

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Anti-Slavery Commissioner, HC 503

Tuesday 6 February 2024

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Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Kim Johnson; Tim Loughton; Alison Thewliss.

Questions 1-65

Witness

I: Eleanor Lyons, Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner.

Examination of witness

Witness: Eleanor Lyons.

Q1 Chair: Morning and welcome to the Home Affairs Committee. This morning, we are going to look at the work of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. We are very pleased to have the newly appointed commissioner with us. The Committee carried out quite a long inquiry last year on trafficking. We published our report in December and we are awaiting a response from the Government, so we are very pleased to have the opportunity to talk to you today about some of the issues that were in that report and other things as well. Also, we are keen to get your take on some of the legislation that has recently been introduced into Parliament.

Just to run through, what we want to do today is understand your priorities during your three-year tenure, hear what you think the biggest challenges are going to be, and seek your views on some of the key recommendations of our report that I just referred to. You are very welcome to the Committee. We are expecting some more members. As you know, in Parliament it can be challenging to keep everybody at their desk at the same time, but we are expecting more members to come along.

I will start with a very straightforward question. Why did you apply for the role of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner?

Eleanor Lyons: Thank you for having me today, Chair. I also thank you for your work on the human trafficking inquiry; I am pleased to be here speaking about it so early on in my tenure.

I applied to be the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner in March last year, as I was in a similar independent advocate role and I saw how critical those roles are for giving a voice to those who are often overlooked and not heard. I knew that the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner role had been vacant for some time, and I wanted to apply. At the same, I was also working with children, young people, their families and the professionals who provide them with care and support when it is needed. I saw some fantastic examples of care being provided when there was exploitation, but also a bit of a postcode lottery and not enough join-up between services. I wanted to be the Independent Anti-Slavery

Commissioner to do my part to help that growing problem among children and young people.

- Q2 **Chair:** In essence, you are saying that you have transferable skills from that particular sector. When I was looking at your background, one thing struck me. The previous Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioners both came from policing but with a lot of experience. One was a very senior police officer—a chief constable—and the first one had many years in policing. Compared with them, your experience and knowledge of the sector around modern slavery and human trafficking is very limited.

Eleanor Lyons: I pay testament to my predecessors. I think that they did great work and they are still passionately committed to this space. My experience and skills are different to theirs. I have background experience largely in the women and girls space from work I did on the women, peace and security brief. I worked with international organisations and partners in-country, particularly in the Sahel region, and with women who were largely victims of sexual exploitation as a conflict issue.

I also have experience of being an independent advocate, as you mentioned, and of working with children and young people, which I believe is very relevant to the IASC job at the moment. More broadly, I bring background in the machinery of Government, the levers of change and how one needs to work to deliver policy across multiple Departments.

- Q3 **Chair:** The Committee has been very concerned about the absence of an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner for 18 months. We have had various opportunities to question Ministers and to chivvy them along to get the appointment made, so we are pleased that you are in place, but I wondered—reflecting back on the fact that there has been an 18-month gap at a time when immigration, migration, trafficking and slavery have all been very important issues—what your reflections are on that gap and on what it now leaves you with coming into post.

Eleanor Lyons: That is an important question. I think that the gap is, without doubt, disappointing and it has had a big impact, importantly, on those with lived experience—on them feeling like their voice has been heard by policy makers. I have been speaking to the sector and law enforcement an awful lot since starting in role, and I think that the gap is very much felt by them, too.

Externally, that absence of an IASC has been felt by everyone while major pieces of legislation have been going through Parliament, as you say. Internally, with my team structure and the position that put me in on coming into role, it created challenges. The office has been largely dormant, so I inherited a team of one individual from the previous commissioner's office. I need to rebuild the team—that is a priority for me—but, for context, in my previous independent role, I inherited a team from the previous commissioner, and that was a team of 30. Now, we are in the position where vacancy has a big impact on my ability to hit the ground running, although I am working as hard as I can to rebuild at pace.

- Q4 **Chair:** At the moment, how many members of staff do you have?



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Eleanor Lyons: At the moment, I have two members of staff.

