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Tackling Child Sexual Abuse

Volume 765: debated on Tuesday 8 April 2025

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🕒 1.14pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department >

(Jess Phillips)

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With permission, I will make a statement updating the House on Government action to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation and on progress on the recommendations of the independent inquiry.

Child sexual abuse and exploitation are the most horrific and disturbing crimes—an abuse of power against those who are most vulnerable, leaving lifelong trauma and scars. Best estimates suggest that 500,000 children are sexually abused every year. Analysis by the police found that there were 115,000 recorded cases of child sexual abuse in 2023; 4,228 group-based offences identified by the CSE taskforce, of which 1,125 were family abuse; and 717 were sexual exploitation cases. In a growing number of recorded cases, the perpetrators themselves are under 18.

The House will be aware that, in its first year of operation up to March 2024, the grooming gangs taskforce contributed to 550 arrests across the country. In the last nine months of 2024, the taskforce contributed to 597 arrests. In other words, it surpassed in that nine-month period what it achieved in its first full year of operation. Data for the first three months of this year is currently being collected from forces and will be available early next month, but all round we are making progress at every level to increase the number of investigations, the number of arrests and, most importantly, the number of victims who are seeing their attackers brought to justice.

Despite the seriousness and severity of these crimes, there has been a shameful failure by institutions and those in power over many years to protect children from abuse or exploitation, so we are today setting out a progress update on action this Government are taking to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation, to get support and justice for victims, and to ensure that perpetrators are caught and put behind bars.

Action on CSA since the election means that we are introducing a new child sexual abuse police performance framework, including new standards on public protection, child abuse and exploitation; legislation targeting online offending, including abuse and grooming enabled by artificial intelligence; new powers for Border Force to detect digitally held child sex abuse at the UK border; new restrictions preventing registered sex offenders from changing their names to hide the threat they pose; and increased investment in law enforcement capability, through the police undercover online network and the Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme.

In the Home Secretary's statement to the House in January, she set out what we are doing to crack down on grooming gangs, and today I can provide an update on that work. Baroness Casey's three-month national audit on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse is ongoing. It is building a comprehensive national picture of what is known about child sexual exploitation, identifying local and national trends, assessing the quality of data, looking at the ethnicity issues faced, for example, by cases involving Pakistani heritage gangs, and reviewing police and wider agency understanding. We are developing a new best practice framework to support local authorities that want to undertake victim-centred local inquiries or related work, drawing on the lessons from local independent inquiries such as those in Telford, Rotherham and Greater Manchester. We will publish the details next month.

Alongside that, we will set out the process through which local authorities can access the £5 million national fund to support locally-led work on grooming gangs. Following feedback from local authorities, the fund will adopt a flexible approach to support both full independent local inquiries and more bespoke work, including local victims' panels or locally led audits of the handling of historical cases.

The chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council, Gavin Stephens, has, at the Home Secretary's request, urged the chief constables of all 43 police forces in England and Wales to re-examine their investigations into group-based child sexual exploitation that resulted in a "no further action" decision. As of 1 April, the Child Sexual Abuse Review Panel can review child sexual abuse cases that took place after 2013. Victims and survivors can now ask the panel to independently review their case if they have not already exercised their victims' right to review.

I can also announce that we intend to expand the independent child trafficking guardian scheme across all of England and Wales, providing direct support to many more child victims of sexual exploitation and grooming that to date has only been available in selected areas. These measures will enable more victims and survivors to receive the truth, justice, improvements and accountability they deserve and put more vile perpetrators of this crime behind bars.

Much of this crucial activity builds on the vital work of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse that was undertaken between 2015 and 2022. Let me, on behalf of the whole House, again thank Professor Alexis Jay for chairing that seven-year national inquiry with such expertise, diligence and compassion. IICSA revealed the terrible suffering caused to many child sexual abuse victims, and the shameful failure of institutions to put the protection of children before the protection of their own reputations. The inquiry drew on the testimony of over 7,000 victims and survivors, and considered over 2 million pages of evidence. Its findings, culminating in the final report published in October 2022, were designed to better protect children from sexual abuse, and address the shortcomings that left them exposed to harm. The publication of that final report two and a half years ago should have been a landmark moment, but instead the victims and survivors were failed again. None of the inquiry's recommendations were implemented or properly taken forward by the previous Government in the 20 months they had to do so.

