Underworld: Behind the Scenes of the NCA

Episode Two: Catching the Limo Guy Transcript

Narrator [00:00:00:00] This episode contains descriptions of child sexual offences which you may find upsetting. Please check the podcast notes for more information and guidance on how to seek help and advice.

Rachel Wheeldon []: David Saynor. He took their childhoods from them. He hid behind the limousine company. He used the limousines to abuse these young girls.

Taylor Harrison: He would give them alcohol, make them feel like they were teenage girls having a good time with their friends. He would then ask them to remove clothing, dance, and then the sort of offending would progress.

Robin Pearson: I think there'd always been hints around Limo Guy. There had always been hints around this person who was potentially offending.

Taylor Harrison: The fact that the National Crime Agency had arrested him for a number of sexual offences, all these years later, he just didn't even seem fazed by it.

Rachel Wheeldon: He systematically abused these young, vulnerable girls over ten years. That in itself tells you what type of person he is.

Robin Pearson: The fact he put all of the girls through the trial was really quite appalling. You know, the evidence was overwhelming.

Taylor Harrison: We can do all the research in the world and try and understand what's going on in this person's life. But yeah, knocking on someone's door and asking them to tell you what's happened to them as a child. It is quite a challenge.

Robin Pearson: There's very little that compares with seeing the likes of David Saynor get held to account for the abhorrent crimes he was committing against children 20 years ago.

Sarah Champion: So this is a team of experts that have been brought together to try and get justice for our town.

Narrator: [] This is the story of an investigation into a sadistic sexual predator who groomed and abused vulnerable children. You will hear how David Saynor, a limousine driver from Rotherham, used his flashy vehicles to attract young girls before perpetrating the most horrific abuse on them and how the NCA worked with brave victims to ensure he would likely spend the rest of his life behind bars.

Narrator: I'm Richard Beanland, an officer with the National Crime Agency, and this is Underworld: Behind the Scenes of the NCA.

This podcast series unearths the murky world of dangerous criminals, and the incredible work undertaken by the National Crime Agency to bring them to justice.

Episode 2: Catching the Limo Guy

Rotherham 2014. The community is reeling from the findings of the Jay report, an independent inquiry by Professor Alexis Jay into child sexual exploitation in the South Yorkshire town.

Sarah Champion: I became the MP for Rotherham in November 2012 and shortly after that the Home Affairs Select Committee did an inquiry into CSE. I didn't actually know what CSE was, child sexual exploitation, but it rapidly became clear that it was happening in Rotherham. I met a lot of the survivors and victims. I met a lot of the almost exclusively I think women that were there trying to help these women rebuild their lives and together I started to learn the scale of abuse and perhaps as significantly the level that they had been let down by the authorities that should have been there to protect them.

Narrator: Sarah Champion was the MP for Rotherham when the report was published and had campaigned for the inquiry after being approached by victims and survivors in her constituency. Among the report's key findings were that more than 1,400 children had been subjected to what Professor Jay described as appalling abuse. Victims had been raped, often by multiple attackers, trafficked to other towns and cities, groomed, beaten, threatened and intimidated.

Sarah Champion: I genuinely couldn't believe the scale of it. This is a town of 200,000 people and this was happening in a very concentrated, narrow area, right in the centre of town. From the community there was a sense of relief. They knew that

this had been going on so I think the fact that it was acknowledged, I think that that was really, really powerful. For the victims and survivors, very mixed. Some, relief that they were believed, others it brought it right back up to the front of their minds when they'd probably been trying to bury it for a number of years. But I think overwhelmingly it was… OK so now you believe us…what happens next?

Narrator: The report identified systemic failures at a local level to address the scale of child sexual abuse taking place, and ultimately, the National Crime Agency was formally asked to take up the investigation. Robin Pearson is the NCA's Senior Ops Manager for what became known as Operation Stovewood, the largest law enforcement investigation into non-familial child sexual exploitation and abuse in the UK.

Robin Pearson: [] The remit for Operation Stovewood was sort of child sexual offending and abuse, non-familial, that took place in Rotherham between 1997 and 2013. So it was quite a broad time period.

Narrator: Another key finding from the report was that many victims had described their attackers as Asian and that a significant number of cases involved group-based offending. But nothing about the campaign of abuse by David Saynor was typical of this pattern. The 76-year-old was a white male who operated alone and officers would soon discover he was the most prolific predator the Stovewood team would investigate.

Robin Pearson: This is one offender with many, many victims. You would expect to be a number of offenders working in concert against a number of victims, and this wasn't. Predominantly the, the offending profile in Operation Stovewood is 66% Pakistani heritage males, but the remaining 33, 34% we have white British, we have African men have been convicted, eastern European men have been convicted. We have men from the Middle East. We've had, we had a white British woman charged with offending. So the spectrum is wide.

