



**Commission of Inquiry into
the Tasmanian Government's
Responses to Child Sexual
Abuse in Institutional Settings**

WITNESS STATEMENT OF HILDA SIREC

I, Hilda Sirec of [REDACTED], in the State of Queensland, Police Officer, do solemnly and sincerely declare that:

1. I am a member of the Australian Federal Police (**AFP**) and hold the rank of Commander. I have been a member of the AFP for 20 years, during which time I have held a range of operational and management roles within the organisation.
2. At present, I hold the position of Commander Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (**ACCCE**) and Human Exploitation. In this role, I am responsible for an AFP Specialist Command which takes the national lead for Child Protection, Human Trafficking and the ACCCE.
3. In my role, I report to the Assistant Commissioner Northern Command, who reports to Deputy Commissioner Operations, and in turn, the Commissioner of the AFP.
4. I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true. Where I express an opinion, I do so based on my experience as a police officer as outlined at paragraphs 5 to 10 below.

Background and qualifications

5. As stated at paragraph 1 above, I have been a member of the AFP for 20 years. During this time, I have acquired significant knowledge and expertise in child sexual exploitation investigations.
6. When I joined the AFP in 2001, I worked across all crime types in the Australian Capital Territory policing area. Between 2006 and 2010, I worked in the ACT Policing sexual assault and child abuse team.
7. Subsequently, I was deployed to Afghanistan to train Afghan police on a range of different crime types, including domestic violence and homicide.
8. On my return to Australia in 2013, I worked in People Smuggling Operations in Canberra, then in the Joint Counter Terrorism Team (**JCTT**) in New South

Wales between 2015 and 2017, and the JCTT in Queensland and Northern Territory between 2017 and 2019.

9. In 2019 I deployed to Pakistan for 18 months to manage Australian law enforcement's interests in relation to major crimes, such as human trafficking, exploitation and narcotics. During this time, I had numerous opportunities to work with the ACCCE to provide Australian insights to the Pakistan partners I engaged with. This was to aid Pakistani agencies understand the coordination efforts Australia has employed towards countering online child exploitation.
10. When I returned to Australia in November 2020, I moved into my current role as the Commander of the ACCCE and Human Exploitation. The role involves leading the collaborative efforts of the ACCCE and also providing strategic leadership for AFP's Child Protection Operations and Human Trafficking.
11. I have the following qualifications:
 - (a) Bachelor of Science degree from University of Western Sydney;
 - (b) Diploma of Public Safety (Policing); and
 - (c) Graduate Certificate in Applied Management, from Australian Institute of Applied Management.
12. Attached to this statement marked **HS-1** is a copy of my curriculum vitae.
13. I make this witness statement to assist the Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmania's Government's responses to child sexual abuse in institutional settings.

The ACCCE – Overview

14. The ACCCE commenced in March 2018. It is led by the AFP and funded by the Commonwealth Government.
15. Our stated mission is to drive a collaborative national response to counter the online exploitation of children. The role of the ACCCE is to enhance collaboration and capability to be able to ensure children are free from online exploitation and are not vulnerable to being groomed by online child sex offenders. The ACCCE works in partnership with law enforcement agencies and industry, academic and international partners to prevent, pursue and

protect children from child exploitation. This partnership is facilitated by memoranda of understanding (discussed in paragraphs 59 to 61, below).

16. The ACCCE has a range of capabilities required to deliver on its mission, including triage of reports of child exploitation, intelligence inputs, specialist capabilities and prevention and online safety. The ACCCE is also working towards progressing a national technology solution, fostering increased collaboration and coordination across the various state, territory and federal law enforcement agencies.
17. We coordinate information and profiles across the whole architecture of online child exploitation across the country, through a partnership with state and territory agencies under the Joint Anti Child Exploitation Teams (**JACET**) structure. JACET teams (which include local state or territory officers working with AFP officers) take referrals from the ACCCE and conduct investigations across the country (discussed in paragraphs 52 to 58, below). While a small number of historical matters may be referred to JACETs by members of the public, historical sexual assault matters are generally referred directly to relevant state and territory police.
18. We also partner with non-government organisations and research institutions through our prevention and engagement arm. We are involved with research on the prevalence of online exploitation, which we use to develop strategies to best raise awareness of online child exploitation (discussed in paragraphs 39 to 45, below).
19. In my current role as the Commander of the ACCCE, I am responsible for the day to day operation of the ACCCE and also the development of strategy and capability to sustain our efforts to combat online exploitation. The daily roles vary from approving operational activities, undertaking risk assessments and privacy impact reviews on technological solutions, responding to and preparing policy responses to government, and engaging with government and non-government stakeholders to collaborate on future strategies.
20. The ACCCE teams are made up of sworn police and unsworn specialists, all with training and expertise relevant to the role they perform.

