



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Human Trafficking](#), HC 1142

Wednesday 19 July 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 19 July 2023.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Lee Anderson; James Daly; Simon Fell; Carolyn Harris; Marco Longhi; Tim Loughton.

Questions 515 to 628

Witnesses

I: Sarah Dines MP, Safeguarding Minister, Home Office; Matthew Bligh, Deputy Director for Policy on Illegal Migration, Home Office; and Rebecca Wyse and Joanna West, Tackling Exploitation and Abuse Directors, Home Office.

II: Sarah Dines MP, Safeguarding Minister, Home Office; and Andrew Patrick, former Migration and Modern Slavery Envoy Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Home Office](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah Dines MP, Matthew Bligh, Joanna West and Rebecca Wyse.

Q515 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Welcome to the Home Affairs Select Committee. This is our final hearing in our inquiry into trafficking. We are very pleased to be joined by the Minister and her officials. Later on, we are also going to hear from the migration and modern slavery envoy.

The purpose of this meeting is to look at some of the key issues that we have identified in our inquiry so far and at the response from the Home Office and the Government. We particularly want to look at prosecuting perpetrators and protecting victims.

Without further ado, Minister, could I ask you to introduce yourself and your officials?

Sarah Dines: Hello, my name is Sarah Dines. I am the Home Office Safeguarding Minister. I have Matthew Bligh here, who is an immigration specialist, and I have Becky and Joanna here to assist me in relation to broader issues.

Q516 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Obviously, we have lots of questions for you this morning, so I would ask each of you to remain fairly brief in your responses. I will interrupt if answers are going on too long, because we have quite a few questions.

Just to start off, Minister, could you give the Committee the benefit of your view of the Modern Slavery Act? Having been in post now for a little while, what is your view of that particular piece of legislation?

Sarah Dines: I am impressed that we were world leading in bringing in the Modern Slavery Act. We were one of the first countries, if not the first country, in the world to bring in this sort of legislation, and I am very proud of that. I have had the opportunity to see the Act in operation and to speak to stakeholders across the country, but also in Romania—I had a visit to Romania where I was able to see it in operation. So my view is that it is important in protecting victims and informs the way we operate in this country.

Q517 **Chair:** And it is working well.

Sarah Dines: I think it is working well. However, with any piece of legislation, as time goes on, things change, and we always need to look afresh at our legislative backdrop to see where we can do better. Of course, if we are talking about protecting people, the ingenuity of organised crime is such that we always need to be vigilant and review our legislation.

Q518 **Chair:** Are there any things you think are not working well with the Act?

Sarah Dines: I think the Act works well, but we do have to be mindful of how, in operation, it can be abused. Obviously, the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have been extremely clear that we have a crisis with



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people coming across the channel, and we have to make sure that our closely guarded and respected laws are not abused or misused.

Q519 **Chair:** Have you got some data that you could provide to the Committee to show us what you are saying about the abuse of the Act?

Sarah Dines: I think the evidence that the Home Secretary gave when she came before you—

Q520 **Chair:** Unfortunately, she did not give us any evidence; that was part of the problem.

Sarah Dines: Well, she wrote to you, Madam Chairman, and gave you four precise examples of—

Q521 **Chair:** But that is not data, with the greatest respect, Minister. Giving me four examples of individuals is not data that should then help determine if a policy is working or not.

Sarah Dines: In relation to data, the Home Office do strive to collect good-quality data. In my discussions with police forces and various agencies from across the country, data information is very important. But what we must not forget is that the type of crimes—the type of harms—that we are trying to stop are incredibly difficult to get data on.

For example, in a session earlier in July, didn't one of your professional witnesses—one of the police officers; I think it was Detective Sergeant Peall—say that it is notoriously difficult to get victims in the sex trade, for example, to continue assisting with prosecutions, because they may just want to go home?

Actually getting data is incredibly difficult. There are varying estimates by all sorts of NGOs and academic institutions as to exactly what the data is. So data is important, Madam Chair, but it is very, very hard to get reliable data.

Q522 **Chair:** In late December 2022, the Office for Statistics Regulation called on the Home Office to ensure that the sources for claims made in public statements are clear. It said the "statistics do not support the claims that people are 'gaming' the modern slavery system, and the source of the claim is unclear to us." That is the national regulator for the use of statistics. Do you accept that view?

Sarah Dines: I accept that it is unclear, sometimes, to get proper data, and it is notoriously difficult in the modern slavery arena. So I do accept that reliable data is difficult, but those examples that have been provided to you show very clear misuse, in my respectful view.

Q523 **Chair:** So you accept what the Office for Statistics Regulation say?

Sarah Dines: I didn't say that. What I said was that it is very unclear.

Chair: Oh, you don't accept what they say.



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Sarah Dines: What I said is that getting reliable data in relation to modern slavery is very unclear. That is what I said.

Q524 **Chair:** So there is no reliable data for the claims the Government are making. That is what you are saying.

Sarah Dines: Absolutely not. What I am saying is that it is difficult to get reliable data, and you have been provided with specific examples that show gaming of the system, which has to stop.

Q525 **Chair:** Four—we have been given four examples. I just want to be clear that the statistics do not support the claims that the Government have made about the gaming of the Modern Slavery Act.

Sarah Dines: I don't think that is a very fair analogy. What we are faced with is a large influx of people across the channel, 80% of whom are male and young.

Q526 **Chair:** That is nothing to do with what I am asking you, which is about the gaming of the modern slavery system and what the Office for Statistics Regulation have said.

But perhaps we should move on—we are obviously not going to agree. Can I just ask you when a new modern slavery strategy will be published?

Sarah Dines: The modern slavery strategy obviously goes back some time now, to 2014. However, the principles in the strategy are still very good. We must almost always look to see how we can get better, underpinned by the values of the 2015 Modern Slavery Act. Our strategy continues. The legislation is strong. I am of the view—

Q527 **Chair:** When? You have consulted on a new strategy. When she came before us, Dame Sara Thornton commented that she had contributed to that consultation when she was the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. So when is the strategy going to be published?

Sarah Dines: The Home Office has been looking very carefully at it. It has also been spending a lot of time on the illegal immigration Bill, which has now got democratic support through both Houses.

Q528 **Chair:** Yes, but when is the strategy going to be published?

Sarah Dines: It will be reviewed. At the moment, we are focusing on the operational way of going forward with our new piece of legislation. We will look at the strategy going forward, but we have been concentrating on the immigration Bill and its implementation.

Q529 **Chair:** Okay. What has happened to the modern slavery Bill that was announced in the Queen's Speech in 2022? Where is that?

Sarah Dines: That was announced in the Queen's Speech and, again, it is something that we are looking at. It is quite right that a Government will look at reviewing important pieces of legislation. The Government has been looking at that—



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Q530 **Chair:** You announced it in the Queen's Speech.

Sarah Dines: We have been focusing on the new Bill.

Q531 **Chair:** Okay, but you announced it in the Queen's Speech. Normally, when Governments announce Bills in Queen's Speeches, that means they are bringing them forward and there is going to be a Bill in the House that will go through all its stages. Is it ready? Is it just sitting there waiting for time?

Sarah Dines: One has to bear in mind that there is limited legislative time. There are all manner of very important pieces of legislation and things that I would like to see going forward, which unfortunately we haven't had legislative time for. At the moment, the focus has been on the Illegal Migration Bill and how to implement that. That has largely been the focus.

Q532 **Chair:** Where is the latest annual report from the Modern Slavery Unit? I think the last one you published was November 2021. Where is that?

Sarah Dines: Again, I don't always support having a proliferation of continual reports in some areas. I come back to looking at the overall matrix of the problem. We are faced with a crisis in the channel, and we have been focusing on the Illegal Migration Bill, soon to be Act.

Q533 **Chair:** Has everything else stopped in the Home Office?

Sarah Dines: Absolutely not. I can assure you that there is a proliferation of very focused, hard work that goes on. I have very regular meetings with the modern slavery team, police forces, stakeholders and intelligence services. I do very regular, hard work on all sorts of things, some of which we don't discuss openly, as you will understand. There is work going on all the time on many of the things that this important Committee looks into, so I don't agree that anything has ground to a halt.

Q534 **Chair:** It is quite difficult for this Committee if we can't have data or documents that show what is going on in the Home Office. I am perfectly willing to accept that there is lots of work going on and that you are involved in lots of meetings, but we need to be able to scrutinise the work of the Home Office. It is proving very difficult when we don't have data and reports coming out to show what is actually happening.

Sarah Dines: To come back on that, the Illegal Migration Bill has had a very high level of scrutiny, and very good interventions and speeches in Committee and on Report. On the Floor of the House of Commons, several people on this Committee made very valuable and interesting contributions to the debate. With respect, I would say that these issues are very highly scrutinised, not least due to the professionalism shown by this Committee.

Chair: Again, we may have to differ on that.