Narrator: As Operation Stovewood got underway, NCA investigators set about reviewing masses of information and intelligence from third parties, working with partners to identify victims and offenders. NCA officer Taylor Harrison explains.

Taylor Harrison: So the Operation Stovewood investigation has quite a robust way that we identify victims. So they will do a review. So if a name is identified, it could be in social care records, it could be on South Yorkshire Police systems. And then the intelligence officers will do a review and conduct research on that individual. And an assessment will take place to say how likely it is that this person has been a victim of CSE.

Robin Pearson: [] We engaged with Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, but their social care element, and particularly the adult safeguarding team, National Health Service have been excellent in in Rotherham, the Trauma and Resilience Service, who were experts in minimising that risk of retraumatising people when we speak to them. On top of that, we worked with housing. We worked with the education sector, really every public service you can imagine. And of course, South Yorkshire Police were our key partners in all of this. They held an awful lot of information that helped to support and corroborate what we were being told.

Taylor Harrison: So officers from the victim contact team would go out and knock on these now young women, women's doors and say, we're the National Crime Agency. We're conducting this investigation. Operation Stovewood, do you think you may have ever been a victim of CSE, explain what that is, and some of them would say yes, and make reports. And some of them didn't want to speak to us because of their mistrust, perhaps of services, law enforcement. It's very much the unknown. We can do all the research in the world and try and understand what's going on in this person's life, which we would. We'd do checks with other third parties, you know, to see are they known to health services, mental health services, and if we thought that there was perhaps a need we would take, and ISVA, an independent sexual violence advocate with us, so that they can provide that support. You know, if we were to knock on someone's door when they really needed that support right then and there, we would have those people with us to provide that. But yeah, knocking on someone's door and asking them to tell you what's happened to them as a child many, many years ago, when they've perhaps tried to put what's happened behind them, yeah, it is… it is quite a challenge.

Narrator: During the review of Stovewood material, including previous reports made to South Yorkshire Police, one name linked dozens of potential victims. David Saynor, a businessman who operated a limousine company in Rotherham from 2002 to 2016.

Robin Pearson: I think there'd always been hints around Limo Guy. There'd always been hints around this person who was potentially offending, and realising the scale and the scope of that took some time.

Narrator: In 2020, the NCA launched Operation Mycotic under the umbrella of the wider Stovewood investigation, to examine the allegations being made against David Saynor and it soon became apparent that this case would be the largest and most challenging the team would face. Taylor Harrison was brought in as case officer.

Taylor Harrison: [] When we first started, I think there was about 35 females that had been identified as potential victims. So from the outset, the intention was that all those 35 individuals would be visited so that we could identify the offences, gather the evidence, and then look to do an arrest.

Rachel Wheeldon: My name is Rachel Wheeldon. I was the senior investigator for Operation Mycotic. My role was more of a, like, managing risk. Directing the investigation. If Taylor reviewed reports or third-party material, which we had a lot of, Taylor would suggest actions. And I would then raise those actions and allocate them out to other members of the team or other members of Operation Stovewood, because this job was so big that we couldn't just manage that on our team. So we had… pretty much everybody on Operation Stovewood has assisted with this case at some point.

Narrator: Saynor was in his 50s and 60s during the early 2000s when he was accused of abusing countless vulnerable young girls. He hid behind the legitimacy of his limousine business, often offering the victims free rides in his limo or paid work promoting the company.

Taylor Harrison: Some of them were from less affluent areas in Rotherham. They weren't used to riding around in limousines on a regular basis, so he would invite them into his limousines. He would give them alcohol, make them feel like they were teenage girls having a good time with their friends. And then sort of as that progressed, perhaps they'd gotten in the limousine on a number of occasions, not always when they were in a bigger group, but try and isolate them. And when they were on their own, or perhaps a group of two and ask them to remove clothing and dance, perhaps touch each other. And then the sort of offending would progress from there.

Rachel Wheeldon: It was imperative that he had that, he hid behind the limousine company, he used the limousines to abuse these young girls. And, you know, I would have, when I was a 12-year-old, I would have enjoyed going in a limousine, you know, it would have been something that was fun. But he turned that from something fun into something very sinister. And a lot of these, a lot of these girls, they didn't.. either didn't realise that what was happening was wrong or they didn't want to say anything.

Narrator: [] Through careful interviews with the women that had been identified, officers established that Saynor spent months grooming each victim, targeting the most vulnerable, including girls who lived in children's homes or those with troubled backgrounds. He would encourage children to undress or dance for him before going on to rape or sexually assault them, often in the back of his limousines. One victim, who was 16 and in care at the time, was given a job handing out leaflets for Saynor's limousine company. She was driven to an area of Sheffield she didn't know and told to perform a sex act on him or be left there, miles from home and with no means of getting back.