Online child sexual exploitation

21. Online child sexual exploitation involves the use of technology or the internet to facilitate the sexual abuse of a child, including the production and dissemination of child abuse material online. It specifically refers to the sexual exploitation of children and young people aged 18 and below over the internet and includes online grooming, personal image sharing and image-based abuse, torture or cruelty.
22. The increase in young people, including children and infants, accessing the internet has seen a corresponding upward trend in cases of online child sexual exploitation. We are aware that children as young as 3 or 4 years of age have access to hand-held devices that can access the internet. YouTube clips and infant targeted apps provide engagement opportunities for very young children. This is truly a borderless crime; the fact that it can happen on the internet means that it can happen anywhere in the world at any time.
23. Child abuse material is a broad category, which includes an image of a child's genitalia or a child posing in a sexual manner.
24. We have moved away from using the phrase "child pornography" to describe such materials. The phrase "child pornography" is inaccurate and benefits child sex abusers because it suggests compliance on the part of the victim and, therefore, legitimacy on the part of the abuser. It also conjures images of children posing in provocative positions, rather than suffering horrific abuse.

Trends in online child sexual exploitation

25. We have seen a number of concerning trends in online child sexual exploitation over the past 15 or so years.
26. One of these trends is the shift in the demographic of perpetrators. When I was policing child sexual abuse 15 years ago, I was generally dealing with adult males over the age of 40. In recent times, there have been arrests of males as young as 19 years of age. We have also seen instances of female offenders perpetrating online child exploitation offences, so there is no particular typology that investigators can target. I am aware that further research on this issue has been conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology.

27. Another trend is the phenomenon of live streaming child sexual abuse. Child sex offenders are now frequently approaching women with children and requesting that they abuse their children and live stream it for a fee. Live streaming can be facilitated on WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and other social media platforms which offer video call functionalities. This is a particularly difficult area of offending for law enforcement to investigate as it leaves no trace. That said, I am not aware of any evidence to suggest that live streaming of child sexual abuse is occurring in institutional contexts.
28. There are some situations where we see offenders who are disseminating or in possession of child abuse material, also committing contact offences. For example, Operation Arkstone is an AFP-led investigation targeting a domestic online network of alleged child sex offenders who are accused of abusing and exploiting Australian children and recording their horrific crimes to share with other offenders (discussed in paragraphs 63 to 65 below). Whilst this is an example of both online exploitation and contact offending, there is no definitive correlation between offenders possessing child abuse material and also carrying out contact offences.
29. We are also seeing an increase in the spread of self-generated sexually explicit material by individuals under the age of 18, such as naked images or videos depicting sexual activity. These may be shared consensually at first, then forwarded to or obtained maliciously by offenders who might then coerce and/or groom the child online. We see school friends or children in remote community settings initially sharing self-generated images without understanding the consequences.
30. The ACCCE receives many reports around self-generated material, which we deal with in a supportive manner. These reports often come from members of the public, either the individuals themselves or the parents and carers who have discovered the existence of these self-generated images. We advise victims and families to access various family support services which can be found on the accce.gov.au website, the afp.gov.au website and also through the JACETs around Australia (if they are interacting with victims and families directly).
31. It is particularly concerning that some of these reports involve children as young as four self-generating nude images to share on TikTok. We work very

closely with the eSafety Commissioner in this regard, who is Australia's regulator for online safety and is able to remove unsafe content. The AFP and the eSafety Commissioner have signed a Memorandum of Understanding which outlines agency remit and provides operational and engagement opportunities to enhance our efforts to combat online child exploitation. Our awareness resources are complementary, amplifying prevention messaging.

Online grooming

32. Online grooming is a type of online child sexual exploitation. Online grooming typically involves the development of a relationship with a child through social media accounts. Groomers do things to build trust and rapport with the child. For example, they might offer money, modelling contracts or sporting opportunities to build the child's self-esteem.
33. Through this process, the groomer starts to isolate the child from their usual support networks, allowing the groomer to become the sole person that the child wants to engage with.
34. Groomers will often ask for innocuous photos to start off with, and then ask for more graphic content over time. The groomer will generally threaten the child that if they do not provide this content, they will inform the child's parents or carers about what the child has been doing. Eventually, the child will be completely controlled by the groomer.
35. Our experience has been that grooming can be very sophisticated. Grooming can occur over a long period of time, but it can also happen within hours. We have to recognise that groomers are master manipulators and if they have done their research in relation to a particular child, they can hook a child very quickly.
36. Over the past two years, we have seen an increase in opportunistic grooming because children are spending far more time online and have access to a greater range of social media platforms than ever before. The pandemic has required children to use the internet to access their education and social connection with friends and family. Groomers have taken this opportunity to gain access to children online, particularly those who do not have appropriate privacy settings or adequate supervision from parents or carers when they are

online. However, the ACCCE is yet to encounter instances of online grooming in institutional settings.