As part of today's progress update on our action on child sexual abuse, the Government are setting out a detailed update and timetable for the work that is under way on the IICSA recommendations. I can announce to the House that, to prioritise the protection of children and improve national oversight and consistency of child protection practice, this Government will establish a new child protection authority. Building on the national child safeguarding review panel, the child protection authority will address one of IICSA's central recommendations by providing national leadership and learning on child protection and safeguarding. Work to expand the role of the panel will begin immediately, and we will consult on developing the new authority this year. We have also asked Ofsted, His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services and the Care Quality Commission to conduct a joint thematic review of child abuse in family settings, starting this autumn.

The IICSA report recommended the introduction of a new mandatory duty to report—something that the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and I have all supported for more than a decade. In the Crime and Policing Bill we will now be taking forward a new mandatory duty to report child sexual abuse for individuals in England undertaking activity with children and, crucially, a new criminal offence of obstructing an individual from making a report under that duty. Mandatory reporting will create a culture of openness and honesty, rather than cover-ups and secrecy. It will empower professionals and volunteers to take prompt, decisive action to report sexual abuse. It will demonstrate to children and young people that if they come forward, they will be heard. Anyone who deliberately seeks to prevent someone from fulfilling their mandatory duty to report child sexual abuse will face the full force of the law.

Today's update also sets out how the Government are supporting victims and survivors in accessing support and seeking justice. We are tasking the criminal justice joint inspectorates to carry out a targeted inspection of the experiences of victims of child sexual abuse in the criminal justice system. We are instructing the Information Commissioner's Office to produce a code of practice on the retention of personal data relating to child sexual abuse. In some cases, where serious institutional failings contributed to the abuse, those institutions have provided financial redress schemes or compensation to victims and survivors who are affected. We continue to support those schemes as recognition by those institutions that they badly failed children in their care.

On the IICSA proposal for a wider national redress scheme for all victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in institutional settings, the scale of that proposal demands that it is considered in the context of the spending review later this year, and we will make further updates at that stage.

One crucial area where we want to make immediate progress is the provision of therapeutic services for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. We will therefore bring forward proposals in the coming weeks to improve access to those services; further details will be set out following the spending review. Ahead of the spending review, I can announce that in this financial year the Home Office will double the funding it provides for national services, supporting adult survivors of child sexual abuse, and providing more help to those adults who are living with the trauma of the horrific abuse they suffered as children.

Finally, we want to speed up progress to make it easier for victims and survivors to get recompense directly from the institutions that failed them. We are therefore removing the three-year limitation period on victims and survivors bringing personal injury claims in the civil courts, and shifting the burden of proof from survivors to defendants, thereby protecting victims from having to relive their trauma to get the compensation they are owed.

Today's update, building on the measures that the Home Secretary announced in January, demonstrates this Government's steadfast commitment to tackling child sexual abuse. The measures we are implementing will protect more children, find more criminals, and deliver support and justice to more victims and survivors. But this is not the end point; it is just the beginning. We will continue to drive forward reforms to protect more children from abhorrent abuse, and support more adult survivors of those traumatic crimes. As we pursue our safer streets mission, we will use every available lever to drive progress on these issues, across Government and beyond.

I want to finish with a word for the victims and survivors. No one should go through what they did. While the failings of the past cannot be undone, we can, we must, and we will strain every sinew to prevent them from being repeated. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker >

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I call shadow Minister Katie Lam.

🕒 1.25pm

Katie Lam >

(Weald of Kent) (Con)

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I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement.

In January, the Home Secretary said that the Government would conduct five local inquiries into the rape gangs who have terrorised so many innocent children. More than three months since the Government announced those local inquiries, Tom Crowther KC, a barrister invited by the Home Office to help establish them, knows almost nothing about their progress, and neither do we. Why is the framework for local inquiries now being led by Ministers, rather than by independent voices such as Tom Crowther? Why is the £5 million set aside for inquiries no longer being allocated, but instead delivered on an "opt-in" basis? What do the Government intend to do about local leaders who say there is no need for an independent inquiry, as they do in Bradford and in Wales?

The girls we are talking about are predominantly white. The men who preyed on them were predominantly Muslim, generally either from Pakistan or of Pakistani heritage. One of the victims from Dewsbury was told by her rapist:

"We're here to fuck all the white girls and fuck the Government."