Rachel Wheeldon: One that does stick with me is that one of the victims said that he used to buy her food. And, you know, if you're… even if, even if you're not, but if you're from some… you know, from a family or from an area where, you know, food isn't always necessarily available, that is… that is a way to gain somebody's trust. He groomed them by gaining their trust and identifying what the individual person needed or wanted. And then once he had that trust, he would then sexually abuse them. You know, some of them described him as being a… thinking that he was a really nice guy. So he'd spent that much time with them that they actually thought he was nice, and that he was kind, only for him to take advantage of that.

Taylor Harrison: They were all young females, between the ages of 12 up to 18 and in this case, some of them were found in the company of David Saynor or had been seen in the limousines.

Narrator: When the NCA first launched Operation Stovewood, it was clear this was going to be a unique operation. A focus on victims was vital, as well as an understanding of the scale and complexity of the abuse that had taken place.

Robin Pearson: The requirements specifically around dealing with non-recent sexual offending against children is really quite specialist. The fact that we had investigators who were trained to national standards was something that we had. So we had detectives, we had investigators who were able to turn their hand to this type of investigation. But where we lacked, I think, was having skilled and experienced officers who could both engage with and then obtain the best evidence from victims who had been subject to some really quite horrific abuse, and then obtaining the evidence in a format where we could build an investigation and a criminal case that we could take to a Crown Court out of it, it was a real challenge, and we had to develop that investigative skill set and that, that interviewing skill set as we moved along.

Narrator: [] By the time Operation Mycotic was launched to *specifically* investigate David Saynor, the NCA had well-established processes and experts in place, both at the agency and by working with external organisations to enable a comprehensive, victim-focused investigation.

Rachel Wheeldon: My team consisted of me, the case officer, and then I had three junior officers, but we also had the assistance of intelligence officers, senior intelligence officers, analysts. We had a whole team on Operation Stovewood of victim contact officers. And there were a number of them that assisted with Operation Mycotic. We also had safeguarding and risk management team, to assist us with any issues that we highlighted in relation, in relation to risk to any of the victims or the suspect or their families, all of… all of those people, whether on Operation Stovewood, within the NCA or partner agencies, were all… we were all working together.

Narrator: Once the investigation into David Saynor had got underway, the team set about visiting women that had been identified in historic reports and records. Rachel and Taylor knew that a prosecution could hinge on victims sharing their ordeals with a jury, so keeping the women engaged with the investigation was crucial.

Taylor Harrison: Some of these young women had a lot of other things going on in their life. So speaking to the National Crime Agency was not always the number one priority, even though it obviously is something really important to them, sometimes

we would have difficulties even just trying to get hold of some of these individuals, and it would be a case of sometimes just going out and having that face to face visit, to sometimes just provide that reassurance that…look, we are here. This investigation is still ongoing. And there were occasions where we would maybe have to take a step back from engaging and just sort of, if there were other things going on with that individual, just sort of let them deal with that and the investigation, you know, take a backseat and continue in the background.

Narrator: The team focused on obtaining as much detail as possible about Saynor's offending through extensive interviews with the survivors, relying on their experience to ensure women felt safe and supported throughout.

Rachel Wheeldon: {] I am a tier three victim interviewer, a victim witness interviewer. So I do have that expertise. And when I was in the military, I also conducted interviews with victims throughout my career there. You develop your own style as you go along. For me personally, I don't take any notes. So some of these interviews are two hours long, and I won't take any notes because these victims are telling me probably the worst thing that's ever happened to them in their life. And I just think, you know, the least I can do is be completely engaged in what they're saying.

Taylor Harrison: It's just a case of being sort of open and honest, explaining what the National Crime Agency can do for them but without making false promises. We would knock on people's doors and it would have to be explained to them the lengthy process that that it would take. You know, this investigation started in 2020 and didn't conclude until four years later. So we would have to explain that from the outset, and also the fact that they could report it, we could do this process, and it wasn't necessarily going to result in criminal charges.

Rachel Wheeldon: It's pretty hard going. I don't even know how many interviews we had. Some of these victims gave 2 or 3 separate interviews, some gave more. So to be continuously listening to that over and over and over again, it is hard. It's hard on you as a person, but you're there to do a job and someone has to do that job.

Taylor Harrison: Obviously the things that he's done are horrendous but I think it's just about remaining professional and knowing that these victims are going to get some justice for what's happened to them. Even if it takes a number of years.

Robin Pearson: It can be really challenging, particularly given the amount of time it takes to conduct the interviews and a lot of the victims have their own complexities and their own challenges in their life, and they do turn to those officers for support. So it is… it can be quite stressful over time. So everybody has a psychological assessment every six months and that really assesses their fitness to carry on in the role. But let's take nothing away from the resilience of our staff as well. You know, our staff are professionals. They are doing the job because they care about doing the job. They care about getting justice for the victims. And that motivates them to continue doing what they're doing.