Q5 **Chair:** Are they permanent?

Eleanor Lyons: No. They are on fixed-term contracts. I have one of them until February and one until April.

Q6 **Chair:** I want to ask about the budget you have available to you. We have information for 2020-21, under the previous commissioner, when the budget was £605,000 for the year. What is your budget for this year or the part-year that we are in?

Eleanor Lyons: As I am coming into role halfway—actually, further than halfway—through the year, a lot of my budget has been reallocated. As of April next year, my budget for the year will be £500,000.

Q7 **Chair:** So less than the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner had in 2020-21.

Eleanor Lyons: Yes.

Q8 **Chair:** Why have you got less? What is the reason?

Eleanor Lyons: I am absolutely pushing for more resource and budget, because I think it is important, but I have been told by the Home Office that my budget will be cut every year that I am in role.

Q9 **Chair:** It will be cut every year that you are in role.

Eleanor Lyons: Yes. By 5% every year. That is what I have been told.

Alongside that, Chair, if I may, one of the things that I have been finding challenging is my recruitment process, which is managed by the Home Office. I need DG sign-off for every role that I want to recruit to the team, with special permission to recruit from outside the Home Office. Again, that creates delays in rebuilding my team and in having it reflect a wide cohort of the sector, such as charities and law enforcement.

Q10 **Chair:** Let me get this straight: your budget will be cut by 5% every year you are in post, and anyone you appoint has to be from the Home Office, otherwise you need special permission to recruit.

Eleanor Lyons: Yes, that is right. I need special permission to be able to recruit from the wider civil service and if I want to recruit from outside the civil service, I need to get special permission to do that. The reason that I find that a unique situation to be in is that in my last independent commissioner role, once the budget was allocated, I was able to recruit whomever I thought. I could put the job on the website, and that made the rebuilding of the team and it reflecting what I needed a lot easier.

Q11 **Chair:** How many members of staff do you think that you need?

Eleanor Lyons: With the current budget, I will end up with six or seven members of the team. In my previous role, we ended up with about 30 members of staff. Obviously, I will push for as many individuals as I can to



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rebuild and resource the office, but I have done my team building on the basis of the budget that I have been given.

- Q12 **Chair:** So I am clear, is the £500,000 just for staffing, or do you have to pay for office space? In fact, where is your office?

Eleanor Lyons: My office at the moment is in Clive House. That £500,000 pays for my salary, my staff's salaries, and office costs. It does not pay for the building, and I do not have to do that from within the budget, but I do have to find money for laptops and all the other things you would expect for an office, such as expenses, travel—anything the team is doing.

- Q13 **Chair:** What is Clive House?

Eleanor Lyons: It is on Petty France, opposite the Ministry of Justice, but I expect to be relocated as part of the levelling-up agenda across Government.

- Q14 **Chair:** I saw in the papers that this post will be moving out of London. Is Clive House owned by the Home Office?

Eleanor Lyons: I think it is owned by the Home Office or the Ministry of Justice, but I am not sure which.

- Q15 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Eleanor. Thank you for being here today. Human trafficking is no longer a priority for the Home Office, because small boats and the Rwanda policy are being prioritised. How would you respond to that statement?

Eleanor Lyons: Human trafficking and modern slavery was absolutely a priority for this Government in 2015, when the Modern Slavery Act passed. There has been an incredible amount of work since then that we can be proud of, in the support that it has provided for victims and those with lived experience. It is fair to say now that the focus of the Home Office is on tackling illegal migration and small boats. Modern slavery and human trafficking is no longer the priority it was.

- Q16 **Kim Johnson:** Recent research by the Work Rights Centre has identified the employer sponsorship system as a systematic driver of migrant worker exploitation. Will you be conducting any review of that? In 2022, the Home Office issued 236,000 employer-sponsored visas. Do you know how many visas have been issued since then?

