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Policing The Void: Safeguarding Victims in Virtual Waiting Rooms

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Abstract

This article reflects on the child safeguarding vacuum that exists between the arrival of a cyber tip referral of child online harm with the National Crime Agency (NCA) and before it is passed on to the UK policing service for further action. The views expressed in this article are driven by my qualitative interview results from specialist policing sectors dealing with online harm referrals emanating from the NCA. Rather than exploring or questioning why such delays exist, this reflection attempts to highlight and illustrate the complexity of knowing that those tasked with safeguarding and bringing offenders to justice are doing so in a vacuum they cannot control, speed up, or investigate. Children, young people, and vulnerable victims are left to wait in a virtual queue, while it is highly likely that their abuse continues in the background. This article sheds light on and brings to the forefront the virtual waiting room that exists, where child victims of unspeakable acts are left to queue, sometimes for up to a year, before being allocated help, assistance, and safeguarding.

Keywords: *online harm, child victims, cyber tip, police, safeguarding*

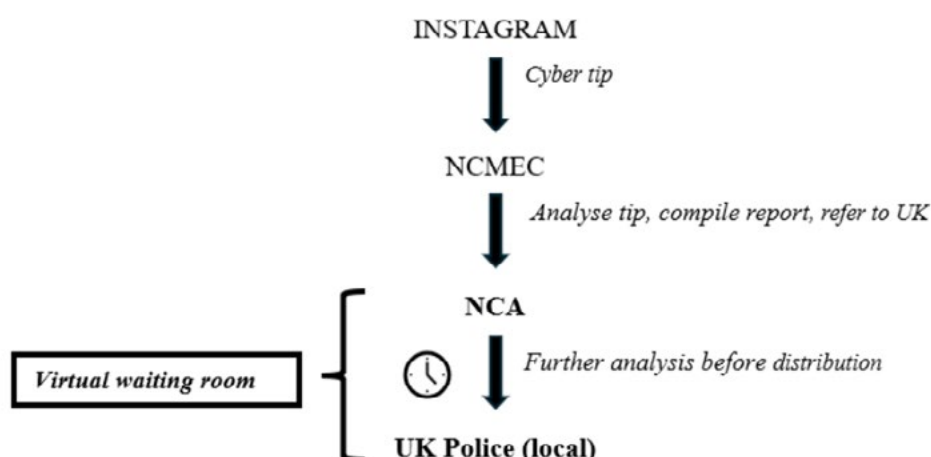
Overview

When I began my interviews with specialist officers dealing with child online harm and child sexual abuse material (CSAM) within various police forces across the United Kingdom, who are dealing with despicable and horrible crimes against children in the online world, it became evident that referrals were subject to significant delays and complications. I was informed that there are enormous backlogs for officers, huge delays in being able to deal with referrals effectively, and a lack of staff able to tackle the constant influx of referrals coming through the door, mainly from the NCA. Where cyber tips or referrals relate to the users in the United Kingdom, there is a requirement to send them to the NCA as the central agency dealing with matters of child sexual abuse and exploitation (Ofcom, 2026).

What became evident quite quickly were the constant delays encountered by police officers and staff when dealing with referrals. For example, delays such as information gathering from third parties or having to wait for devices to be returned from forensic units could add weeks or even months to any investigation. However, there was another type of delay – the kind that left any victim suspended in a vacuum, queuing in the virtual system created to safeguard those victims waiting their turn. A referral could sometimes take up to a year to arrive on the desk of a police force before safeguarding or an investigation would even begin.

Background

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) acts as a conduit in the USA between social media platforms, online platforms and law enforcement by offering a cyber tipline (a service provided by NCMEC). A cyber tipline is a place to report child sexual exploitation online (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children [NCMEC], 2026). Any online platform can report disturbing, explicit, or suspicious images of a child so that law enforcement can follow up. A cyber tip can be just an IP address, or an image, or may include further information, such as details of the victim(s) or offender(s), or both. NCMEC can provide a report and analysis to law enforcement, among other services, which facilitates the removal of such images (NCMEC, 2026). The National Crime Agency (NCA, 2026) highlights that it receives ‘on average 1,700 reports a week of alleged child abuse on online platforms.’ There is a certain way cyber tips (or referrals) travel before they arrive with the local UK policing service as illustrated in this basic example below (e.g. let us assume INSTAGRAM makes a referral to NCMEC because it has flagged an indecent image of a child and the person uploading it lives in the UK – the flow order would be as follows):



This reflection focuses only on the timeline between the NCA and local police forces. Referrals from NCMEC arrive with the NCA (the central hub for the UK), but before the NCA passes those referrals on to local police, 7-12 months might have passed while the NCA investigates and prioritizes all referrals it receives. During this time, the question of whether a victim is safeguarded or an offender is arrested became an interesting debate. I have found there to be a conflict between the immediate safeguarding need of victims and the future safeguarding of potential victims against offenders.

Increase Of Referrals

To understand this complication better, the NCA published that it had received ‘on average 1,700 reports a week of alleged child abuse on online platforms’ (NCA, 2026) from NCMEC. While much is then discussed about how many victims were safeguarded or how many offenders arrested, it fails to describe the waiting time behind those referrals before any work to safeguard or arrest can even begin by police. It does mention, however, that a new program will be implemented over the coming year to ‘speed up investigative processes and free up frontline resources to ensure policing is better equipped than ever to disrupt offenders and prevent harm’ (NCA, 2026). This indicates that, at present, there is no speedy process in place, and that resources and staff are lacking. The inability to work effectively and rapidly is detailed in the latest National Crime Agency Annual Agency Report and Accounts 2024-2025 (NCA, 2025) which reports that due to a ‘63% increase in referrals of online CSA [Child Sexual Abuse] over the last two years’ (p9) it has placed a substantial burden on the agency where ‘demand exceeded capacity’ (p9). All of this is echoed by local forces who feel extremely overwhelmed with the sheer number of referrals coming through their door.