Rachel Wheeldon: [] We had such a good dynamic on the team that if anybody was struggling or anybody was wanting to chat, we all would have, myself included. So, you know, we were all quite open with how we were feeling about what we were listening to and what we were seeing and, and things like that.

Narrator: It soon became apparent David Saynor was the most prolific predator under Operation Stovewood. He had abused dozens of girls over a ten-year period, and due to the sheer volume of victims he had been linked to, we decided a specialist approach was needed for this investigation.

Rachel Wheeldon: We were more focused in relation to going in the limousines because some, some young females and males went in the limousines and didn't disclose that anything had happened. So, you know, from our strategy, we were able to then separate the people that we believe that had been offended against, and then they would go through the intelligence process.

Taylor Harrison: A large number of the complainants, I think, met him through like a legitimate booking. So he would perhaps be booked for like a birthday party and then he might say to them, oh, do you want to come and work for me advertising my limousine business? So he sold it as a bit of a job that they could earn a little bit of extra pocket money. They could bring their friends along, have a good time. And most of them did think that they were at the time, they were having a good time. I recall one of the complainants in the case saying, you know what 12-year-old girl wouldn't want to ride around in a limousine and show off to all of their friends? He would ply them with free alcohol, cigarettes on occasions, drugs, cannabis. And so that might take place over a number of months, possibly, before there's any, any

sort of contact offending. On occasions he was picking some of these girls up from school. They would leave school in the middle of the day, and he would pick them up and they would ride around. He would then perhaps say to a couple of them, oh, can perhaps two of you just come tonight, or when he's dropping them off home, they might have been the last person and it's when they were then on their own that the offending then progressed until that there was contact offences.

Narrator: As well as abusing girls in the back of his limousine, Saynor also lured some of the victims back to his office. One girl recalled how Saynor had invited her into his office to play a game on his computer. She told investigators he made her sit on his lap at which point he assaulted her. Another girl said Saynor had threatened to hurt her family if she told them he had raped her. The abuse caused immeasurable harm to his victims, many of whom were left with lifelong consequences.

Taylor Harrison: [] Some of them described that he destroyed their childhoods. Their life had never been the same. Some of them, particularly those, the more serious offences, the girls that he had raped, you know, report that when they've gone on to have relationships, they'd struggled. It's difficult to describe, but I think, yeah, definitely lifelong. And as I say, quite a number of them struggled with mental health issues as you can only imagine.

Rachel Wheeldon: Some of the victims have said that they find it hard to trust their partners, and they find it hard to be intimate. And, you know, and he… he is the reason for that. He's the reason that they feel like that.

Narrator: The Mycotic team had spent months interviewing victims and gathering corroborating evidence before the decision was made to arrest David Saynor. But the team's work was far from done.

Taylor Harrison: He was first arrested in December of 2020, but then as the investigation progressed, we actually continued to identify potential victims. And I think in the end, there was something like 80 females that we'd identified and spoken to as potential victims of his. Particular due to the historic nature of these offences, you know, we didn't have forensic evidence like people might expect. So, yeah, a lot of it was based on the victims' accounts, speaking to the victims' friends, families, because some of them, some of their parents, their family members, had

witnessed them in Saynor's company or going… knew about them going in his limousines. We had to approach social care and schools to obtain their records. Some teachers had made notes about this limousine business. It was documented in some of the girls' social care records that… about their association with this limousine business. So, yeah, obtaining all the third-party material was particularly challenging because it can be quite a lengthy process going to different businesses and companies and associations to get all those records.

Narrator: Saynor was eventually charged with a string of sexual offenses including rape, assault by penetration and sexual activity with a child.

Taylor Harrison: I remember the day that we got the charges, and myself and Rachel actually went out and visited the majority of the victims in that day so that we could be sure that they had the news of the charges, in person, you know, and provide that support, because, again, whilst that was good news to them, some of these people had been waiting ten, 15 years. And whilst it was good news, the way that they might have dealt with that might not have been positive, you know, that could have triggered them to have some difficulties. So we wanted to go out and see them in person. And it was a very rewarding day. Some of them were extremely grateful for all the work and, that the whole team had put into getting it to this point.

Rachel Wheeldon: [] From where I was in my position, I could see all the hard work that had gone into this job. So yeah, it was, it was extremely rewarding, you know, all the way up to the Deputy Director. Everybody was invested in this case.

Narrator: Since the early stages of the operation, the NCA had been working with the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure the case was being built in the strongest way possible to present at trial.

Rachel Wheeldon: The CPS are partners and they… they provided on this case real sound advice right the way through and it was consistent because we had the same lawyer.