Tim Loughton: On the professionalism of the Committee? I hope not.

Chair: No, on the amount of scrutiny that that piece of legislation has had



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in this House. This Committee offered to do pre-legislative scrutiny of that Bill, and we were refused. If the Home Office is attempting to say that there was sufficient scrutiny, I would differ on that.

Tim Loughton: We do recognise the Minister's comments about the professionalism of this Committee, though, but that is another matter.

Chair: We do, of course.

Sarah Dines: I thought you might.

Q535 **Tim Loughton:** Minister, how important is the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner to this whole policy?

Sarah Dines: Highly important. Obviously, I came to the post at the end of last year, and it was something very much on the agenda. I was very much involved with the competition in February. I am pleased to say that there has been a really good field of people to be appointed, and I am extremely hopeful that there will be an appointment shortly.

Q536 **Tim Loughton:** I think you said it would be quite shortly in March. What constitutes quite longly in your definition?

Sarah Dines: Longly, shortly—these things are just as flexible as many words. I can tell the Committee that I have been involved in it, and we are towards the end of the process, so I am very hopeful that it will be soon.

Q537 **Tim Loughton:** Okay, but it was advertised at the beginning of the year. You stated in March that the application period had come to an end, that you would take the necessary steps in a short period, and that the best person for the role would be recruited. We have been without an Anti-Slavery Commissioner for almost 16 months. It is a role that you have just described as highly important, and you still can't give us a timescale for when a new person will be in post. Has that been damaging?

Sarah Dines: It has been a very thorough process, as you would expect. I am not going to go into the details about particular applicants or the process, but I can reassure you that there has been a very rigorous process, which I have been involved with, and I expect a decision shortly. "Shortly" doesn't mean another few months; it means shortly.

Q538 **Tim Loughton:** "Shortly" can mean anything, can't it? It can mean the same thing that it meant in March. We have heard from the previous commissioner that she is very worried about the vacuum that we have had over this time.

We have made a case in the past for why there should be confirmatory hearings for such an appointment, by this Committee, for example. The Home Office was going to consider that. Notwithstanding that we don't want to spin out any further the delay in getting a person into the post, do you think the post should be subject to confirmatory hearings by the Home Affairs Committee or a comparable body, if there is such a thing?

Sarah Dines: I do not think in this instance it is a decision that should be made in that way. I am of the view that it should be, quite rightly, a



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ministerial decision. I want to reassure the Committee that I have taken all the views of this Committee and the media and what was said on the Floor of the House quite seriously. I have been intimately involved with it. While I will not go into details, it is at an advanced stage—very much more advanced than when I spoke to the House about it.

Q539 Tim Loughton: The appointment of the Governor of the Bank of England is a ministerial appointment, but subject to a hearing by the Treasury Committee. The appointment of the Children’s Commissioner is a ministerial appointment, subject to a hearing by the Education Committee. Both those Committees can, and have been in the past, overruled by the Minister. Why is this post any different from those also very important posts?

Sarah Dines: Well, I think it is a ministerial decision. What I do not want to see is another step that can increase, I won’t say the delay, but the time that this sort of appointment takes. That might be another step that could elongate the process. In this particular case, I think it is only right that a decision is made promptly and by the Home Secretary.

Q540 Tim Loughton: You have just said that the decision has not been made promptly, because there has been a vacancy for 16 months. Adding on a week or two for this Committee to be able to sit, very soon after you have recommended an appointment, would only add a fraction of delay, if any.

I am not necessarily just talking about this appointment; I am talking about future appointments. It is slightly disappointing that you do not think that this Committee has a role in what is a very important role, which we certainly support. We have been very concerned about the vacuum that has been caused due to the definition of “shortly” being rather different in the Home Office to the rest of society.

Sarah Dines: I agree with you, Mr Loughton, that there should be a role for the Committee, but I do not agree that it should be the final decision-making role. You are very influential, and you hold Ministers to account, but I think in this case, where there is an imminent decision to be made, that it is best made by the Home Secretary.

Q541 Tim Loughton: I think I just said that we do not have a veto role; it is purely an advisory role, so the decision is not taken by us.

Can I ask about engagement? Obviously, that is particularly important in the absence of the commissioner. Back in April, the Modern Slavery Unit proposed a new model for stakeholder engagement, getting rid of previous groups. Karen Bradley, when she was in your role, chaired various groups involved with transparency of supply chains, victims, and so on. These new groups are, I think, to be called modern slavery stakeholder forums. How many of them have met and over what period?

Sarah Dines: As I understand it, there has not been a meeting of such a group. There are always continued discussions on how to improve the system. There is an anticipation that there might be quarterly meetings, but there is refreshed thinking about it. The four possible proposed forums



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would be adult victim policy, child victim policy, prevention, and enforcement, including international and supply chains. Those stakeholders are all people with whom you will be very familiar. They include Anti-Slavery International, Barnardo's, Red Cross, Focus on Labour Exploitation, Human Trafficking Foundation, the Centre for Social Justice, the Salvation Army—the list goes on.

There is a very wide list of people that will be engaged in engagement forums. As I understand it, there has been no formal change, just discussion, as you would expect. We have to refresh things and make them more efficient all the time; otherwise, we will stand still.

Q542 Tim Loughton: Making something more efficient and refreshing it would suggest at least that they meet, and they haven't. When did the forerunners of these groups last meet?

Sarah Dines: They have not met yet. This is under discussion. As I understand it, there has not been any public—

Q543 Tim Loughton: These MSSFs were suggested by the unit in April to replace previous groups. When did those previous groups last meet?

Sarah Dines: I will have to ask my officials about the diary dates because such meetings are not something I would regularly attend, although I would be informed.

Q544 Tim Loughton: Minister, that is the point: your predecessors not only attended but chaired such groups. Are you saying that since you came into post last October, you have not chaired or attended any of those groups and that you do not know whether any of them have met, which means they have clearly not reported to you about their findings?

Sarah Dines: They have clearly met together and there have been meetings with the Home Office, because those discussions would possibly inform your question and the stakeholders are very aware of that. I wonder whether my civil servants can give a little more detail as to how regularly the quarterly meetings—

Tim Loughton: Any detail, rather than a little more, would be helpful.

Sarah Dines: Well, I have given you details of the main stakeholders and what the three new forums would be—

Q545 Tim Loughton: I have not asked about that; I have asked when these meetings have taken place. Have any meetings taken place in recent times?

Sarah Dines: There have been no meetings, as I understand it, of the new system—

Tim Loughton: And the old system?

Sarah Dines: If you want to find out when the latest meeting of the last system was, I will refer you to my civil servants.



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Rebecca Wyse: I do not have the dates in front of me—forgive me—but we are regularly engaging with the individuals the Minister has set out within the forums. We can certainly write to the Committee and follow up.

Q546 **Tim Loughton:** What does “regularly engaging” mean if there have not been any meetings?

Joanna West: We have recently established the modern slavery engagement forums, which are official-level meetings. You are right that we have not had—

Q547 **Tim Loughton:** They have not met yet. They were suggested only in April and we have ascertained that they are anticipated—I think that was the Minister’s word—but they have not met. What I have asked about specifically is their predecessors, over which Karen Bradley presided in a previous form, and she attended and chaired them. When did they last meet?

Joanna West: I don’t have that date in front of me.

Q548 **Tim Loughton:** Okay, so you have come here today with the Minister with no knowledge of the advisory groups that were an important part of this whole strategy—important enough for predecessor Ministers to have actually turned up and chaired them. You have no knowledge about whether or not they have met, so there has clearly been no input to the Minister about their findings. They are now to be replaced but you do not know what with. The replacement has not actually met and you are only anticipating how that might be refreshed. We have had no Modern Slavery Commissioner for the past 16 months. This is a shambles, isn’t it, Minister?

Sarah Dines: I think that is a little unfair in the way it is framed, with the greatest of respect. We are very clear about who the major stakeholders are. We fund them and meet them regularly. There is regular civil service—

Tim Loughton: You don’t!

Sarah Dines: You are asking about whether they meet in a particular format. There will be a new format and to say that we have no knowledge of those stakeholders is not quite right. I have personally met several people from these organisations and I know that my civil servants do all the time. I am regularly updated as to the funding arrangements, whether we are spending the money in the right way and what the concerns of these groups are. I have sat down and had a meal with somebody from the Salvation Army and I have spoken to numerous people from Barnardo’s and other very important stakeholders.

Q549 **Tim Loughton:** Minister, having a sandwich with somebody from the Salvation Army is a poor replacement for formal engagement groups on specific areas of this policy that were set up some years ago to make sure that a Minister is fully plugged in and engaged with what they have to say about the way this policy and this flagship project is actually working or not. None of you knows when they last met, we have no



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formal minutes of recommendations that they may have made, we know nothing about the way Ministers and the Home Office may have responded to those recommendations, we do not have a commissioner to oversee any of this work and you still don't know when they are going to meet, but it is okay because you have had a sandwich with the Salvation Army. That is not good enough, Minister, is it?

