

News story: Government outlines strengthened plans to tackle child abuse

The Government has today (5 March) set out plans to strengthen information sharing between police, social workers and healthcare professionals to tackle child abuse and neglect, and to improve joint working and decision-making.

Building on the ambitious programme of reform to the children's social care system, the Home Office and Department for Education have responded to a joint consultation, 'Reporting and acting on child abuse and neglect', which sought views on how to best protect vulnerable children from abuse and neglect in all its forms.

Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerabilities, Victoria Atkins said:

Child sexual exploitation and abuse are sickening crimes which this Government has done more than any other to tackle. In the past we have seen vulnerable children let down by the very people who should have protected them from harm. We are clear that this must never be repeated.

We have set a clear expectation on the police by giving child sexual abuse the status of a national threat, set up joint inspections of health, police, and children's social care, and introduced a national whistleblowing helpline with the NSPCC for any employee who wants to raise a concern about how their organisation is dealing with a concern about a child.

The consultation sought views on issues relating to the child protection system, specifically proposals to introduce additional legal duties for professionals and organisations working to protect young people. These proposed changes to the law included mandatory reporting of any concern relating to child abuse by practitioners, and a duty to act, whereby individuals could face professional or criminal sanctions for failing to take appropriate action where child abuse was known or suspected. The consultation received a response of more than 760 responses from social workers, police officers, local government, children's charities, educators and health professionals, victim support groups, and other members of the public.

Of these responses, the majority disagreed with introducing new statutory requirements. Nearly 70% felt mandatory reporting could have an adverse impact on the child protection system and 85% said it would not in itself lead to appropriate action being taken to protect children. Only 25% were in favour of a duty to act, and less than half that number (12%) supported introducing mandatory reporting.

The evidence received does not demonstrate that either of the proposals would sufficiently improve outcomes for children. Rather, feedback suggests that these additional measures could risk creating unnecessary burdens, divert attention from the most serious cases, hamper professional judgement, and potentially jeopardise the vital relationships between social workers and vulnerable families in their care.

England already has a higher rate of reporting than countries where such duties are in place, and the evidence from serious case reviews, Ofsted inspections and the consultation responses does not suggest there is a systemic problem.

Instead, the majority of respondents (63%) were in favour of allowing the Government's existing programme of child protection reforms time to embed before considering additional statutory measures. Reflecting on considering the current child protection system, respondents called for better joint working between different local agencies, further work to encourage new and innovative practice, and better training for practitioners.

Children and Families Minister, Nadhim Zahawi, said:

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the social workers and other professionals who support the most vulnerable in our society, especially those who have been victims of abuse.

The response to this consultation shows the strength of feeling among the sector on this extremely important issue, and it's vital that we work directly with people on the ground, supporting them to carry out their work sensitively and efficiently.

Decisions we make as a government should be with the ambition of improving outcomes for as many in society as possible, which is why we must listen to the views and experience of the sector as we progress further with our reform agenda.

National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Child Protection, Chief Constable Simon Bailey said:

I'm pleased that the Government has listened to the views of frontline professionals by promising to work with us to improve coordination between agencies as they work to tackle child sexual abuse.

Teachers, social workers and other professionals can and do play a vital role in keeping children safe from harm but our research suggests imposing additional legal requirements on them could be counterintuitive – with forces finding themselves inundated with reports that shouldn't ever have been made.

Key to tackling this horrendous crime is ensuring these dedicated

professionals are well trained in how to spot the signs of abuse and act on them, and that agencies are truly coordinated.

Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, Isabelle Trowler, said:

The Government has listened to the views of social work leaders who know the system best and understand the unintended consequences that introducing mandatory reporting could produce.

Our focus should be to continue building public confidence in our first-class child protection system which holds a door wide open for vulnerable children and also provides support for families.

In direct response to sector feedback, the Government has today confirmed that it will:

- prove coordination between agencies involved in keeping children safe through better information sharing – implementing stronger safeguarding arrangements locally, as well as clearer, stronger national statutory guidance;
- publish revised Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance to make clear the roles and responsibilities of the agencies involved in protecting children from abuse and neglect;
- build on its successful campaign, [Together, we can tackle child abuse](#), a new phase of which launched in February 2018;
- continue to boost the professional development of social workers and practitioners by improving training, accreditation and regulation, supporting them to better protect children and promote their welfare; and
- consider the current legal framework to assess whether it is sufficiently robust in terms of criminal offences for concealing child abuse and neglect.

The government's consultation is the latest in an active and broad reform agenda, which includes a £200 million investment in innovation, legislation and cross-governmental working.