Samantha Thompson: My name is Samantha Thompson and I'm a specialist prosecutor with the Organised Child Sexual Abuse Unit within the Crown Prosecution Service. In my role, I very much work, in tandem with the, the

investigative team. So we become involved in cases quite early on. And that's not, not the way that all cases are prosecuted within the CPS. But certainly in these complex cases, it's… it's a positive benefit to get involved from an early stage. You build that team rapport, you build that bond, and you build that trust as well that you have. And I think it's important that you have that between investigator and prosecutor. You know, we both do have different roles. And sometimes that can be, you know, I can be giving bad news or news that isn't, you know, always welcome. But the… the understanding that you have between you about why that might be and being able to have frank conversations about how we go about something and why we might not be able to do that, but we might be able to do something else is very important. So yeah, that, that relationship is vital in this case, particularly given the number of victims that we have.

Narrator: Saynor denied every allegation put to him. After initially going no comment in his first interview, which you're about to hear, he offered up excuses, refusing to acknowledge he knew the girls.

INTERVIEW AUDIO []

Taylor Harrison: The offending period that we're talking about here starts in 2005. That's sort of the earliest dates of the allegations we've got. What happened around that time that sort of caused your interest in these young girls?

Saynor: No comment.

Taylor Harrison: Was there anything in particular that happened in your life that caused you sexual interest in young girls?

Saynor: No comment.

Taylor Harrison: Were you in a relationship at that time?

Saynor: No comment.

Taylor Harrison: I understand that, that your company [redacted] ceased operation. And that's sort of the end of the offending period that we've got. Can you account for sort of the coinciding of these two dates? You've no longer got your limousine business. We have no allegations after this date?

Saynor: No comment.

Taylor Harrison: Is it because you weren't able to commit any further sexual offenses?

Saynor: No comment.

Taylor Harrison: Because you didn't have your limousines to drive around in?

Saynor: No Comment

END OF INTERVIEW AUDIO

Taylor Harrison: [] As the investigation progressed and, and more evidence was put to him, he did deny knowing some of the girls when in fact we'd got statements to disprove that or records from social workers that had seen him in in the company of some girls. He'd been seen picking up girls from children's homes and things like that.

INTERVIEW AUDIO

Taylor Harrison: So how've gone from she's one of your customers to her being a friend of yours?

Saynor: Just because she lived locally, I suppose. I mean, I can't remember but I suppose she came down to the yard once she got to know me, through driving them around. She probably came down to the yard, which a lot of them did.

Taylor Harrison: Okay, so would a lot of young people, visit your yard?

Saynor: Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW AUDIO

Taylor Harrison: [] He claimed that he believed they were all over the age of 16, that they were all adults, which, when presented with some of the photographs of some of these girls, a couple of them were as young as 12 and they looked like 12-year-olds. There could have been no question that he thought they were 16.

Rachel Wheeldon: He didn't have the limo business when we arrested him. He'd already sold that business. But we, we would still search for devices, you know, some of, some of the victims informed us that they would be contacted by him or they would contact him. We would still search for devices. I mean, it spanned over a ten-year period. So there could have been digital data that would have been beneficial to the case or introduced as evidence. Unfortunately, in this case, that didn't happen. But, you know, we… we conducted a thorough investigation to the point where we went to the yard, even though it wasn't owned by Mr. Saynor anymore. We went to the yard and we conducted inquiries there, and we actually gained entry to the office that some of the victims had described in their… in their accounts.

INTERVIEW AUDIO

Taylor Harrison: So eight females have now made allegations against you Mr Saynor that you've sexually abused them as children. Can you explain to us why such a number of people who… have all independently made allegations against you?

Saynor: Only thing I could think of is for money, to gain money.

Taylor Harrison: Okay, it's a bit of a coincidence, though, isn't it? That eight people have all, all made allegations against you. One person. So you're suggesting that, that all the complainants have made up the allegations? Is that what you saying?

Saynor: Yes

Taylor Harrison: Are you now denying the other allegations? Is that now your…

Saynor: All of them.

Taylor Harrison: Standpoint?

Saynor: Yes

Taylor Harrison: Okay. So are you suggesting that, that all the allegations we've previously spoken to you about, each individual has made up what's happened to them.

Saynor: Yes.

Taylor Harrison: Okay. Do you know any of the complainants that we've previously spoken about?

Saynor: No.

Taylor Harrison: Okay. Because we showed you pictures, didn't we before?

Saynor: You did.

Taylor Harrison: Okay. So you don't recognise anybody else from any of those pictures?

Saynor: Nope. Only what we spoke about.

END OF INTERVIEW AUDIO

Taylor Harrison: [] I think the main difficulty and sort of observation is just the lack of remorse or emotion, like throughout the interviews. And he was interviewed for quite a number of hours. I say over a number of occasions. He didn't even seem concerned. The fact that the National Crime Agency had arrested him for a number of sexual offences all these years later, he just didn't even seem fazed by it. If someone's denying the allegations, you would expect that they would be jumping up and down, screaming from the rooftops, look, you've got this wrong. I'm, I haven't done this, but to just sit there and say nothing and show no emotion or remorse for what you've done… Whilst people are entitled not to answer our questions in the interview, when someone sits there in a case of this nature and, and portrays himself the way he did, it does just speak volumes.