Sarah Dines: That is a really unfair characterisation.

Tim Loughton: It's pretty close.

Sarah Dines: I have regular meetings once a fortnight. I am regularly updated. This is not a trivial matter about discussions over sandwiches; this is about people's lives—

Tim Loughton: Exactly!

Sarah Dines: Millions of pounds are spent by this Government and my civil servants do engage to a high level and regularly with all these very important groups, so I think you are to some extent trivialising it. I understand that you are concerned that a commissioner has not been appointed and I have just reassured you that I have taken a very close part in that and there will be an appointment imminently. These groups are at the heart of the work we do and we meet with them extremely regularly.

Q550 **Tim Loughton:** But you don't. It is because we do not trivialise it that we are so concerned that the structures that the Home Office set up to make sure this policy is a success have apparently been completely ignored and we have no information that they are going to be replaced.

Sarah Dines: I do not accept that they have been ignored. There is regular very high-level engagement with a number of these groups and I am kept up to date.

Chair: This is not the first time that we have had in front of us Home Office officials who do not have basic information about dates and meetings. I would have expected that, in preparation for the session today, you would have had chapter and verse on exactly who had been meeting and when and that you would be able to tell the Committee.

It seems to me as obvious as the nose on my face that those are the questions that we would ask in scrutinising the effectiveness of your Department, Minister, so I am really disappointed that although you have three officials with you today, we do not have that level of basic information. It is not the first time that the Home Office has come up short on that, so I just ask that, in the future, officials and Ministers are effectively briefed on the basics that we are likely to ask about.

Q551 **Carolyn Harris:** Could we turn our attention to discouraging demand? What is the Home Office doing to address the demand that leads to human trafficking?



Sarah Dines: Reducing the demand for human trafficking is a very, very interesting academic subject. The industry, the sex trade, prostitution, trafficking in general and the abuse of individuals by others for money or power have been around for thousands of years, and reducing that demand is difficult. There have been various models across the world; across different countries, people have tried different things.

In relation to the sex trade, we know about, for example, the Nordic model; we know that other countries have tried outlawing various practices. I was very interested in some of your earlier sessions where you were speaking to academics about this. What is clear is that discouraging demand is incredibly difficult and that we have to be very careful about the evidence in relation to that.

What we are doing practically—to answer your question—is that we are funding a lot of work to stop this trade. It goes to the very heart of the whole reason why we have the Illegal Migration Bill—now passed. It's because we want to squash the international organised crime aspect of this. I am sure we will all agree on that.

For sex work, the demand is there; it is unfortunately part of human nature. I would like it to be outlawed. What we are doing is using the legal system where we can to make the United Kingdom the most unfriendly country that we can for this sort of practice.

Q552 **Carolyn Harris:** Thank you for that well written piece of commentary, but if the Home Office is so keen to deter people from wanting to buy sex from trafficked individuals, why is it that over the last seven years there have been only three prosecutions for buying sex from a trafficked person? If that total reflected the reality of the situation, we would not be having this conversation. By your own admission—you are saying—it is a problem, so why have only three people in seven years been prosecuted for buying sex?

Sarah Dines: That is an excellent question, which obviously you put to the professionals from the National Crime Agency and the police force that were before you fairly recently. It's an excellent question. I think the answer lies in what they say, and what is my view, which is about the element of having to prove force: in relation to this trade, unless you are actually in the room when the sex act takes place, it is actually very difficult to prove that. What tends to happen is that we, like many other countries, look at where the money goes.

A lot of hard work is undertaken by the National Crime Agency and the police. I think there are 4,500 live investigations for modern slavery. A lot of work is being done. We want more prosecutions; I agree with you. But it is a complex issue. Witnesses may leave the country without informing you. Witnesses may not be ready to give evidence. Proving force is very hard.

Q553 **Carolyn Harris:** But do you honestly believe, Minister, that if we have prosecuted only three people in seven years, witnesses are going to want



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to come forward? There is no and there can be no confidence, in relation to a system that has prosecuted only three people, that what they are going to say, the evidence that they are going to give, is going to lead to a “bang to rights” conviction. And I believe that the punishment for those three individuals was a fine of less than or around £100.

Sarah Dines: However, to put this in context, there are myriad other offences for which people are regularly prosecuted and convicted. It is proving the force element that is hard. So it does not give the full picture to pull just the three out. You need to look at the thousands of investigations that our police and the NCA are involved with across the country.

Q554 **Carolyn Harris:** But if I am a trafficked person who is being sold for sex, I am not going to have any interest in any other prosecutions for any other kind of trafficking offences—I am being raped numerous times a day, and nobody is getting prosecuted for that act.

Sarah Dines: There are myriad offences, and people are being prosecuted for offences within that offending arena. It is not right to say that there are absolutely no prosecutions. The whole picture is to show what prosecutions in the cluster of offences can be prosecuted. We know from the evidence of the National Crime Agency, and from the money that is put into police specialist units by the Home Office, that there are a lot of live investigations, and people are put behind bars for these crimes.

I would like to see more of the section 53A offence, which I think you are talking about—the forced. I would like to see more of that, because it sounds effective and it would be wonderful, but it is hard to get convictions. The other point I would make is that just because convictions are hard to get does not mean that we should not strive for them. There are other offences, such as female genital mutilation, where there are only ever a handful of convictions, but we still strive to prosecute, and we must continue to do so.

Q555 **Carolyn Harris:** I must press you here, Minister, because I am trying to be quite specific about buying sex from trafficked women. Can I just move on to Vivastreet? The Home Office has had 15 meetings with Vivastreet since 2017. What was the outcome of those meetings?

Sarah Dines: Just to remind everybody, it is part of the violence against women and girls strategy that the Home Office and the Government are expected to, and do with alacrity, engage with all sorts of people. It is also part of the strategy to identify and try to prevent sexual exploitation, and these adult service websites are one such arena that has to be engaged with to some extent, because they are legal.

The Home Office is identifying and putting in place initiatives to reduce the harms that we see on websites similar to Vivastreet. We are informing and educating these sorts of platforms about the provisions of the Online Safety Bill, and it is essential that Government prepare the websites, which some may describe as cowboys who are allowed to do what they like—



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Carolyn Harris: I call them porn sites.

Sarah Dines: Exactly, which is why the Home Office has to engage, make sure that their practices are lawful and within the law, and introduce them to the new legislative regime that we are going to have with the Online Safety Bill.

They can also be useful in obtaining information. I was very impressed with the evidence of Detective Sergeant Peall, who, in answer to some of your very searching and proper questions, said that such websites can produce information and evidence even when a victim is unwilling, unable or frightened to give evidence. You can go ahead and charge within 24 hours with information you get from some of these platforms. He is very remarkable detective sergeant; I spoke to him in person as I was so impressed with the evidence he gave to this Committee.

Q556 **Carolyn Harris:** Can you provide us with specific examples of how these meetings that you or your officials have had with Vivastreet have led to the prosecution of traffickers and the safeguarding of victims? Some practical outcomes from those meetings would be really useful.

Sarah Dines: We know that there are various police initiatives—I think one is called Mirage—and we know from the evidence that the National Crime Agency gave to you that there are 4,500 live investigations, many of which are live. As you have heard previously, some of these take years to get to court. I would like them to come to court much more quickly, and where I can, although I am not the Policing Minister, I try to hold police forces to account if they are slow. But these are very difficult offences. There are 4,500 live investigations into this sort of offence, and the police and the Home Office are not standing back and watching it; they are proactive.

It is not right to give specific examples of live investigations. I want to see more convictions. When I meet police officers who work in any of the protective areas that my portfolio represents, one of the first questions I always ask in this arena is: what more can we do? What can we do to get around the difficulty of evidence?

Don't forget that we also have special arrangements for children and vulnerable people, such as people in the sex trade, to give evidence by way of remote video link or pre-recorded evidence, and under the Victims and Prisoners Bill we are doing a lot more in that area. So we are doing quite a lot. We need to do more—of course we do.

Q557 **Chair:** I want to ask you a specific question, Minister. In 2020-21, I think, you funded a three-month campaign targeted at UK-located sex buyers and those using adult service websites. That was a grant of £10,000. The stated intention of the campaign was to increase their understanding of how adult service websites are used by offenders to advertise victims of sexual exploitation. I have tabled written questions on this. Could you tell me who the £10,000 was paid to and what the results of that grant were?



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Sarah Dines: Let me just say that the Home Office puts millions of pounds across many, many stakeholders—

Q558 **Chair:** I understand that, but what happened with this £10,000?

Sarah Dines: The £17.8 million that the Home Office puts into fighting crime and the various grants—*[Interruption.]* With respect, I am not going to be necessarily able to give you each and every grant that has ever been given. I deal with a lot.