Eleanor Lyons: I do not have the precise figure for the number of visas that have been issued since that time. I cannot provide that today, although I am obviously happy to follow up in writing. In general, the issue of sponsored visas is very much on my mind. Only last week, I was in Bristol with Unseen, which is responsible for the modern slavery helpline and often acts as a warning system for issues that may be coming up. It has had a vast increase in the number of calls, particularly from workers in the care sector who, as a consequence of the seasonal worker visa and the care worker visa, had been brought into this country where those high-demand sectors are now facing exploitation. I am pleased that the GLAA

and NCA are now doing stuff on that, but it is undoubtedly an important issue to keep an eye on.

- Q17 Kim Johnson:** You mentioned earlier the importance of a joined-up approach to dealing with this problem. Are you optimistic that the services involved in these issues are joined up at the moment? Sometimes the police take a different view on human trafficking, where victims are not viewed as such. How will you, as the independent commissioner, work with the police to ensure that this does not happen?

Eleanor Lyons: It is a really important point and question. I have been making sure that I speak to a wide range of stakeholders since coming into role, but it is also a concern that I brought from my previous job. When we were speaking to children and young people in the wake of Child Q and strip-searching, we found examples where they had come into contact with law enforcement and not been identified as potential victims of modern slavery. Instead, they had been retraumatised by the experience, and strip-searched. Undoubtedly, we need to increase the training and awareness among law enforcement.

When I have spoken to individual teams, I have seen examples of great best practice. They are aware of the issues, know what to look for, and have a victim-centric trauma-informed approach. I do not think that is as consistent as I would want it to be at the moment. I plan to work across a wide range of stakeholders in role to convene and co-ordinate where I can, and to share best practice.

The Committee's recommendations as part of its inquiry into the policing and prosecution of human trafficking were very important, in terms of it being a priority for police forces and PCCs to have in their police and crime plans. I agree, too, with the need for victim navigators across all law enforcement forces.

- Q18 Kim Johnson:** Can I ask about child criminal exploitation? Poverty is a main driver affecting these increasing issues. Organised crime is using these vulnerable young people, who are being coerced into criminality. I am curious about what the Commissioner is doing. Can you say a little bit about the independent child trafficking guardians?

Eleanor Lyons: I am concerned about the growing numbers of children who are being exploited across this country. We have seen this grow year on year, for many years now. I believe that in 2022—which is the last full data year we had—there were 7,019 children who were being exploited. My concern is for every single child on that front, but also that we are not capturing all the children.

- Q19 Kim Johnson:** So 7,019 might be just the tip of the iceberg?

Eleanor Lyons: Yes, unfortunately. There is some good work going on in this area: as you said, there are independent child trafficking guardians. I have met with Barnardo's, who do great work in this space. Obviously, they are available only in two thirds of areas at the moment. They need to be available everywhere. That independent advocate role is really



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important in explaining to the child what is happening to them and allowing them to navigate what is a very complicated system. Undoubtedly, we need better clarity, too, on child criminal exploitation. I support the Committee's recommendation that we make sure there is a definition of that which professionals who are working with children and young people should recognise and understand, so that they can provide both prevention, to help stop children getting into a vulnerable position, and clarity about interventions and how we can help those children.

Q20 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you.

Q21 **Chair:** For clarification, you said that you have met with the new Safeguarding Minister, Laura Farris. Is your understanding that the whole issue of modern slavery and trafficking sits within the safeguarding portfolio of that Minister, or is it with the Illegal Migration Minister, Michael Tomlinson?

Eleanor Lyons: I have met with the Minister for Safeguarding, Laura Farris, and had a conversation with her about what I would like to see in this space. I am not completely sure that it fully sits within her brief. I think it is also partly within Minister Tomlinson's brief, so I have written to him as well. Though I have asked the question, I have not managed to have a completely full answer.

Q22 **Chair:** Do you think it should sit within their briefs? Minister Tomlinson is the Minister for Illegal Migration; Laura Farris is the Minister for Safeguarding. Where should it sit, in your view?

Eleanor Lyons: I think it should fully sit with the Minister for Safeguarding. That is where it sat historically. Also, it might make sense for it to sit with the Home Secretary; it is a priority issue and should be taken very seriously by a single Minister.