Rachel Wheeldon: [] The fact that he's systematically abused these young, vulnerable girls over ten years, that in itself tells you what type of person he is. I didn't expect that he would show any emotion.

Narrator: Throughout the operation, it was critical that investigators ensured the survivors were safe and felt fully informed about the progress being made. Since the inception of Operation Stovewood, the agency's been working hard to develop an expert approach that put victims first.

Robin Pearson: I think another area where we really had to - and I will use this phrase - build the motorway as we were driving along it was in the space around safeguarding. How do we best safeguard the victims? Because first and foremost it's about ensuring they remain safe. Quite a lot of people, we're walking up to, we're knocking on their door and asking them to tell us the worst parts of their life and what do we do to make sure that those people are in the best place and are well looked after? Our role is to investigate these crimes, but we couldn't turn our eye away from the fact that we'd need people who are looking after the basic needs of some of the women we were working with.

Rachel Wheeldon: We had an allocated safeguarding officer for Operation Mycotic, and that officer knew the case inside out, knew the victims and their circumstances and what support they needed. And they really did push. They really did push for the, for the tailored approach to, to support. And, you know, it, it worked. It worked for

our investigation and it worked for lots of other investigations on Operation Stovewood. I think to the extent that we went to it's very unique to the agency and I think the amount of partnership working that we, that we did is, is unique and how closely we worked with them, because we had to. It was, it was imperative that we did. Otherwise we wouldn't have been able to provide the right support for these victims. And they needed that.

Narrator: Saynor denied all charges, forcing the women to face the ordeal of a trial. So the NCA worked hard with the CPS to prepare them to give evidence and present the best case possible to the jury.

Taylor Harrison: [] I was not surprised because there was no way that this person was going to admit what they'd done. He'd created a new life, he had a new young partner, a new family. There were suggestions from other investigators when there's this number of victims and this amount of evidence that he perhaps should plead guilty. But I don't think I ever thought that would happen based on having sat in front of this person and seen what he was like.

Samantha Thompson: This case was completely victim led, effectively, in the sense of the evidence. We didn't have any DNA. We didn't have any forensics. There was no witnesses. These sorts of crimes, generally, there aren't any witnesses. It's one on one in, you know, an isolated location. Some of the girls corroborated each other about certain incidents, so that was helpful. But, yeah, very much dependent on them. We liaise with them early on. So. right, right from the outset, as soon as the case is charged, we normally offer them a meeting to discuss what's available in terms of special measures. I will go and explain what the various options are and how that might impact on them, and get an understanding of what their concerns are about giving evidence. Sometimes a victim's concerns might be in relation to being identified because these offenses are historic so, they took place a long time ago. Some of them obviously their appearance will have changed since then. Sometimes it is just about being so fearful of being in the same room with the offender. Sometimes it's actually just more about what's going to help them most in terms of giving their best evidence. Is it going to be less stressful for them to sort of do it from a video room, or is it going to be more stressful? Yeah, very much victim-led in that respect, which, which is absolutely right and the way it should be.

Rachel Wheeldon: As the case officer Taylor would be the person that would be there every day. And we had a deputy case officer as well. So those two were pretty much there at court every single day for the six weeks. They all had that rapport with Taylor. So it was right that she was there to support them.

Taylor Harrison: I think when you're at court, it's difficult to describe. It's literally every morning you get up, you come into the office. Are there any…there might be emails from the barristers to deal with and then we'll, we'll travel to court. There might be things to do on the day down there. We might not be finishing until whatever time at night because there's last minute requests of… can you produce this document and amend this? And yeah, it does kind of consume you a little bit.

Samantha Thompson: [] All of them gave evidence on video so their accounts that they gave to the NCA on video were played effectively as their evidence in chief. And then some of the girls gave evidence live in court. Some had their cross-examination prerecorded. That then gets played as another video, effectively, to the jury. And then others had screens and different special measures to assist them to, to give their best evidence.

Taylor Harrison: We did have a number of challenges whilst at court because, one of the complainants actually withdrew support literally the week of trial due to some of those difficulties with her mental health, she just didn't feel like she could go through with it and give evidence when it came, when it came to coming to court. So that presented challenges because the indictment was there in front of the jury and they were expecting to hear evidence from this individual. So there were times throughout that trial when we thought we weren't going to get to the end.