Technological challenges

37. Online child sexual exploitation is an ever growing crime, aided by the anonymity that encryption platforms and the internet provide. The ACCCE relies on the co-operation of technology companies and service providers, and the extent to which they can identify child abuse material and child exploitation when it happens on their platforms. In my experience, Facebook has to date provided the ACCCE with online exploitation and child abuse material data from its platform. However, the move to end-to-end encryption will reduce the visibility the company currently has over activity on its platforms.
38. We are also seeing offenders move to the dark web, which is a part of the internet that you can only access if you have specific software. We find offenders are using the dark web due to the anonymity it offers. It is much harder for law enforcement to detect and identify activity that is occurring on these sites. Improved technology and up-to-date legislative powers are necessary to enable law enforcement agencies to monitor activity on the dark web.

Barriers to reporting and ACCCE's awareness-raising activities

39. ACCCE research has shown that 21 per cent of parents and carers say child sexual abuse is too sickening to think about and 15 per cent of parents would be too embarrassed to talk about it if their child was exploited. The stigma attached to this topic is a significant barrier to reporting incidents of child sexual abuse. Attached to this statement marked **HS-2** is a copy of ACCCE research report titled Online child sexual exploitation: understanding community awareness, perceptions, attitudes and preventative behaviours dated February 2020.
40. To that end, the *Stop the Stigma* campaign aims to address the stigma that surrounds child sexual abuse and, in doing so, encourage survivors to seek support and make it harder for perpetrators to hide. The campaign provides resources and information detailing how to report, what to do if someone discloses child sexual abuse to you, and how to access support. It represents

a unique collaboration between law enforcement and industry, involving the AFP, the ACCCE, 2021 Australian of the Year Grace Tame, The Daniel Morcombe Foundation, Bravehearts, Act for Kids and others.

41. Lack of awareness is another barrier to reporting incidents of online child sexual exploitation. Through our research, we found that only 52 per cent of parents or carers talked to their children about online safety. It is critical that we have an aware cohort of parents and carers who can translate information about online safety to their children.
42. With this in mind, the ACCCE is raising awareness through our podcast series, *Closing The Net*. The series includes interviews with over 55 different child protection experts to provide awareness and understanding of the incidence of online child sexual exploitation.
43. The ACCCE is also involved with the AFP's *ThinkUKnow* program, which engages people of influence in a young person's life, including parents, carers and educators, to raise awareness and deliver education about preventing child sexual exploitation.
44. The AFP's *ThinkUKnow* develops resources and advice for parents, carers and educators, children and young people to prevent online child sexual exploitation. Led by the AFP, the program includes presentations for schools and community groups, online learning resources, fact sheets and guides, and educator resources.
45. We have also implemented community connection initiatives, such as *Stop Child Abuse — Trace an Object*. This initiative, which was established by Europol in 2017 and adopted in Australia in March 2021, asks members of the public to help identify objects extracted from the background of online child sexual abuse material. Successful identifications can dramatically enhance law enforcement's ability to identify and locate both victims and offenders. The ACCCE has a specialist team of victim identification officers who review these reports and feed the information gained into the global network.

Challenges in prosecuting child sexual abuse offences

46. When I worked in the ACT sexual assault and child abuse team in the 2000s, children were required to provide oral evidence and be subject to

cross-examination in the witness box. The cross-examination of child victims was a particularly horrendous process and it was something that parents and carers often avoided because it re-traumatised children.

47. Since that time, we have seen significant legislative improvements which make it easier for child victims of sexual abuse to give evidence.
48. The introduction of special witness arrangements has made a difference for child victims of sexual abuse in court proceedings. The ability to provide evidence-in-chief through interviews where the victim does not have to be present in court has been critical. Other arrangements, such as the provision of closed circuit television processes for evidence in court, and ensuring that the victim does not have to be in the presence of the accused, have also made an important difference.
49. Another example is that under the *Evidence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1991* (ACT), if police conduct an audio-visual recording with a child who is the victim of a sexual or violent offence, that recording may be admissible as evidence in court proceedings.
50. In my experience, these arrangements make children feel more comfortable giving evidence and, as a result, have improved the quality of their evidence. The arrangements have also meant that parents or carers generally feel more comfortable, and are more willing to allow their child to give evidence in pursuit of a prosecution.
51. Despite these legislative developments, there remains an inherent difficulty eliciting evidence from a child who was subject to grooming. Child witnesses are often reluctant to provide negative information about a person close to them, as they do not want to get them in trouble, or they feel shame about the situation.

Joint Anti Child Exploitation Teams

52. The JACET is a taskforce bringing together the AFP and state and territory police departments to combat online child exploitation. The JACET enables sharing intelligence and risks and removing operational duplication to effectively identify and prosecute offenders and remove children from harm.

