpool and the Casey Report does not focus on Blackpool or coastal areas.

8) The Case for an Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Blackpool

The deep-rooted and ongoing issues of child sexual exploitation and abuse in Blackpool demand an immediate and thorough investigation by an independent public inquiry. Despite numerous attempts by Blackpool Council and local authorities to address the many failures, the recurring deficiencies and repeated negative reports demonstrate that the problem persists. An independent inquiry is essential to break the cycle of neglect and ensure accountability for the individuals and institutions responsible for failing vulnerable children.

Why Only a Full Independent Inquiry Can Address the Issue

An independent inquiry is essential because authorities in Blackpool, including the police and council, have shown repeated and systemic failings in addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse. Despite numerous warnings and investigations over the past two decades, including the initial Ofsted findings in 2012 and 2018, there has been little meaningful change. The leadership, policies, and responses of the local council have been inadequate, which is why a locally led investigation cannot be trusted to bring about meaningful change.

An inquiry led by external, independent bodies can provide an unbiased, transparent, and impartial review of the failings. It would have the power to scrutinise sensitive documents, question key figures, and deliver recommendations based on evidence rather than political or institutional assumptions. Only an independent body has the credibility needed to ensure that all aspects of the problem—ranging from the council’s response, the police’s role, victim support, and the involvement of organised crime—are fully examined.

Examples of past successful inquiries leading to reforms

Historically, full independent inquiries into child sexual exploitation in other towns and cities have led to significant reforms and positive changes in policy, providing a clear path for what could be achieved in Blackpool.

- **Rotherham:** The 2014 independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, chaired by Alexis Jay, uncovered a systematic failure by local authorities, police, and social services. It revealed that over 1,400 children had been exploited between 1997 and 2013, with authorities turning a blind eye due to fear of being accused of racism. The inquiry’s findings led to the resignation of local leaders, a major overhaul of child protection services, and the establishment of new protocols for responding to child sexual abuse.
- **Rochdale:** The 2012 investigation into the grooming and sexual exploitation of young girls in Rochdale uncovered how a group of men had trafficked children into sexual slavery, and how authorities had failed to protect the victims for years. Following the inquiry, significant changes were made to local safeguarding practices, and new training programs were put in place for social workers and law enforcement officers to better respond to exploitation cases.

These inquiries were instrumental in bringing about policy changes, fostering greater collaboration between agencies, and ensuring that child protection became a priority. An independent inquiry into Blackpool would have similar potential to spark reforms and improve the safeguarding of children.

9) What an Inquiry Should Investigate

An independent inquiry into Blackpool should investigate the following key areas:

- 1. Police Response:** The police's handling of child sexual exploitation cases has been a critical concern. The inquiry should examine whether police investigations were thorough, whether there were instances of systemic failures or lack of coordination with social services, and whether there were missed opportunities to prevent exploitation.
- 2. Council Accountability:** The inquiry must scrutinise Blackpool Council's actions (or inaction) over the years in addressing child sexual exploitation. This includes evaluating the effectiveness of child protection policies, leadership accountability, and the council's response to the repeated warnings from professionals, the media, and the public.
- 3. Victim Support Failures:** A major concern has been the inadequate support for victims of exploitation. The inquiry should investigate the availability and quality of victim support services, including whether children received the care and resources they needed to recover from their trauma.
- 4. Organised Crime Links:** The rise of county lines gangs and organized crime networks has played a central role in the exploitation of children in Blackpool. The inquiry should assess the involvement of criminal groups in child sexual exploitation and the extent to which local authorities and law enforcement have addressed these threats.
- 5. Coastal Economy:** The inquiry should look at how the tourism industry, including seasonal work, nightlife, and visitor traffic, might contribute to, or facilitate child sexual exploitation. The transient nature of many workers and visitors could provide a cover for criminal activity, and places of entertainment including amusement arcades, which attract children, provide a unique and easy link between victim and abuser.

10) How an Inquiry Could Lead to Policy Changes and Better Protection for Vulnerable Children in Blackpool and other coastal areas of the UK

An independent inquiry would provide a thorough analysis of the failings in Blackpool's response to child sexual exploitation. Its findings would serve as the foundation for policy changes aimed at improving the protection of vulnerable children, both in Blackpool and across the coastal resorts of the UK. By pinpointing specific areas of failure and making concrete recommendations, the inquiry could drive legislative reforms, improve inter-agency collaboration, and hold to account those responsible for failures.

Many of the conditions that have exposed children in Blackpool to CSE and County Line Gangs activities are prevalent in other UK Coastal areas. The Inquiry should use Blackpool's example as a way of examining CSE and County Line Gang operations in all of Britain's coastal towns and cities that have similar issues.

The inquiry would also have the potential to raise awareness of the complex issues surrounding child sexual exploitation and organised crime. By giving a voice to victims and survivors, the inquiry could ensure that their experiences inform future practice and policy, leading to better support services for children at risk.

An inquiry could pave the way for:

- Improved coordination between law enforcement, local authorities, and social services, ensuring that vulnerable children are better protected.
- Greater accountability at all levels of government, from local council leaders to national policymakers.
- Reforms to child protection laws and practices, making it more difficult for perpetrators to operate with impunity.

11) Recommendations

In light of the urgent need for reform and accountability in Blackpool's handling of child sexual exploitation, this report proposes the following recommendations:

- 1. Establish an Independent Public Inquiry:** The Home Secretary should launch a full, independent inquiry into the handling of child sexual exploitation in Blackpool over the years, with a focus on the failures of local authorities, the police, and other agencies involved in safeguarding children.
- 2. Improve Coordination Between Police, Social Services, and Local Government:** The inquiry should recommend specific measures to improve coordination between all parties responsible for child safeguarding. This should include better information sharing, joint training, and clear accountability structures to ensure that no child is overlooked or neglected.
- 3. Increase Funding for Victim Support Services:** The inquiry should advocate for an increase in funding for services supporting victims of child sexual exploitation. This includes counselling, legal aid, and long-term support to help survivors rebuild their lives.
- 4. Strengthen Legislation and Enforcement Against County Lines Operations:** The inquiry should highlight the growing threat of county lines gangs and call for stronger laws and enforcement to disrupt these criminal networks. Local authorities need to work with national agencies to ensure that children are protected from being recruited into these gangs.

12) Conclusion

An independent inquiry into Blackpool's handling of child sexual exploitation is not only necessary but urgent. It is only through an independent, transparent investigation that we can hope to address the systemic failures that have allowed this issue to persist for so long. Only by learning from past inquiries and implementing the recommended reforms, can we take meaningful steps towards protecting Blackpool's children and preventing further exploitation.