Q23 **Tim Loughton:** Commissioner, apologies that I was not here right at the beginning. You have just said that your budget is going to be cut by 5% every year. Did you know that when you accepted the job?

Eleanor Lyons: I did know that my budget would likely be reduced each year when I accepted the job.

Q24 **Tim Loughton:** You are concerned, too, that you will not have enough staff to be able to do your job in the best way, as you would like it to be. Why, then, did you accept the job?

Eleanor Lyons: I accepted the job because I am passionate about this and think it is very important that there is an independent commissioner in role. I am keen that I will work within the budget that I have to do all that I can to help the potential victims of modern slavery in this country. When I took the role I did not understand how long it would take me to rebuild the team. That is something new that I am discovering in role.

Q25 **Tim Loughton:** Do you think that the Home Office is passionate about your job, as well?

Eleanor Lyons: I cannot speculate what the Home Office thinks in general about my role, but I would say that modern slavery and human



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trafficking was more of a priority back in 2015 and seems to be less of a priority now.

- Q26 **Tim Loughton:** Given that the Committee said in the trafficking report that it is not a priority, and given that for the Home Office, certainly financially, it appears to be a dwindling priority, what sort of instructions, guidance or offers of support have you been given by the Home Office? What is the governance of your relationship vis-à-vis officials in the Home Office and Ministers?

Eleanor Lyons: I have had conversations with officials and Ministers since starting in role. I have come into role with the attitude and perspective of working collaboratively to do all I can to deliver for potential victims of modern slavery in this country. At the moment, I am finding that I am having good conversations and working relationships with those officials and with Ministers too. Did you have a broader question around the formal governance side of things?

- Q27 **Tim Loughton:** What is interesting is that we have had inspectors in the past who have been quite high-profile and quite outspoken and prepared to go public when they are critical of the attitude of the Home Office or the support or resources they are getting from Ministers in this area. Your predecessors have both been pretty long-experienced people, from a police background as well. How are you going to stand up to a Home Office that appears increasingly indifferent to this subject?

Eleanor Lyons: The first thing for me to be really clear on and I need to do as quickly as I can is produce my strategic plan, to make it clear what my office is focusing on and being clear and transparent about my priorities. I aim to then utilise that to work across all stakeholders, including the Home Office, to push for the changes that I want to see.

I have already suggested to the Home Office that I want to see an update to modern slavery strategy and annual reports being published again. Though, of course, I have the ability as an independent commissioner to speak publicly when I do not think that stuff is moving in the direction that I want it to be. That is absolutely something that I am willing to do in-role.

- Q28 **Tim Loughton:** How do you do that? One criticism we have had of the Home Office in other areas around inspections is its tardiness, if not reluctance first, to publish and secondly to respond to independent reports, be it inspection of the immigration estate or whatever. What will you do if they say, "Thank you very much" for various reports that you produce and then do nothing about them?

Eleanor Lyons: That is something I experienced at the Deputy Children's Commissioner's Office when we were trying to get data out of the Home Office for the number of children in hotels and the experiences they were having. Undoubtedly, it was a uniquely challenging Department to navigate and push for things that were in statute and something that we were entitled to.



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I will be willing, as an independent commissioner, to speak out when—I think this is incredibly important—the needs and voices of the victims of modern slavery are not being heard. I plan to initially work collaboratively with the Home Office to push for changes that I want to see, but I am aware of the challenges in this space.

- Q29 **Tim Loughton:** What are the examples of you having spoken out when you were Deputy Children's Commissioner for three years?

Eleanor Lyons: When I was Deputy Children's Commissioner for three years, one of the big pieces of work I did just before leaving the role was on the Illegal Migration Act as it was then going through Parliament. I spoke out on unaccompanied children seeking asylum not being within the scope of the legislation. Also, alongside that, I worked on getting data from the Home Office. I did wider work on children not attending school and on changes needed to the Online Safety Act—then Bill.

On a wide range of issues affecting children and young people's lives, I found that initially being very clear about what I was going to work on and pushing for change across Government—beyond the Home Office or DfE at the time—is incredibly important, as is, then, being clear in public if those needs are not met.