This commitment allows JACETs to prioritise and respond to reports in a timely manner and leverage each agency's investigative powers and resources.

53. Members of the JACET also have an opportunity to attend the Child Protection Investigation Workshops (**CPIW**) delivered by the AFP. The workshop provides important baseline training for investigators in the recent investigation and prosecution transformations implemented for JACET and AFP Child Protection investigators which enhances investigation processes and streamlines brief preparation. The curriculum is based on theoretical and practical skills of child protection investigations with a focus on introducing and improving the capacity of investigators new to Child Protection.
54. CPIW focuses on the following core elements:
 - (a) Understanding the Child Exploitation Environment;
 - (b) Categorising Child Abuse Material;
 - (c) Intelligence and Technology;
 - (d) Planning, Collection and Resolution;
 - (e) Prosecutions;
 - (f) Prevention and Engagement;
 - (g) Mental Health and Trauma; and
 - (h) Understanding the Offender.
55. The ACCCE provides a central point for receiving, triaging, value-adding and referring reports of online child sexual exploitation to the JACETs and relevant domestic and international law enforcement agencies. Through the ACCCE's Intelligence Fusion Cell, this brings together a number of agencies such as AFP, Australian Border Force, Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre, Department of Home Affairs and Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, which provide intelligence insights in the reports received so that trends and tactics are made available to our law enforcement partners.
56. Broadly, the introduction of the ACCCE and the JACETs has provided a national and consistent focus on online child sexual exploitation. The ACCCE has had the opportunity to develop best practice and connect with global partners to enhance our capabilities, so that we can provide the best tools and

subject matter experts to combat the problem. Through this national lens, every jurisdiction is able to gain access to the best information and capabilities.

57. For example, not every state and territory has its own victim identification resources and expertise. Through the ACCCE and the JACET constructs, states and territories are able to access the available technical capabilities, such as covert online engagement and access to the Australian Victim Identification Database (**AVID**). AVID holds tens of millions of images and videos seized or obtained through various child protection operations and activities. This material can be utilised to advance all of Australia's law enforcement efforts in victim identification, covert online engagement and disruption, as well as facilitate prosecutorial mandates using the categorised material.
58. On 4 November 2019, the JACET was launched in Tasmania. While I am not involved with any operational work in Tasmania, I am aware that in financial year 2019/20 there were 9 arrests and 35 charges laid in relation to online child sexual exploitation, and in financial year 2020/21 there were 13 arrests and 73 charges laid in Tasmania.

Memorandums of understanding

59. Memoranda of understanding (**MOU**) are in place between the ACCCE and its partner agencies and organisations. We are in the process of revamping the national MOU with all JACETs around the country.
60. The main advantage of MOUs is that they reduce duplicative or inconsistent activities across agencies. The MOUs strengthen the sharing of information and intelligence, and provide agencies with enhanced capacity to investigate child exploitation offences through these cooperative arrangements.
61. That said, child protection is a heavily crowded arena. In this environment, a wide range of activities are being undertaken across all agencies that are operating in the effort to protect children. It can be challenging to attain insights across every agency, and there will probably always be some level of duplication or even inconsistency between national and local strategies. However, the cooperation arrangements through the ACCCE and operational teams, these challenges are being met.

62. The ACCCE's mission to drive a collaborative national response is predicated on the principle of partnership across all the agencies that work to counter online exploitation. In my opinion, by giving the room, space and mandate to prioritise collaboration, like-minded agencies are able to direct their energy and efforts in the same direction.

Operation Arkstone

63. Operation Arkstone is a large-scale AFP-led investigation into an online network of alleged child sex offenders.
64. Operation Arkstone began in February 2020 following a report to the ACCCE from the US National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children about an online user allegedly distributing and receiving child abuse material online. AFP investigators subsequently uncovered the online network of alleged child sex offenders and, as at 28 January 2022, the investigation has resulted in 1340 charges laid and 56 child victims identified.
65. The alleged offenders charged under Operation Arkstone range in age from 20 to 48 years. Amongst the offenders charged were a 27 year old former childcare worker and a 30 year old volunteer soccer coach.

National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030

66. In October 2021, the government launched Australia's first *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030 (National Strategy)*. The National Strategy responds to key recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and will provide the strategic framework for a coordinated, whole-of-nation approach to addressing child sexual abuse in all settings over ten years. The AFP, alongside other Commonwealth agencies, received funding to enhance national law enforcement capabilities to prevent, disrupt, investigate and combat online child sexual abuse and exploitation.
67. The **National Strategy** will also ensure continued coordination with State and Territories to build on existing arrangements to enhance responses to child sexual abuse.

I make this solemn declaration under the *Oaths Act 2001* (Tas).

Declared at
on 28 April 2022

Before me

Commander Hilda Sirec