

Parliament Warns Child Protection Laws Lack Real Consequences

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Efforts to shield children from sexual exploitation by grooming gangs are set to fall short, as lawmakers warn that proposed legislation lacks meaningful penalties to hold professionals accountable for failing to report suspected abuse.

A report by Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights has sounded the alarm over the Government's flagship measures, stating they may prove largely symbolic. Under the Crime and Justice Bill, individuals working with children would be legally obligated to notify law enforcement or local councils if they suspect a child sex offence. Yet despite repeated calls

for accountability, the Government has refused to classify noncompliance as a criminal offence, opting instead for possible professional sanctions such as being barred from child-related work, a consequence that is not guaranteed to be enforced.

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, led by Professor Alexis Jay, previously underscored the urgency of stronger action, noting that an estimated 3.1 million adults in England and Wales reported having experienced child sexual abuse before the age of 16. The Inquiry called for mandatory reporting and recommended that failure to act could be treated as a criminal matter. These recommendations gained further weight after an investigation by Baroness Louise Casey uncovered 700 recorded cases of group-based child sexual exploitation in a single year, with victims as young as 10 years old.

Despite these, the Government maintains that criminal penalties for failing to report abuse could discourage people from working with children or from reporting concerns due to fear of legal consequences. Instead, those who ignore the reporting duty might be referred to the Disclosure and Barring Service, known as the DBS, which decides whether to place individuals on a list that prohibits them from working with minors. Critics argue that this discretion leaves too much room for inaction and allows the possibility that no real consequence will follow.

Committee chairman Lord David Alton expressed scepticism that the proposed approach will lead to genuine reform. “Without repercussions for those who fail to do their duty and report these horrific crimes, it may prove ineffective,” Alton warned. “If it fails to deliver the necessary change, the Government must review its impact and toughen its penalties.”

Labour Member of Parliament Rachael Maskell echoed those concerns, emphasising that accountability is the cornerstone of safeguarding. Campaign group Mandate Now pointed out the inconsistency of punishing failures to report financial crimes, like money laundering, while treating the concealment of child abuse as a lesser offence.

While the Home Office insists the new rules will promote a culture of openness and trust, the reality remains that children depend on adults to act decisively when abuse is suspected. Professor Jay, whose inquiry heard from over 7,000 survivors, noted that many victims had confided in adults only to be ignored, a betrayal that compounded their trauma.

A spokesperson for the Home Office defended the approach, stating that alongside the duty to report, the Government will create a new criminal offence of obstructing or preventing an

individual from making a report. This offence will carry a maximum prison sentence of five years. Even so, lawmakers and campaigners argue that without criminal consequences for failing to report abuse itself, the system is unlikely to change a culture that too often favours silence over protection.