- Q30 **Tim Loughton:** Do you think this is going to be primarily a children-focused role, given that in 2022 41% of referrals to the NRM were from children? That appears to be growing. Is your experience as Deputy Children's Commissioner the most relevant thing that you have done?

Eleanor Lyons: I am obviously early on in my tenure and still deciding on my main areas of focus. I want to ensure that the voices of victims and survivors are at the heart of everything that my office does, particularly focusing on areas where I do not think the system is working at the moment. That applies to UK nationals and children and young people, and also girls and women, who are often overlooked by first responders. The Government need to do more in that space too. We need to establish a survivor advisory council, which is incredibly important, to ensure that those with lived experience are heard by all policymakers.

Secondly, it is incredibly important that I try to make this a priority again for everyone—I think this is everyone's business—so I will be looking to work across Government. Many Departments have a key and important role to play here, and the modern slavery strategy should be visionary across Government and have clear KPIs for each Department. Alongside that, part of my role and remit is also to hold businesses to account, so I will be looking to do that as well. Of course, I will be working with law enforcement colleagues and partners. Children and young people is definitely an important part of my role, and it is an area that I care about passionately and think is incredibly important, but it will not form my whole focus while in role.

- Q31 **Tim Loughton:** You say that it is important to work across Government and the various Departments that have responsibilities on this. Given the reluctance of the Home Office to engage as enthusiastically or



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passionately as you would like, how on earth are you going to get other Departments, which do not have that direct link, to engage with you?

Eleanor Lyons: Since coming into role, I have actually welcomed some of the interactions that I have had with other Government Departments. I have already been speaking to the Ministry of Justice about the need for the Victims and Prisoners Bill to include independent advocacy for victims of modern slavery—independent modern slavery advocates, not just IDVAs and ISVAs. That is welcome and something that I have collaborated with other commissioners on so that we are working together in that space.

I also plan to meet with DBT about its work to hold businesses to account in this space. I have found there to be an appetite across Government in other Departments so far, since I have started in role.

Q32 Tim Loughton: You have referred to stakeholders several times. Who do you think are your primary stakeholders?

Eleanor Lyons: I think I have a wide range of stakeholders. Obviously, my job is UK-based and includes the devolved Administrations, which is why I have been speaking to both the Deputy Minister in Wales and the Minister in Scotland. It is also important that I work across law enforcement, the sector and anyone who is working in this space.

In particular, most important to me is ensuring that I am hearing the voices of those with lived experience. So far, I have found there to be pockets of best practice, depending on local authorities or the law enforcement team with which I am speaking, but that best practice is absolutely not being joined up across the UK. In role, I would like to do all I can to convene people and speak to them to ensure that they are hearing what other individuals are doing and take forward some of that best practice.

Q33 Tim Loughton: On overseas stakeholders, when you were at the MOD, you travelled to the Sahel and spoke to a lot of trafficking victims and agencies out there. With your shrinking budget, that is going to be rather difficult, isn't it?

Eleanor Lyons: Yes, I am aware of that. I have spoken to the modern slavery envoy already to understand his focus areas and priorities to ensure that I am focusing on the areas where I can have the most impact as IASC. Obviously, those international partnerships and relationships are still important, so I have spoken to the OSCE and the ambassador-at-large in America, but my primary focus will be on the UK.

Q34 Alison Thewliss: Thank you and welcome, Ms Lyons—it is good to see you here. I was quite glad to see that one of the first things you did was get out and about, go visit Wales and go visit colleagues in Scotland. I think it is important to understand the different legislative footings on this.

One concern that I have heard from the sector in Scotland, and I am sure this will be reflected in what you have heard, was that the Nationality and



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Borders Act, the Illegal Migration Act and the Rwanda Bill—when it becomes an Act, if it does—will undermine things like the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act. I wondered what your thoughts were on this.

Eleanor Lyons: It was great to go to Scotland and, in particular, to hear about its modern slavery strategy, which was published at the end of last year. It was very welcome. It was great to hear from the sector, too.