Samantha Thompson: The defence wanted to make an application to discharge the jury and, you know, start again effectively. But we managed to rebut that, and that, that was, you know, a bit hair-raising, I guess, at the time. But, we knew we were on good grounds to, to be able to proceed. A couple of the victims who gave evidence live in court. Yeah. Quite impactive. I mean, it's all impactive, obviously, but seeing someone's… the whites of someone's eyes, I think sometimes can be quite compelling. And listening to someone talk about what is a horrific experience, and being cross-examined about it, it's very compelling, I think, to see that. In this case, something that was quite unusual, I guess, was not all the victims knew each other, so they were giving accounts of very similar behaviour. Saynor's behaviour was very similar in all of the accounts of the girls. So there was a consistency,

effectively of his modus operandi, I guess. And that was striking, I think, in this particular case. You don't always get that because sometimes girls are known to each other and there's a lot, you know, they're out together at the same time. But in this particular case, victims didn't all know each other, so they were coming forward with a similar account of what happened to them. And that was very much, you know, very compelling in this case.

Taylor Harrison: I could literally feel my heart in my chest going because you've got these ten, 12 individuals that have kind of put all their faith in you. And it doesn't matter how many times you say to someone, look, this, this may not result in the verdict that you want or a prosecution, but when you've come all that way and we are four years down the line and all they want is for this person to get found guilty. So yeah, it is a lot of pressure. But ultimately the decision is out of our hands.

Narrator: [] After deliberating for several hours, the jury found Saynor guilty of 15 offences, including two counts of rape, five counts of meeting a child following sexual grooming and three counts of assault by penetration. But he was cleared of five charges, leaving Rachel and the team with mixed reactions.

Rachel Wheeldon: I was sat next to Taylor at the time. It was a really good day for everyone. The team, the NCA, Operation Stovewood, the victims, but he wasn't found guilty in relation to all of the charges that had been brought, and we did make sure that we delivered the news to each victim individually. And, you know, there were some people that were upset. There were some victims who were, who were really upset. And it's hard to deliver that message. It is really hard. And it's, it does, it does stick with you. These are people's lives, it's not, you know. This is their entire lives.

Robin Pearson: The fact he put all of the girls through the trial was really quite appalling. Because he should have put his hands up. Well, you know, the evidence was overwhelming. It really was.

Rachel Wheeldon: David Saynor. He took their childhoods from them. And they've got, they got to a point where they felt that they could disclose that information to the NCA. They trusted us with that information and we took it to court. And if they didn't have the outcome that they wanted, you know, are we putting them back in that place again? Are we putting back in that position? Are we triggering them again?

Narrator: Saynor was remanded immediately after the verdict was delivered and he was brought back to court a month later to be sentenced.

Taylor Harrison: [] That day is probably a day that will stay with me throughout my career. They all gave victim personal statements that were read to the court, and a lot of these women didn't know each other, but they were all, they'd all come, and they all sat together and were supporting each other, because they had, as strange as it sounds, something in common. So yeah, it was… it was a very emotive day when he was sentenced, and they were reading through some of the words of how it had affected these women.

Rachel Wheeldon: One of them, which I had written with the victim in the car on the way to, to the sentencing hearing because she just, she hadn't felt that she could do it up until that moment where she was in the car on the way there. But, you know, there was there was a line in her statement. She said something along the lines of, it doesn't matter how long you go to prison for, Dave, it will never be enough. That shows you what kind of impact it's had on, on her life. So even though she's put herself through all those interviews with the NCA, she's put herself through four years of waiting for this moment and she's saying it doesn't matter how long you go to prison for, like, that won't, that won't be enough to be able to put her in a position where she, where she feels happy with, with life. One of the other victims, in her impact statement, said that if it hadn't have been Taylor that knocked on the door, she wouldn't have been able to do it. So, you know, when we're talking about having the right people in the right roles, that shows you that Taylor being there and being that consistent for this victim, how important it was to her that she's put that in her personal statement to the judge.

Taylor Harrison: I think it's important that an offender understands the impact that their actions have had on an individual, whether that will have sunk in or had any effect on him, I don't know, but I think it's important for the victims to have, have that day and have, have their voice heard, because a lot of these women - girls at the time - just felt like they hadn't ever been listened to. Some of them had told people about what had happened or attempted to tell people, but perhaps not gone into the full detail. So I think to be able to just have their say and have it explained to the court and to the public and to, to Saynor himself.

Narrator: In August 2024, 76-year-old David Saynor was sentenced to 24 years in prison, one of the longest Stovewood sentences the team had secured. He was told by the judge he would likely die behind bars.

Samantha Thompson: The overall sentence that he got, I thought that was very representative of what he'd done. I think it was a good indication of how serious his offending was and how prolonged it was, and over what protracted period he was offending over and then the volume of victims obviously. It's important, you know, that the public see that these offences are treated seriously by courts.

Rachel Wheeldon: [] Probably the proudest that I've been in my career. It was it was a brilliant result. And, you know, testament to the investigation team and testament to the victims.

