



HM Government

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
TO THE INDEPENDENT
INQUIRY INTO CHILD
SEXUAL ABUSE
INVESTIGATION REPORT
INTO ALLEGATIONS OF
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE
LINKED TO WESTMINSTER**

18 September 2020

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Introduction

The Government is grateful to the Inquiry for its Report and the insight it provides. The Government is committed to tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation in all its forms. We are committed to ensuring high standards of conduct in all that we do and have considered the Inquiry's findings carefully. Our response to each of the Inquiry's recommendations is set out below.

Recommendation 1:

The criteria for forfeiture of all honours must be formally extended to include convictions, cautions and cases decided by trial of the facts involving offences of child sexual abuse. This must be set out in a published policy and procedure, which must include a clear policy on how forfeiture decisions are made public. The Inquiry expects the Forfeiture Committee to take a lead on this matter.

Recommendation 2:

The Cabinet Office should re-examine the policy on posthumous forfeiture, in order to consider the perspectives of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.

The Honours and Appointments Secretariat in the Cabinet Office coordinates the operation of the honours system and supports the Forfeiture Committee and the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals (known as the HD Committee). The HD Committee is the policy forum for the honours system. It gives advice about possible changes to the honours system and military medals policy. This includes responsibility for policy on forfeiture of honours. Its members are senior officials in the Civil Service and the Royal Household.

An honour can be revoked if it is determined that an individual has behaved in a way that brings the honours system into disrepute. Specific examples of disrepute include being convicted of a criminal offence, or sanctioned by a regulator, or struck off by a professional body but any action or inaction can be considered. Recommendations to forfeit are made by the Forfeiture Committee to the Prime Minister, and then to The Queen for approval.

The Forfeiture Committee has a majority of independent members and is chaired by a Permanent Secretary, on delegated authority from the Head of the Civil Service. The Committee is not an investigatory body – it does not decide whether or not someone is guilty or innocent of a particular act. Instead, it reflects the findings of official investigations and makes a recommendation of whether or not the honours system has been brought into disrepute. The Committee is also not a policy-making body.

Most of the structure and responsibility for the operation of the honours system is therefore independent of the Government of the day. Changes to policy on forfeiture are made on advice from the HD Committee, which may in turn be advised by a range of sources including the Forfeiture Committee. The HD Committee is taking forward an in-depth review of forfeiture policy in this area, in response to the recommendations made by the Inquiry.

We will continue to keep the Inquiry informed of progress in this area.

Recommendation 3:

Government, political parties and other Westminster institutions must have whistleblowing policies and procedures which cover child sexual abuse and exploitation. Every employee must be aware that they can raise any concerns using these policies and that the policies are not limited to concerns specific to a person's employment.

Government Departments

All government departments have whistleblowing policies in place. To support departments in ensuring their policies are effective, a model policy is provided by Civil Service Employee Policy, part of Civil Service HR. This policy has been renamed 'Raising a Concern' in line with a recommendation made by Professor Thorburn. The change of emphasis in the name moves the policy away from the 'whistleblowing' term which we have found can discourage individuals wishing to raise a concern. The policy specifically mentions danger to environments or to people, where it gives the example of abuse or mistreatment of children. Civil Service Employee Policy supported departments with their implementation of the model policy by running a cross-government 'Speak-Up' campaign in 2019. A further campaign is planned for 2021.

Parliament

The internal policies and procedures of Parliament are a matter for both Houses and the Government respects the exclusive cognisance of each House to conduct its own internal affairs.

However, the Government is clear that all institutions should have appropriate policies and procedures in place to ensure that they fulfil their responsibilities to safeguard children. Everyone must adhere to the legislation and guidance in place to safeguard children. The 2018 statutory guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children sets out that everyone who comes into contact with children and families has a role to play.

More broadly, the Government has been working closely with both Houses to support meaningful culture change in Parliament. For example, the Government worked closely with the House Authorities to establish the Independent Complaints and Grievance

Scheme which provides support for improving the working culture in Parliament. Both Houses have also agreed to a Behaviour Code which sets out the standards expected of everyone working in Parliament. This Government has made clear that there is no place for bullying, harassment, or sexual harassment in Parliament, and by working cross party we are helping to ensure that everyone working in Parliament is treated with dignity and respect.

Recommendation 4:

The Cabinet Office must ensure that each government department reviews its child safeguarding policy or policies in light of the expert witness report of Professor Thoburn. There must also be published procedures to accompany their policies, in order that staff know how to enact their department's policy. All government departments must update their safeguarding policies and procedures regularly, and obtain expert safeguarding advice when doing this.

All government departments have been made aware of the Inquiry's recommendation and of the contents of Professor Thoburn's detailed report.

As Professor Thoburn's report acknowledges - *'It is appropriate that safeguarding policies and procedures will vary according to the differing remits of government departments ... and extents to which employees provide services to children in general and specifically to children who are vulnerable to abuse'*. Nonetheless, Civil Service HR has developed and launched a model safeguarding policy and a 'Health Check' process, which again have been made available to all departments. These products enable departments to robustly check their own procedures and practice to ensure they are fit for purpose, and are driving a consistent approach to safeguarding across departments.

The Civil Service HR safeguarding products recognise that children are one group of several who may be vulnerable to harm and exploitation. They were launched in January 2020 for departmental implementation and a check of their use in departments will be undertaken later this year.

In addition, all departments which spend overseas aid budget (Official Development Assistance (ODA)) are invited to attend a quarterly meeting on safeguarding - focused on tackling sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH) in the aid sector. This is a forum for departments to share lessons, identify risks and align approaches to safeguarding in relation to ODA spend, including how to assess the suitability of partners' safeguarding policies and procedures and to raise departments' own capability. The forum is working on a cross-government ODA strategy on safeguarding against SEAH across the aid sector, within ODA-spending departments and across the UK's ODA funding. It has also agreed a register of strategic safeguarding risks to be reviewed on a six monthly basis.

Recommendation 5:

All political parties registered with the Electoral Commission in England and Wales must ensure that they have a comprehensive safeguarding policy.

All political parties must also ensure that they have procedures to accompany their policies, in order that politicians, prospective politicians, staff and volunteers know how to enact their party's policy, which must be published online. All political parties must update their policies and procedures regularly, and obtain expert safeguarding advice when doing this.

The Electoral Commission should monitor and oversee compliance with this recommendation.

The Government agrees that political parties should have in place a comprehensive child safeguarding and whistleblowing policy alongside the appropriate procedures.

However, the Electoral Commission – whose remit is focused on electoral law – has no expertise in child safeguarding policies or legislation and is therefore not an appropriate regulator of the quality of these procedures.

The Government recommends that individual political parties work with child safeguarding experts to review their own policy and procedures, and that they publish those policies online on their websites to ensure that these details are accessible to the press and public. Such transparency will help ensure public confidence and scrutiny of such policies.

This reflects the broader stance the Government has taken in response to the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 2018, that each political party should draw up their own Code of Conduct to set clear expectations about the behaviour of their members, both offline and online.