What shocked me the most was the time delay between receiving the cyber tip referral and the police’s ability to take positive action based on the same tip where it was pointed out, on numerous occasions, that this could take up to 12 months. This time delay needs to be pointed out, as victims and offenders are afforded additional time to either, be further abused, or be allowed to continue with their abuse until the correct local police force is identified and the referral/cyber tip is forwarded. Then there are additional delays specific to local police forces impacting their response times as well. Nonetheless, while CSAM referrals or cyber tips should be acted on with immediacy wherever possible, an exact response time does not exist and is dependent on multiple factors such as risk, available evidence, operational capacity or corroboration from other agencies.

However, I was left wondering what processes were available for queueing in the virtual waiting room before the handover to local police forces. It became obvious that there

were no policies dealing with any virtual wait, no statistics that noted queueing times or reasons for delays, and certainly no provisions applied to safeguard anyone while waiting to be served, in a sense, this void is not being talk about. There is furthermore no way of finding out additional information by way of a freedom of information (FOI) request, as the NCA is not listed as a public authority in Schedule 1 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and is not required to respond to any such requests. There is no reasonable way to find out what causes such delays directly from the source, or what could be implemented to help reduce such waiting times for victims, thereby increasing safeguarding.

Consequences Of Waiting

It was evident from speaking with police forces across the country that they shared the same concerns about this constant delay, even though they were mostly playing catch-up with their own referrals. Indeed, there were concerns that victims were sometimes left for many months at locations with their abusers.

In essence, whether virtual waiting times can be reduced or referrals can be distributed quicker is not something I can answer or even begin looking into at this point. It was extremely important to me to highlight this vacuum, especially with the continually growing number of referrals and cyber tips. Safeguarding children should be at the forefront of everyone's actions, and any harm to children should be addressed as quickly as possible. With safeguarding at the forefront, there should be specific measures in place to reduce virtual waiting times for victims and improve response times, allowing for quicker removal of offenders who abuse children now, as well as safeguarding future victims from the same offenders later. It was pointed out that workloads are enormously high for everyone involved in online child safeguarding, including possibly the NCA, but high workload delays (e.g. staff shortages, high number of referrals, limited facilities, limited equipment etc) are different reasons and should not impact waiting victims. The policy paper by the Home Office (2025) estimated that 'there are 400,000 searches for online child sexual abuse material every month in the UK alone', issuing a stark warning that child sexual abuse has escalated in both complexity and severity. Across the years the scale and data have been on the increase. Childlight (2025) reported that 'more than 300 million children under 18 have experienced online sexual abuse and exploitation within the last year' (p12), while in 2023 NCMEC received a shocking 35.9 million cyber tips referring to incidents of suspected CSAM (NCMEC, 2023), with Thorn (2024) illustrating that suspected CSAM files in 2023 were more than 100 million as compared to 450,000 in 2004. All in, NCMEC (2025) reported that 'child sexual abuse material is the largest reporting category for the CyberTipline' (p6). In addition to actual physical CSAM, the Internet Watch Foundation (Internet Watch Foundation, 2026)

reported that artificial intelligence or AI CSAM has seen a ‘rapid, frightening advancement’ (p9) complicating matters yet further for practitioners.

While the NCA (2026) provides statistics on arrests, safeguarding, and sentencing, there is no mention of how many victims were safeguarded between the time referrals arrived with the NCA and when the same referrals were passed along to local policing services for action. It is crucial to keep at the forefront that, as emphasized by Barroso et al. (2026) in their systematic review on the consumption of CSAM, those who consume CSAM not only inflict harm on children shown in those materials, but also present the risk of direct contact offending and could continue with further on or offline sexual violence.

Limitations Of My Reflections

It could be argued that safeguarding is implemented as soon as referrals from NCMEC arrive with the NCA, given the provided statistics, but this is not made clear. However, this position contrasts with and is juxtaposed to the experiences of specialist policing services that were interviewed and thus remains the subject of contention until further information is available. Sometimes referrals could also relate to reports that occurred years prior to being passed to NCMEC and subsequently to the NCA. Such delays could have been the subject of different assessment strategies platforms use, or human and technical issues. Platform systemic delays are not deliberated here but there is again no official indication of how often this happens in published reports either. And even with the introduction of the Tackling Organised Exploitation (TOEX) programme, designed to identify online harm better and strengthen both protection and support for young victims (TOEX, 2025), the extent of its effectiveness remains to be seen. At this point it is unclear whether its capabilities will help reduce the virtual waiting times for child victims or not, or whether it leans more toward offender and organised crime in the investigatory stage after referrals arrive with local police.

Additionally, not all policing services were interviewed and consideration should be given to whether a smaller sample size is sufficiently representative to generate such a viewpoint. Even though I was drawing from a smaller sample size of local police forces, everyone unilaterally pointed out delays with referrals coming from the NCA, and everyone was concerned about the long waiting times. Even if there had only been one force experiencing such delays, then this would have been one too many missing out on child safeguarding in this environment.

Concluding Remarks

I am worried that virtual waiting rooms are continually filling up with online child victims of abuse for months at a time, leaving children exposed, vulnerable, and in suspense, possibly in locations living with abusers, while little explanation as to why this is happening or how this could be addressed in the future is forthcoming. Delays of this scale also imply a wider system failure, one where child victims are subjected to eroding safeguarding mechanisms, operational shortcomings and oversight gaps, at a time when CSAM and the technological ability to produce CSAM are escalating.

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