Taylor Harrison: That day in particular was definitely the most rewarding. Seeing the impact that it had on the victims and just how pleased they were that, that they finally got some justice, you know, and that obviously builds confidence in the agency and in law enforcement in general.

Sarah Champion: A long sentence has I hope a chilling effect on other perpetrators or potential perpetrators. What it does for the victims and survivors is say this is not your fault. You were a victim, this person is evil, what they did to you was horrendous and we believe you.

Rachel Wheeldon: He was allowed to live his life for another 15 years after doing this to these girls. They've lived with what happened to them ever since it happened. It will always stay with them, but they are, they are so brave for what they did and for, for trusting us with, with their accounts. That's such a hard thing to do. To tell, to tell a stranger about the worst thing that's ever happened to you.

Taylor Harrison: I remember that the judge … and he did sort of look up and almost directly speak to them how they'd come forward to report these offences. They'd given evidence, which is, is very difficult. You know, some of these girls had stood there and had a defence barrister call them a liar, say that they were making this up, say that they were doing it for compensation. And they stood their ground and had, you know, come back to court to see him be sentenced.

Robin Pearson: That is what secured the convictions. And we can't ignore the trauma and the challenges that those women had to go through to give the evidence and then to stay with the, the case through to trial. The team that were on it, Rachel and Taylor particularly were excellent. They are professionals, they understand their role, they understand their purpose, and they put together an excellent file with some really strong evidence. And, you know, when that got put to test at court, it got home and they got the really good result that, that David Saynor is spent going to spend the rest of his life in prison.

Sarah Champion: [] Personally, I just think the fact that victims and survivors have the strength and the courage to go ahead and do that is remarkable but knowing that the NCA is walking along by their side, I think it helps give them the strength to do that as well. It has been such a remarkable transformation in the way that survivors and victims have been supported, dealt with, and you can literally see through the prosecutions that the NCA has worked and is continuing to work in our town.

Rachel Wheeldon: This was a very unique case. He was a lone offender, a white male. He… his age. He was 50s to 60s. So it was a very different case for Operation Stovewood. But you know, when you think about the Alexis Jay report identifying approximately 1400 victims, and we identified close to 100 potential victims on Mycotic, that's a large chunk of that 1400. So it shows you what the scale of the case was.

Taylor Harrison: It's very, very different to investigating… say… the importation of drugs, which obviously affects a lot of people, but you haven't got that person there that's had this horrendous thing and all the challenges that that brings in managing that person to, all the way through from the first knock on the door, right through to a successful conviction.

Sarah Champion: The Stovewood team that we have for Rotherham, it's not your typical cops that you might consider. It is people who are choosing to be there because they really care about this. So this is a team of experts that have been brought together to have the specific skills that a specific crime in a specific town needs and they've decided to use all that skill and experience to try and get justice for our town. And it works.

Rachel Wheeldon: Just because of the amount of victims and how hard, how hard that side of things is. I don't think people have an appreciation sometimes for how hard it is for the victims, to manage the victims, and to have to work so many different parts to be able to support people that have been through these horrendous crimes. I do recall having a meeting with everybody and letting everybody know that essentially that I was really proud of the team. You know, they, they, they went above and beyond for some of these victims. They - there was there was nights spent in the office. There were phone calls at weekends or after working hours. And none of them hesitated. There was a sense of pride from them, from me, all the way up, there was a sense of pride with this investigation.

Narrator: [] The NCA's Operation Stovewood remains the single biggest operation of its kind. To date, it has identified and provided support to 1,150 potential victims. Officers have also secured the conviction of 49 offenders who have received custodial sentences totalling more than 1,500 years. Among them was Muhammad Imran Ali Akhtar, who was jailed for 23 years for six offences, including the rape of a 13-year-old girl. Also jailed for 23 years was Muhammad Siyab, one of seven men convicted of sexually exploiting and raping two vulnerable girls when they were aged between 11 and 15.

Narrator: Following Baroness Casey's national audit of group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse, the NCA is now overseeing a new criminal operation, codenamed Beaconport to investigate grooming gangs and wider group-based offending. The UK-wide operation will see thousands of previously closed investigations reviewed by specially trained officers.

Beaconport will apply the tried and tested approach of Operation Stovewood to put victims at its heart, ensuring their allegations have been investigated thoroughly and that perpetrators face justice.

Robin Pearson: You look at what we've learned around safeguarding, what we've learned around victim interviewing, what we've learned around processes of risk management and investigating this very sort of niche, complex area. It has been really valuable for the agency. When you look forward, will those skills be required in future? Absolutely. We're only on the heels of the Casey review where the National Crime Agency's called out for its ability to investigate, particularly on Operation Stovewood. And what will our role be in looking at that in the future? Those skills, it's put the National Crime Agency at the forefront of fighting this type of criminal activity.