Q559 **Chair:** I have asked written questions about this. I would have expected your officials and advisers, in preparation for today's session, to look at what I was asking and prepare you to respond. Are your officials able to tell me about this £10,000 grant?

Sarah Dines: I will ask to see if they can remind me. We do, of course, have a lot—

Q560 **Chair:** Who was it paid to and what was the outcome? What did you find out about sex buyers?

Joanna West: We may actually need to offer you a private briefing on this, Chair, because it relates to some of the law enforcement outcomes that are a result of this work.

Q561 **Chair:** You paid £10,000 to an organisation and you need to brief me privately because of what, sorry?

Joanna West: I think we need to give you a private briefing on who that money went to and what it was used for, because of the organisation that it went to.

Q562 **Chair:** Because of the organisation it was given to?

Sarah Dines: Let me jump in at this stage and explain that, operationally, some of this sort of information is sensitive; however, we are prepared to give you a private briefing about that. We do not want you not to be informed and not to have an answer to your question, so we would offer a private briefing on that.

Q563 **Chair:** Okay. We will come back to that. I am very surprised, if public money is being given to an organisation to do a piece of work looking at who is buying sex, that we are not allowed to know publicly who that is and what the outcome was. That seems to me a very strange state of affairs.

Sarah Dines: We are very happy to give you a private briefing. We do not want to potentially compromise any future similar campaigns. That is why—

Q564 **Chair:** It was a campaign, was it? I thought it was to find out what—

Sarah Dines: Well—piece of work, grant, campaign.

Q565 **Chair:** Have you met with Vivastreet, Minister? Have you met with Adultworks or any of the adult service websites?



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Sarah Dines: I haven't, no.

Q566 **Chair:** Are you happy with the approach that the Home Office is taking in engaging with organisations and businesses like Vivastreet and Adultworks? We have heard evidence of what is going on on those platforms. We think that there are trafficked women on there who are being moved around the country to all of our constituencies week in, week out, and raped multiple times. Are you satisfied with the current situation?

Sarah Dines: I am rarely satisfied with the current situation; that is why I am in politics. I want to move, focus, change.

Q567 **Chair:** What are you doing about this? I am really concerned.

Sarah Dines: I have explained that I do accept that these practices are heinous—of course they are; we all agree on that in this room. However, unfortunately, sometimes we have to engage with people we may disagree with morally to get results, and it is part of our strategy.

Q568 **Chair:** But you are not getting results, Minister. That is the problem. Last week—

Sarah Dines: Four and a half thousand live investigations is getting results.

Q569 **Chair:** But prosecutions, putting people behind bars, perpetrators being held to account—

Sarah Dines: There is more to be done.

Q570 **Chair:** The strategy you are adopting in engaging with these websites doesn't seem to be resulting in what you want and I want, which is holding people to account and putting them behind bars. That is why I am questioning it.

Sarah Dines: I don't accept that. Sergeant Peall said they have been very useful. We must not forget that if there is a flat ban, which some other countries have introduced, the evidence appears to be—this is what I am advised—that this sort of trade just goes on to encrypted open channels. It is not just on the dark web; it goes on to social media, WhatsApp, Telegram—it just goes into a different space. I was very impressed with the expert evidence of the NCA that that information and intelligence is actually very important.

Q571 **Chair:** We all know that punters still have to find prostitutes, so they will find a way of making that information available. If punters can find it, then the police and the NCA can find it.

Sarah Dines: If punters can put it online and we can have that evidence, it obviates the need for distressing trials.

Q572 **Carolyn Harris:** Can I say, Chair, how interesting it is to have an almost BBC catch-up interpretation answer to all my questions this morning? It is quite fascinating.



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The definition of human trafficking contained in the Modern Slavery Act differs from the internationally agreed definition in the United Nations protocol on trafficking, commonly referred to as the Palermo protocol. That protocol defines trafficking as the “recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”

In short, the definition means that a person who is trafficked has not necessarily had to be physically moved from location to location, and yet, in this country, a person who is trafficked has to be moved physically from one place to another. I would argue that there are very many women who are not trafficked into this country from another country, but are British women who are not classed as trafficked, despite the fact that they are controlled and sold for sex.

Do you not agree that it is absurd that a man, or a group of men, can sexually exploit a woman, but get a substantially more lenient penalty simply by the virtue of the victim not having been in a car or on a plane or train? Do you think the definition of trafficking in the Modern Slavery Act needs to be brought in line with the United Nations definition, to ensure that all perpetrators of this heinous crime are held to account?

Sarah Dines: We have a very detailed definition within our legislation. I am not moving a change. I am not working on or suggesting a change in that definition, because I think it is adequate. I will go on to your other points in a minute. If you are desirous of a new definition, you should be petitioning debates, and, with respect, trying to change your own party’s policy.

Q573 **Carolyn Harris:** I know how Parliament works, Minister. Whether or not a person has been physically moved in a vehicle from one location to another, do you not agree that, if we know they are being controlled and sold for sex, that person has been trafficked—and therefore the perpetrators and the people who buy sex from those victims should be treated in the same way as those who traffic victims who have been transported?

Sarah Dines: Your use of the verb “trafficked” is different from our statutory definition. If you would like to see a change, then you must petition for that change. I am working with the current legislation.

I very much want to protect UK women. There are also men who are similarly trafficked in the broader sense. It was quite clear in the discussions you had in previous sessions that being moved just from one town to another, which was one of the major criticisms of what you can see on some of the online adult service websites, or just being moved from one house to another—not from one room to another, which was a subject of some of the debate earlier—is capable of falling under the definition of trafficking in the Modern Slavery Act within this country. I



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think that is sufficient. We should focus on that in protecting girls and boys in the UK who are abused by the sex industry.

Q574 **Marco Longhi:** Thank you for coming along today with your team, Minister. I think everybody agrees that we have to do an awful lot more. Outcomes are not what they are supposed to be, and that has been a matter for debate in not just this Committee but the Chamber itself.

There seems to be one common thread in all this. We keep saying that convictions are difficult to obtain because of the required evidence. We then say that the required evidence is incredibly difficult to obtain based on the legislation we have in place. We then say that we engage with individuals who we perhaps might not want to engage with because of the nature of their business, but we do so because that evidence is important. We deal with rather unsavoury websites. Why? Because we say that that engagement can produce evidence that we would like to use.

It seems to me as if everything hinges around evidence. Is it because our legislative framework, with our laws as they stand, requires such a high level of evidence—that is, does the way that the law is worded, and how it can be enacted to bring convictions and prosecutions, mean that we cannot do so? The Minister will know that I am not shy of coming forward and criticising Ministers or civil servants when I believe that we are falling short of implementing a law that is in place, but are we in a situation now where we are hearing all of these stories around evidence and perhaps the law is not fit for purpose?

Do we actually have to look at changing the law and making it more fit for purpose? If outcomes were not being achieved, perhaps enforcement agencies, the civil service and Ministers could be held to account, perhaps in a fairer way. It feels to me almost as if we are trying to hold to account enforcement agencies and civil servants, but they keep saying that it is about the evidence. Well, if the evidence cannot be used, or we cannot use it because of what our legislative frameworks are, we need to change that. That's my point.

Chair: Do you want to put that to the Minister?

Sarah Dines: That is an excellent question and excellent topic for discussion. It is the meat and potatoes of every criminal law seminar at universities. You're right on the money. Over hundreds of years, we have developed a very highly sophisticated criminal law system that protects the rights of the victim and prosecutes perpetrators, but does so lawfully and safely, which is why our criminal justice system is considered one of the best—if not the best—in the world.

That said, there are problems. I want to see more prosecutions. I know Mr Daly does too; when we were on the Justice Committee together, that was something he felt very strongly about. I would like to see a bit more common-sense policing, where police officers like Detective Sergeant Stuart Peall can go out, get the evidence and charge in 24 hours. Just yesterday, the Home Secretary and I were undertaking a grooming gangs

evaluation as part of our taskforce, and we spoke to senior officers. We were talking about the length of some of these investigations. I think we need to be more proactive and to have a tighter timeframe in getting the evidence together.

Yes, we do need proper evidence. I don't think we should interfere with the standard or the burden of how that evidence and proof proceeds, but I agree with you that we need to do more. We need to get back to old-fashioned common-sense policing, where a police officer is properly trained, speaks to people who have expertise if he doesn't have it, gets out there and collects the evidence. You are bang on the money, Mr Longhi.

Q575 Marco Longhi: Other countries will treat the sex trade differently from the way that our legislative framework looks at it. I will never claim that I fully understand the law around this, but it seems that, even within the sex trade itself, whether a person is trafficked or not, there are changes that we could be making so that we actually look at reducing demand, because wherever you have demand, there will always be a seller. If the law, or even just aspects of the law, simply allow for that to carry on, all we end up doing is carrying on chasing our tails.