You are right. That was very much a feeling that I got from my conversations with the Minister, the wider sector and those providing support for victims. On that visit, I also heard from victims themselves—those with lived experience—that the Illegal Migration Act had created in them a sense of feeling confused, unwelcome and as though they were not going to get the support that they very much wanted and needed. These were individuals that would not have been impacted by the legislation, but they saw the rhetoric and it was concerning to them.

I am looking at this legislation purely through the prism of modern slavery and human trafficking. I am looking at sections 22 to 29 of the Illegal Migration Act. Undoubtedly, that legislation does conflate human trafficking and illegal migration, and they should not be conflated in the same legislation. From the sector, I have heard that it has created real concern.

I would say that because the legislation has passed but not yet commenced, it is great that there is a sunset clause within those provisions, but at the moment we are in a space where we have something on the statute books that is creating an environment where traffickers may be able to say to victims, “You are not going to be able to get the support that you need.” But, at the moment, that legislation has not even started. I am looking at what I can do to best provide clarity. There is a really important role of also making sure that first responders understand the advice that they are giving to the potential victims that they are coming across. Undoubtedly, it is one of the consequences of there not being an IASC in role for the last couple of years.

- Q35 **Alison Thewliss:** Thank you very much; I appreciate your frankness on that. The legislation has been described as a gift to traffickers, and that certainly seems to be borne out from what you have heard because that uncertainty is an environment in which they can thrive, is it not?

Eleanor Lyons: Yes. It is.

- Q36 **Alison Thewliss:** I went to a roundtable recently and picked up this real issue: we apparently jail more victims than traffickers. Is there something inherent in the criminal justice system that is not protecting victims of trafficking at the moment?

Eleanor Lyons: Coming into the role, one of my reflections is that there is not enough knowledge, understanding and data in a lot of the conversations we are having. I have not seen that data, but what I can say is that I think one of the difficulties we do have at the moment is that,



when victims are coming in contact with law enforcement, not all of those working in law enforcement are trained in how to spot potential victims.

From what I have heard from individuals working in the space, I do not think that section 45 is being used that frequently. Alongside that, I think it is really important that, because the criminal justice system can be a very lengthy process, we are providing support and wraparound care for victims. It is an area that is difficult and concerning, particularly when it comes to the criminal exploitation of UK nationals, that we are not often providing the support for the victims and going after the perpetrators and the criminal gangs.

- Q37 **Alison Thewliss:** The recent report by Every Child Protected Against Trafficking suggests that people who have been trafficked do not often recognise the terms that are being used or the jargon of the sector. They do not really understand, in some cases, the impact on themselves or that they have even been trafficked. They do not recognise that, particularly if the exploitation has gone on for a long time. What more can you do to kind of break that jargon and get more recognition for people?

Eleanor Lyons: That is something that I have been thinking about an awful lot. In general, we are far better with victims of other crime and recognising that they might not have the tools, language and ability to instantly describe what happened to them. Trauma has an incredibly big impact on these victims. Particularly for children, it is really important that we speak to them in a language that they understand.

Also, adults I have met who have been referred to the NRM have said they had been referred in a situation where they are in a very difficult place. They do not quite understand what they are being referred into and the consequences of that. That is definitely something that we need to be clearer on. It is something that I am thinking about as I come into role.

It is important that first responders explain what the national referral mechanism is. We need to make sure that everyone is aware of their roles and responsibilities in this space. I also think it is why advocacy is so important. IMSAs and the independent child trafficking guardians are really important because they provide that translation to the potential victim about what is happening and helping them to navigate what is often a very complex system for them.

- Q38 **Alison Thewliss:** Absolutely. I agree with that statement. TARA, the Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance in my constituency, had heard from women who thought that TARA themselves were the next traffickers. The women did not understand that they were now safe. The women who were in situations of sexual exploitation expected the people that they were speaking to at TARA to be their next pimp. That really brought home to me the scale of how you tackle this. There is a deep-seated problem where people have been abused for so long that they do not really understand how to be safe.