Sarah Dines: These are huge moral issues. I would love to be able to stop the demand for a man coercing and paying a woman for sex. I would love to stop that demand. All we can do is worth within the law in the most efficient way.

Marco Longhi: Within the law?

Sarah Dines: We can't work outside the law.

Q576 Marco Longhi: Does the law need to be changed?

Sarah Dines: Well, we can try and change the law, but that's not going to disappear demand; it'll push it somewhere else.

I have experience of this from 30 years at the Bar—I know I don't look that old. I was involved with very serious cases, including one of the largest pimping operations that ever came to court, where there were confiscation orders in the millions.

An EU national of Brazilian-Mozambican heritage who was living in the UK brought girls over to London from Brazil on Portuguese passports and set them up. They were never free because they had to pay back the obscene debts that these organised international criminal organisations had in store. They were slaves. There were prosecutions; people went to prison for that—so it does work.

We need to do more, of course we do, but this is one of the reasons why we need the IMB and why it was passed. It means that we can focus internationally on stopping this trade, rather than being concerned about something that may be a small change in the law that we can do at home; we need to stop the overall international organised criminal enterprises. I



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do not only want to say the word “gang”. These are sophisticated enterprises that are cross-continent and they are always one step ahead of us.

Chair: Okay, I am going to stop you there because we are getting short on time. I will bring in Simon Fell to ask some questions that might be pertinent to the remarks you have just made.

Q577 **Simon Fell:** Thank you, Minister, for joining us. I just want to cover some of the issues we have touched on repeatedly regarding the legislative framework. Almost the first words out of your mouth when you sat down were that the Modern Slavery Act is world leading. The Chair has touched on this: very few people disagreed at the time that it genuinely was a world-leading piece of legislation. But we have heard repeatedly in our evidence sessions that it is showing its age and could be improved, specifically around sanctions for those involved in the supply chains and toughening up the rules as the environment has developed. In the Queen’s Speech 2022, there were plans to bring forward a new modern slavery Bill. Can you give us an update as to where the Home Office is on that?

Sarah Dines: I probably answered that quite a lot in response to Dame Diana, but what I can say is that we are doing a lot of work in regards to not only the sex trade but other forms of modern slavery—for example, organised crime involved in things such as nail bars, and looking at whether supply chains abroad where cotton would come from are properly sourced or whether the slave trade is involved in that. There is a wide ambit of work that we are doing and we are considering all the time.

We have the excellent assistance of a very proactive international operation, which you will be hearing from shortly, after we get on to the next part of the session. I think we still punch above our weight internationally in our negotiations and discussions with other countries. We have our agreement with Albania. My trip to Romania was interesting in that respect. It is not just sex work; it is all other forms of abuse that happen, or what has been described as being out of the country—away, upstream.

Q578 **Simon Fell:** I appreciate that, Minister, but there was a determination made prior to that Queen’s Speech that a new piece of legislation was needed. Is it now the Home Office’s view that you can operate without a new piece of legislation or is preparation still being made for that to be brought forward before the next general election?

Sarah Dines: We are always looking and revising. We have been focused on the crisis in our channel. That has been the main focus, but we are looking. There are still some very good parts of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and some international partners I have met are quite envious of what we have, notwithstanding what is sometimes said in the Chamber here.

For example, I was part of hosting Ministers and law enforcement officers from the Netherlands to discuss modern slavery. They had meetings with



the Home Office and went on various visits, and they want to emulate what we do with the referral mechanism. They were quite impressed with it and they want us to give them some assistance, so we can all help each other. I do not think that just because a piece of legislation is five or eight years old, you necessarily have to have another one. Some of our finest pieces of legislation, such as the Sexual Offences Act, have their history back in the 17th and 18th centuries. In answer to your question, although I think I answered it earlier, we are not bringing one forward at this stage. We have been focusing on the crisis across the channel.

Q579 Simon Fell: I look forward to seeing what is in the King's Speech.

Let us move on to a different piece of legislation: the Online Safety Bill. One of the concerns that we have, again, heard repeatedly through evidence sessions in this Committee is the actual ability of law enforcement to deal with the volume of information that might come their way as a result of the changes in legislation. What steps is the Home Office putting in place to make sure that law enforcement has the capacity to deal with referrals?

Sarah Dines: Capacity is always a major issue when crime evolves and becomes more sophisticated. The Online Safety Bill is a prime example. The National Crime Agency is doing a huge amount of work internationally to get us ready. It is going to be a groundbreaking, world-leading piece of legislation. We are the only country in the world doing this. It will be a tough piece of legislation. We have 20,000 more officers. Are they all going to have expertise in online safety? Probably not, but what I can say is that there is a lot of preparatory work being done, and the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing are very seized of it. We are now working out the best way to operate that.

I am looking forward to the Online Safety Bill. It will bring challenges. I think AI will be a part of that. I think the big platforms such as Meta are looking into that—rightly so. The Prime Minister is putting a lot of effort and funds into making sure that we are one of the best countries, if not the best, to get ahead of the AI revolution, which will assist us in this field. But there is no substitute for properly educated police officers. If we could replicate or clone Detective Sergeant Peall, I think we all would.

Q580 Simon Fell: I think we would agree with you there.

Our experience from looking at when the United States introduced similar measures was that law enforcement was overwhelmed. A huge number of referrals were put through, and they simply did not have the capacity to deal with them—frankly, nor did some of the large social media platforms. What preparatory work has been going on to get the Home Office and law enforcement ready to work with some of these online platforms, especially the large ones like Meta, to make sure that they can deal with the consequences of the Online Safety Bill?

Sarah Dines: There are very regular meetings and correspondence with Meta and all the other online providers, as you would expect. Let me step back to when we were looking at how the new world of the internet,



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Google searches and photographs would affect the child sexual abuse arena. We were all very concerned about that. However, we have adapted. We have the IWF in Cambridge—it was recently on TV, I noticed. I visited some months ago and it is a fantastic organisation. This Government funds it. You can adapt, and that is what we are doing. You have to try to get ahead of the curve. We are putting a lot of money and a lot of planning into it.

I have been impressed by what I have seen. Obviously, we can always do more. I have been speaking to the national police chief leads in all these areas; I have met most of them, if not all of them. It is a big task, bearing in mind how many of them there are now and what a huge subject this is. There is no lack of appetite to tackle this. There is focus planning, but it will be hard—you are quite right.

Q581 Simon Fell: The Online Safety Bill understandably focuses on large platforms, but a lot of the most dangerous content and most dangerous platforms are the smaller ones that fall out of the scope of a lot of this Bill. We have talked about Vivastreet today, but in previous evidence sessions we have heard that that is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of platforms enabling people to access trafficked women and procure them for sex.

There are amendments going through the House of Lords at present that would expand the scope of the Online Safety Bill to cover some of these high harm smaller platforms. What is the Home Office's view on whether that will be beneficial to help stop the trafficking of human beings?

Sarah Dines: The lead Department is DCMS, although we work closely together on what we can do. I am personally in favour of pushing to the maximum the legislative framework to prevent harms to children, vulnerable people and victims—the population in general. My ears are open and I am watching with interest. There are discussions between DCMS, MOJ and the Home Office. I am hopeful, but it is a big task—you are right.

Q582 Simon Fell: Moving on to the Illegal Migration Bill—we are skipping through legislation at the moment. What is your view on whether the Illegal Migration Bill will make it more difficult for victims of human trafficking to receive support?

Sarah Dines: That accusation has been levelled at the Bill quite persistently, but we must not forget that the first responders are well trained and well versed in spotting this sort of activity—heinous crimes. We have a very detailed digital tool that they use. I have looked at that and considered whether—in my layman's view as I am not a trained caseworker—it is adequate. It seems very detailed; I have a copy here.

I think that there is a lot of expertise in our first responders, and it would be unfair to say that victims will not have as much help as possible under the regime. I want them to be supported. We do, of course, have the exception from removal if there is co-operation with prosecutions and investigations in this country. Also, we support prosecutions even if they



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are from abroad. If there were a situation where someone was removed—perhaps wrongly, in some people’s views—we could still support prosecutions.

I am mindful of the evidence given in previous sessions that prosecutions have been supported from Spain, France and, from memory, I think there was mention of Vietnam—I am not quite sure of that. They will be supported if we can identify them, and there is much training for first responders to identify them. We are ahead of the world in this respect. I know that we in the UK sometimes like to bash ourselves when it comes to what we are doing, but we are ahead of the world. Countries are coming to us to emulate what we are doing, and even with the assistance of measures such as the IMB to ensure that the systems are not abused.

Q583 Simon Fell: It is not just organisations that you might expect to say this that are saying this. The former Prime Minister—the person who introduced the Modern Slavery Act—has expressed her concerns, suggesting that the Illegal Migration Bill will, to directly quote her, deny “support to those who have been exploited and enslaved and, in doing so” make “it much harder to catch and stop the traffickers and slave drivers.” Do you disagree?

Sarah Dines: I do personally disagree with the former Prime Minister, Mrs May. I think there is a time and a place for everything—fantastic legislation, but we have to make sure that it works for today. It cannot be right that our noble intentions are undermined by floods and floods of people—as many as 45,000—crossing the channel. It cannot be right that we allow that.

This is a crisis. We need to be able to deter the organised international criminal organisations and gangs from abusing our system to enable the resources to go towards supporting just those very victims the Modern Slavery Act was designed to help. We need to be able to put the money there, and not towards helping a lot of, I would suggest, abusive and maybe at times fraudulent people who would claim to benefit from our generosity. Legislation evolves in the circumstances. I have great respect for Mrs May, but on this one I am afraid that I totally disagree with her.

Q584 Chair: Just to be clear, Minister, you just said that you have a great deal of time and respect for the first responders and the work they do in identifying people who may have been subject to slavery or trafficking. In 2022, the national referral mechanism received 16,938 referrals for potential victims of human trafficking. Is it your view, as the Minister responsible, that those numbers are right? Are you saying that these first responders—some of whom work for you in the Home Office and many in other very good organisations that we all respect—are doing a really good job and identifying people because of the training they have had over the last few years. Is that what you are saying?

Sarah Dines: I am saying that they do a good job, but the system allows the system to be misused. We are being gamed.

Q585 Chair: How are you being gamed? Just explain that to me.



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Sarah Dines: I think we are being gamed, because people from criminal gangs and individuals and international criminal organisations are able to game the system to promote their filthy trade in our country, and we have got to stop them.

Q586 **Chair:** Sorry, that is not making sense to me. You have just said how important the work the first responders do is and what a good job they do. I have just asked you about the 16,000 who were identified in 2022. Are you saying that a large number of those 16,000 are gaming the system?

Sarah Dines: There is a long process. It would be incorrect to say 17,000 are either this or that. There is a long legal process that it goes through, and we know that quite a lot of people in the system will leave the system for a variety of reasons. They maybe should not have been in the system in the first place.

I respect the professionalism of the responders. I am not going to say each and every decision on the guidelines and the processes that they work to has the right result. I do think it is misused.

Q587 **Chair:** But we know that over 90% actually have conclusive grounds that they were victims of modern slavery or trafficking, don't we? We know that from the data. If you look at the data, it is showing that the vast majority of the people who are referred by first responders, who are doing such a good job, go through the process, come out the other end and are found to have conclusive grounds. The data shows us that, doesn't it, Minister?

Sarah Dines: What I want to happen is to break the business model of organised crime, to make sure that if people have come here illegally, they can be supported in perfectly reasonable countries, such as Rwanda. I want to see them supported, so that we remove the incentive for criminal gangs to get people here.

Chair: Okay, Minister. I am just trying to drill down into the data, because the Committee needs to look at data. It seems to me that the data for 2022 shows that the vast majority of the people identified by first responders go on to have conclusive grounds. That is the data. I think it is quite important to look at data, as a Minister, and for that to inform your statements about policy. I am going to James Daly, because we have an important section around prosecutions.

Q588 **James Daly:** Before I ask some questions of the Minister, can I ask Rebecca and Joanna something to try to understand the Home Office structure in respect of this? You are both tackling exploitation and abuse directors. Could you explain to me what that encompasses, and what your role is?

Rebecca Wyse: We oversee the Modern Slavery Unit; the Single Competent Authority; tackling violence against women and girls through the Interpersonal Abuse Unit; and child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Q589 **James Daly:** How many people work in the Modern Slavery Unit?



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Joanna West: Fifty-six.

Q590 **James Daly:** And that is based at the Home Office.

Joanna West: Yes.

Q591 **James Daly:** Are those 56 people, and you two, the civil servants involved in this policy area, or are other people based in the Home Office dealing with the issues we are talking about?

Joanna West: The Modern Slavery Unit is the core unit working on modern slavery policy. Obviously, as we have discussed, it does cross over many areas, so we engage right across the Department, as you would expect us to. The 56 is the core policy unit, and then there are also the two competent authorities.

Q592 **James Daly:** The Minister was asked about the Modern Slavery Unit. What is the interaction between that and the police force? Do you have discussions with chief constables and the prosecuting authorities?

Joanna West: We do, yes, as does the Minister.

Q593 **James Daly:** How often do you speak to the prosecuting authorities—the CPS and people like that?

Joanna West: We have a range of engagement across the unit. I am not sure that I can say, “We speak to the CPS every x days,” because we will speak to them when we need to, and we have a range of formal and informal engagement. Similarly, we speak to law enforcement very regularly.

Q594 **James Daly:** The point I am trying to get at—forgive me if I am misunderstanding—is: what are you trying to achieve in this unit? There are 56 people employed there, and both of you are the directors of the unit. What are you a director to? What is the top-line outcome that you are trying to achieve for the taxpayer?

Rebecca Wyse: The Minister has set out the overarching reason for our unit existing: it is to prevent modern slavery, to prosecute people, and to protect and support the people who have been affected by modern slavery. That is what we are seeking to achieve each day.

Q595 **James Daly:** Let’s go into one of the things that you have said. On the data, as the Chair said, we seem to be doing extremely badly. In 2022, we had 16,938 referrals to the NRM. Out of that, there were 286 referrals of human trafficking cases to the CPS, so the charging rate was 1.69%. I am talking about the collective team, and the Minister has ultimate responsibility for this, but whatever the unit and the 56 people are doing, it is not achieving a satisfactory charging rate under the legislation that is in place. Would that be correct? Is a 1.69% charging rate acceptable to the Home Office?

Rebecca Wyse: The Minister may wish to speak a little bit more than that, but just to be very clear, first of all, charging decisions are made by



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the CPS, not the Home Office, but we work very closely with them across our portfolio to increase charging decisions across the board.

Q596 James Daly: I understand that, but you just said that there are three reasons why 56 people are employed in the unit, and one of them is related to the prosecution of people. People are not being prosecuted, whichever way you look at it, so if that is one of the grounds for why your unit exists, the unit is failing, isn't it? Would you agree? That is to either of you.

Joanna West: We absolutely recognise that the prosecution numbers are low. That is not uncommon for hidden crimes and in these areas of exploitation. We are working across forms of exploitation to try to drive those numbers up. We are working closely with the police and the operational partners. They have given you evidence on just how difficult it is to put together those cases, and how they take them through. We are working on it, but it is a very complicated and difficult area. However, we recognise that the numbers are low; we don't disagree.

Q597 James Daly: I am directing these questions not at you two individually but at the Home Office, but that is just not acceptable. People come here and tell us all the time, "Everything's complicated; everything's difficult," and there is never a discussion regarding the outcomes.

I come from a private sector background. If I set one of my employees a task regarding the number of prosecutions, I would say, "There is a target to hit of"—whatever that figure may be. Do you have a target to achieve, working with other personnel in the Home Office and the Minister? It could be—I don't know—a 5% charging rate, or 3%, or whatever you think is appropriate. Or is it literally, "Just leave it to the CPS and the police, and they'll work it out if they can"?

Sarah Dines: Perhaps I can come in on that. I have regular meetings with Assistant Chief Constable Jim Pearce, who is the modern slavery lead on the National Police Chiefs' Council. There have been discussions about education for officers, to make sure that they fully understand what they need to do, but as I mentioned before, it is very important that we have common-sense policing, where the police officers get on with it and make arrests.

One question that I've been asking is: why do we have to wait for some investigations that can take years? Some things are sensitive, and there are international links in the big ones, but I share your frustrations. It is a matter of the education of the officers on the ground. The police are operationally independent, but the Home Office Ministers and civil service can to some extent hold them to account, and I regularly do. I have been impressed that there is enough effort; I want to see results, too, so I ask those questions, Mr Daly.

Q598 James Daly: Minister, I am sure that everybody in the Modern Slavery Unit is extremely good, so this is not against them individually, but what do they actually do?



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Sarah Dines: I have hands-on sight of a huge amount of work that takes place. There is a lot of work in engagement with stakeholders, contrary to some concerns, and a lot of liaison to be done with them. There is also the development of new strategies and policies, and making sure that we do as much as we can; I do as much as I can, keeping to my brief, to get the police to move forward in an area that is very important to the Prime Minister.

Q599 **James Daly:** I hope you understand, Minister, that I would hope that a specialised unit of 56 people would be doing more than that, and that there would be more tangible outcomes than that. We have many cases going through the NRM; I referred to the 16,938 figure. We are always told how complicated this is. Do you think that those 56 people have a role to play in assisting the immigration agencies that sit in the Home Office—Matthew might be able to answer this—in terms of evaluating evidence that individuals provide?

Sarah Dines: Matthew, would you like to answer that?

Matthew Bligh: I do not really understand the question—sorry. I am not in the Modern Slavery Unit, so I cannot answer for the work that happens in it.

Q600 **James Daly:** I suppose the point is this: could the Modern Slavery Unit assist your Department, when it comes to immigration outcomes, by playing a part that meant that we did not have such lengthy delays in modern slavery cases in the immigration system?

Matthew Bligh: Yes, of course. All the work that the Modern Slavery Unit does to reduce the time it takes to make decisions contributes to immigration outcomes. The Modern Slavery Unit has had a leading role in developing the illegal migration legislation, which has just passed through the House. It is the lead on all the modern slavery-related provisions, so it is an integral part of that work.

Q601 **Chair:** Can I interrupt? You're saying that the Modern Slavery Unit has been very involved in the drafting of the Illegal Migration Bill?

Matthew Bligh: The policy development of it.

Q602 **Chair:** Clearly, we are interested in trafficking. We are looking at that as a safeguarding issue. It is not an immigration issue, is it? It is a safeguarding issue. That is why we have the Minister for safeguarding in front of us. Seeing it through the prism of immigration seems rather to shift what we would expect the Home Office to do.

Sarah Dines: I think they are linked arenas, aren't they? They are distinct areas in a linked arena. We mustn't forget the advances made by the unit in terms of productivity, in reducing the number of days it takes to go through the process, which is still way, way too high. If we are looking at the value of the unit, we need a unit to drive strategy and policy, to assist with law enforcement and to make sure we are ready for new legislation. There is a lot of work to be done.



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Q603 Chair: I think we need to be clear as a Committee that when we are talking about trafficking, we are talking about offenses against a person, aren't we? Whereas with immigration, it is offences against the state. They are quite different, aren't they?

Sarah Dines: I think they are different, but within the same arena. It operates within an international world of organised crime, but of course they are separate.

James Daly: I really don't know what to say. What would I take away from this? My background is in criminal justice, and I think Lancashire police are showing how this can be done. Detective Sergeant Peall is backed up by the data, in terms of what his unit is doing in Lancashire.

On the criminal justice side of this, I would urge, Minister, that that good practice, and best practice, be rolled out. You are right, Minister. We have been involved in the legal profession for a long time. You mention old-fashioned policing; I think that is exactly what is required in this, but I would also hope, when we have lots of people at the Home Office in a Modern Slavery Unit, that we could have better outcomes.

For example, 56 people getting us to a charging rate of 1.66%, and the answer being, "It's too complex, and we leave it to the CPS and the police," is just not acceptable, I'm afraid. If we carry on like that, I don't see what we are achieving. We are just not achieving anything at all. Please follow the example of Lancashire, and let's try to influence other police forces to take this seriously.

Sarah Dines: I have asked him, and I have asked Jim Pearce, what more we can do to make sure that that degree of specialism, practicality and common sense is everywhere in the UK, not just in Devon and Cornwall, or in Lancashire. I have asked that question, and they are assisting me in making sure that the education and advice, not least that they can give other forces, are fully taken care of.

James Daly: Thank you.

Q604 Chair: I am very conscious of time, and we want to get to our next witness, so would you write to me with the answers to these questions? First, when will the Home Office share the outcomes of the devolved child decision making pilot, which ended in April 2023? I would also be interested in your view on whether there should be a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation.

Could you let me know what the attrition rate is for NRM decision makers? When we took evidence last week, we were advised by one of your officials that we should ask you about the policies that would be used to speed up NRM decision making and ensure there was sufficient support for victims of trafficking. I also wonder what your view is on whether the NRM should be overseen by an independent body. If you wrote to us with responses to those questions, that would be very helpful.



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Sarah Dines: I can give you one or two of those answers now if you have time, or would you rather move on?

Q605 **Chair:** If you feel able to do so, you could respond now. We could take a few moments, but then I would be keen to move to the next witness.

Sarah Dines: I think the attrition rate is 28%; I will be corrected if it is not. There is a huge focus on continually recruiting. We are doing well on that process.

Q606 **Chair:** How many have you recruited? We were told that you were trying to get 200 caseworkers.

Sarah Dines: We are trying to get to 200. I think we are well over midway.

Joanna West: We have already doubled our decision-maker numbers to 336, and we are recruiting a further 200 by the end of this year. We are absolutely on track to do that.

Sarah Dines: The statutory definition is a big question, so perhaps best if I put it in a written answer—I could give an answer now, but it would probably be long, and you do not want that. We will also answer with the results of the pilot.

Q607 **Chair:** Can you say anything about that now? That seems to work quite effectively, the decision making for children being devolved. Can anyone say anything about that?

Sarah Dines: All I can say, briefly, is that the pilots have been working quite well. Those involved have been very seized of the need to do a common-sense job, to reflect Mr Daly's language, and that has worked well for children, in my view. I am hopeful that there will be some good news with which we can move forward in that area, but I can give you more details by letter, if you like.

Q608 **Chair:** It would be helpful to understand what your objectives are for getting down the numbers of days that people have to wait for decisions. In the last quarter, it was 654 days for a Single Competent Authority conclusive grounds decision, and 350 for a decision from Immigration Enforcement Competent Authority. I don't know if you have this, but it would be good to have an objective for getting that down over a certain period of time. What do you think the numbers should be? How long should someone wait?

Sarah Dines: Ideally, I would like to see decisions in 40 or 50 days. I concur with the Home Secretary on that. In the last quarter, as I understand it, the efficiencies had kicked in, and there has been a shortening of the time. There will be some statistical glitches, because we are going through some very old cases that may skew the data—you are interested in data, I know—but a more detailed written answer can be given.

Q609 **Chair:** Finally, we have not talked in great detail about the change



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regarding objective evidence when a first responder is making a decision about whether to refer to the national referral mechanism. Lots of voluntary and charity organisations are first responders. Given this requirement for further information, will the Home Office provide any funding to assist first responders and organisations with the additional work that will be required?

Sarah Dines: There may be. That will be something I have to look into. I will write to you about it. It is very important that we have that information; medical, professional, expert evidence and information will be fundamental. There may be financial cost. It is likely to be delivered through Barnardo's, but I would like to give you a proper answer with some detail.

Chair: Thank you and your officials for your evidence. We will now move to the second panel, although you, Minister, are going to stay with our next witness.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah Dines MP and Andrew Patrick.

Q610 **Chair:** Mr Patrick, would you please introduce yourself to the Committee?

Andrew Patrick: Until May, I double-hatted as the Migration and Modern Slavery Envoy, sitting in the FCDO but working closely with the Home Office.

Chair: Thank you very much. We will now have some questions from the Committee.

Q611 **Tim Loughton:** Mr Patrick, can you confirm that you were in post for 15 months? We can perhaps treat this as something of an exit interview, which might be useful. Feel free to be as liberal in your comments as you wish. It was a full-time post.

Andrew Patrick: Yes.

Q612 **Tim Loughton:** And you have no permanent replacement at the moment, but one is intended.

Andrew Patrick: There is an interim replacement. The reason it is interim is that we are expecting to make some changes to how it is done. We did not want to advertise it as full time but have someone else come up in three months, and to be accused of changing it regularly.

Q613 **Tim Loughton:** How is the post likely to change?

Andrew Patrick: I do not want to pre-empt that, because that is for Ministers to confirm. I am sure it will be clear in a few months how it will change.

Q614 **Tim Loughton:** But your understanding is that the post in some form will continue.

Andrew Patrick: Yes. My successor is in fact sitting behind me.



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Q615 **Tim Loughton:** Right. It has been quite hard to glean what your role has involved in those 15 months. There is a paragraph in the FCDO “Human Rights and Democracy” annual report that refers to three engagements you had: visiting the Vatican, meeting the OSCE special representative and visiting Doha. Your Twitter feed refers to a visit to Vietnam and some engagement with the Governments of the Philippines and Malaysia. Would you say that those were your main achievements in your 15 months?

Andrew Patrick: They were my main visits, yes, but of course I am engaging from London when I am not visiting, and my role is to advocate to increase support for the global fight against modern slavery. I should clarify, by the way, that my role has not focused on the countries where there is a particular flow into the UK. It has focused on global advocacy to address modern slavery in countries where there isn’t necessarily a flow into the UK, but one of our objectives is to eliminate modern slavery worldwide and that is what I focus on.

Q616 **Tim Loughton:** Can you explain that? I just noticed that one of the countries not mentioned is Albania, which is a key candidate country for trafficking coming to this country. Can you explain why there hasn’t been an engagement with Albania, and why that is not part of your role?

Andrew Patrick: Let me distinguish between my role and the FCDO’s role. As far as I know, our ambassador in Tirana spends most of his time working on that issue. The point is that where I can add value—and this was the decision between myself and the Home Office—is that I focus on the global fight, and where there are particular issues with the UK they are led by Home Office officials with the ambassador in post.

Q617 **Tim Loughton:** Okay. We met the ambassador in Albania when we visited. We were all extremely impressed with his grasp of the problem and with the various UK agencies based out there. They are working with him specifically on the issue of trafficking by Albanians, and on the wider context of Albanians involved in international crime, which ends up in the UK as well.

Surely there would have been benefit to an engagement between you, with your more global reach, and him, with his very detailed knowledge of how these gangs work. In this case, they happen to be Albanian but they have international links, so I do not understand why it was not a priority to deal with the Albanian experience and the experts, and the great deal of knowledge that has been built up with other agencies there.

Andrew Patrick: As I say, the FCDO is heavily involved in that. My role has focused on the global fight. If I were to focus on the flow to the UK instead of the Home Office, we wouldn’t contribute to, for example, addressing issues of modern slavery in manufacturing in Malaysia or the construction of World Cup stadiums in Qatar, or sexual exploitation in the Philippines. Those are important issues that we should cover, which is why I have been focused on them. My Home Office colleagues, with whom I meet regularly, focus more on direct trafficking to the UK.



Sarah Dines: On Albania, Mr Loughton, I remind you that just a few days ago we renewed our working agreement with them. I think it is a fifth-year anniversary or similar. The Home Office does a lot of work on the flows to the UK rather than globally, and specifically on the flows to the UK from Albania. The FCDO is also involved in that work, very similarly to what has been done in Romania. So there is work in that space, although it may not be that this particular diplomat has been focused on that. He is looking at the whole globe, whereas the Home Office has focused on where a lot of people have come from recently.

Q618 **Tim Loughton:** That was my point, Minister. There was no criticism—quite the reverse—of the operation we have in Albania, but it provides a good deal of information and examples of how we can deal with the issue in the rest of the world, hence there is a bit of surprise at the lack of interface between the global envoy and the agencies working in Albania. By the same token, Mr Patrick, you did go to Vietnam, which again has been a significant source of people being trafficked to this country, not least in the cultivation of drugs; why did you go there but not engage with Albania?

Andrew Patrick: That was originally meant to be a joint visit with the Home Office, but for various reasons the Home Office element dropped away so I went on my own. I focused on the problems of modern slavery within Vietnam, the trafficking of Vietnamese people to other parts of south-east Asia and Vietnam's own modern slavery systems. We did talk about the flow to the UK, but I knew that my colleagues from the Home Office were going to come a couple of months later—as indeed they did, I think, last month—to talk about the law enforcement co-operation and the co-operation specifically to stop the flow into the UK.

Q619 **Tim Loughton:** With your Home Office job hat on, returns of people who have been identified as victims of trafficking in the UK is an important feature of the whole trafficking programme and presumably an area that you take an interest in, in terms of whether it is safe to return people who have been taken within the system and given support as victims of trafficking but for whom it is not necessarily appropriate to stay in the United Kingdom.

Albania is probably one of the biggest examples of countries that we have returned people to within the trafficking programme. What other visits or contacts globally have you gleaned information from about how well the return programme works, or whether it does not?

Andrew Patrick: I have not been to Albania. The only country where it is really relevant is Vietnam. My sense from my visit is that the strength of our law enforcement co-operation and broader co-operation means that people who return will be looked after.

Q620 **Tim Loughton:** How can you judge that?

Andrew Patrick: I am talking about the impressions I had from my visit, but it was not a specific topic in my visit. We talked about broader co-



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operation, so I cannot give you an evidenced answer. I am talking about what my impression was from my visit.

Q621 Tim Loughton: Let us look at it from a Foreign Office point of view. For example, the Foreign Office, through the British embassy in Tirana, funds a project for women who have been trafficked into the sex trade and are returned to Tirana and then given support, particularly if it is not safe for them to go back to their families. That is specifically a Foreign Office initiative.

A very important part of the whole debate around the trafficking section of the Illegal Migration Bill has been whether it is safe for trafficked individuals identified as victims of modern-day slavery to be returned to their countries. It would be useful to have data from Vietnam, as another high-profile country that is of relevance to us, to know whether it has those sorts of projects, so that we can gauge whether it is safe to return people to Vietnam. What did your research glean in that area?

Andrew Patrick: With the Minister's agreement, we would be happy to write further on that issue to the Committee.

Q622 Tim Loughton: Okay, but give us a rough impression. It was your visit—you were there. Did you see any returned trafficking victim projects in Vietnam?

Andrew Patrick: As I said, I was there to talk about the context within Vietnam and the exploitation of Vietnamese within the region primarily. I know that we have a number of modern slavery fund projects in Vietnam. They are run from the Home Office rather than the FCDO, and I am sure we would be happy to give you details of those.

Q623 Tim Loughton: So there are no projects in Vietnam that are being funded through our embassy.

Andrew Patrick: The implementation is through the embassy. The funds come from the Home Office, but they are run out of the embassy in Vietnam.

Q624 Tim Loughton: But the embassy is beholden to the Foreign Office. You are part of the Foreign Office, and it is a major part. I do not see why this should not have been a key part of your trip to Vietnam. The answer to my question clearly is no. With respect, what I am trying to get to is, what is the legacy of your 15 years in post?

Andrew Patrick: Fifteen years?

Tim Loughton: Sorry—15 months.

Sarah Dines: It felt like 15 years.

Andrew Patrick: No, it did not; I wish I was there longer.

The fight against modern slavery globally is something that requires sustained commitment by like-minded Governments working closely with the Australians, the Americans and European partners. We have moved



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things forward. We have been able to get Qatar to continue the effort it made to address problems of modern slavery that came out during the World Cup.

We have, together with the Department of Health and Social Care, helped to improve the situation in the glove industry in Malaysia, which, as you know, was accused of having significant levels of modern slavery in the manufacturing of gloves coming into the NHS. In the Philippines, the co-operation that we have between the National Crime Agency and the Philippine law enforcement agency to tackle the sexual exploitation of children is a very significant part of that country's effort to suppress that activity.

There are things we can point to that have been achieved, but I am not going to claim that tackling modern slavery globally is something we are going to make very rapid progress on.

Q625 Tim Loughton: I appreciate all that, and they are very important developments, but with respect, Mr Patrick, the word "I" did not appear in that answer at all, and I asked what the legacy was of your 15 months in post as the envoy specialising in this area.

Andrew Patrick: Those were all the countries that I visited and talked to those partners about, so yes, I am part of that, but I do not want to claim sole credit for the progress that has been made.

Sarah Dines: Can I jump in at this stage, to give some figures? Some £4.8 million has been given under the UK modern slavery fund directly to Vietnam. A similar figure—£4.7 million—has been given to Albania, and from my experience and witnessing it, similar millions have been given to Romania. The modern slavery fund is a large fund that regularly gives money to focused work with survivors.

It is not the Vietnamese example you were looking for, Mr Loughton, but while I was in Romania, I was able to meet victims of slavery who had been in the UK and in Holland and were back in Romania. I was also able to meet a UK national living in Romania who had worked on the streets in Amsterdam.

Those stories were salient, but the support they were getting in Romania was as a direct result of the funds that the UK Government had spent through these Home Office modern slavery fund grants. There is work on the ground in Romania, and if it is £4.7 million in Albania and £4.8 million in Vietnam, I suspect that it will be very similar work, but we can get you the specific details.

Q626 Chair: Having travelled the world and seen what is happening in different countries, can you tell us how the UK is perceived by the many countries you visited? We talked earlier about the Modern Slavery Act and the UK being world-leading; what are you picking up when you travel the world? Do countries look to the UK and see ours as a model they should follow in tackling slavery?



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Andrew Patrick: Yes. In the countries I have talked about that I visited, we are seen as one of the leading countries in this area, along with the US and others, and they look for our expertise. For example, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority is seen as a very interesting model; people want to have it visit and to learn from it. The NCA has provided very good advice on how policing tackles modern slavery here. So yes, we are seen as a model.

Q627 **Chair:** The former OSCE special representative, Valiant Richey, who I am sure you have come across, visited the UK in November 2022, and he noted that a growing number of unfulfilled UK initiatives and commitments “threatens to undermine the UK’s position as a global anti-trafficking leader”. What do you say about that?

Andrew Patrick: Well, he said that in his report. You also heard from his successor or deputy, I think, who gave evidence to this Committee and pointed out that this country has the same number of people in its national referral mechanism as the whole of the rest of Europe combined. Clearly, the OSCE is going to make criticisms, but it is also clear that we are one of the leading countries in tackling this issue.

Q628 **Chair:** Obviously, we want to be seen and carry on being seen as leading the way on this, do we not? At the moment, there is doubt about that.

Andrew Patrick: We want to continue to be able to influence the world, to improve the fight against modern slavery. That is absolutely right.

Chair: Thank you both very much for your time this morning. That concludes our questioning. We will be writing a report in due course, which we will forward to the Government, and I am sure we will let you have a copy.