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Eleanor Lyons: Absolutely. It was great to meet TARA. They do important work. I am hugely impressed by the professionals that work there. What we are relying on a lot around the country is dedicated professionals working to provide support day in, day out. They are tenacious and committed to helping potential victims, but undoubtedly we need a reset moment now where we are really clear about what the modern slavery strategy is for this Government, what the areas are that need to be focused on by everyone from law enforcement to businesses, and then also look at what more support we need to give victims where it is not quite working at the moment.

Q39 **Alison Thewliss:** Absolutely. I also spoke to Guardianship Scotland about the work that they do to support young people and young people being assigned a guardian to help support them through the process, which seems a good model. It is a partnership between Aberlour and the Scottish Refugee Council. It seems to be quite powerful for those involved.

But I was concerned to hear that in the face of rising numbers of young people in the system, budgets will obviously be stretched. The Scottish Government is essentially paying for lots of the Home Office's work here, relating to what you said about your own budget being cut year on year. Do you think the Home Office understands the scale of the issue, because it does not feel as though the funding is matching the scale?

Eleanor Lyons: I think that for children and young people there are examples where there is good practice in terms of the guardians, who play an important role. Devolved decision-making pilots and multi-agency working are the way forward. That is something that I think should be taken forward across the whole country in terms of providing a quick decision for children and young people and also that local knowledge and understanding.

I am concerned about the scale of the problem with children and young people in terms of criminal gangs being willing to target children who are younger with smaller debt bonds. Looking more widely, they are willing to exploit children from all backgrounds, which is very concerning.

One of the consequences of there being concern about the NRM and the length of time that it takes to go through that is that I have heard from individuals in the sector that they are using local pathways instead of referring into that mechanism. Although I welcome their providing the support and care that they need, it means that we are not capturing the true problem on a national scale, so I echo your concerns about us not necessarily knowing the prevalence of where these issues are taking place. Not knowing where they are taking place and the prevalence of them obviously makes it harder to prevent it happening and then provide the right support.

Q40 **Alison Thewliss:** I agree with that but, again, if there is not a sufficient budget to support all these folk through a system that, as we have said, can be very complex, difficult to navigate and far too lengthy in many



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cases, the whole system does not work properly.

Eleanor Lyons: Which part of the system are you most concerned about, in terms of budget, just so I understand this?

Q41 **Alison Thewliss:** This is just what I heard from Guardianship Scotland. They are having more children come into the system. The Scottish Government is doing its bit and funding that, but it is really the Home Office's job to fund this kind of system, isn't it?

Eleanor Lyons: Let me take that away. I would be concerned if they do not have the budget they need to provide support and care for children. Let me look into it.

Q42 **Alison Thewliss:** They are doing the very best they can with that, but the increasing number of children makes it more difficult to provide that kind of personalised, individualised support.

Eleanor Lyons: Undoubtedly; I recognise that it would.

Q43 **Chair:** Can I ask about the Home Office Modern Slavery Unit? The Committee has been concerned for some time about it. There are 56 members of staff, and it has been very difficult to get any information about its output. It is not producing an annual report. You referred earlier to wanting to see that happen again. What is your view of the Modern Slavery Unit at the moment?

Eleanor Lyons: I agree with you that it needs to start publishing annual reports. Again, I think that is very important. My interactions with the Modern Slavery Unit so far, since coming into the role, have been positive. I have met officials who are dedicated to working on modern slavery and are incredibly well informed about the policy space. It is obviously important for officials to be clear about the areas they are working on and the outputs. It is also important that the Modern Slavery Unit works on modern slavery and human trafficking, and not other areas within the Home Office's remit, such as illegal migration.

Q44 **Chair:** We heard that the Modern Slavery Unit had a leading role in developing policy for the modern slavery measures within the Illegal Migration Act, which the Committee is obviously concerned about. From the information we were given by the previous safeguarding Minister, there seemed to be a view that dealing with illegal migration is an issue for the Modern Slavery Unit.

Eleanor Lyons: In my opinion, the Modern Slavery Unit should be focusing on modern slavery and human trafficking. Of course, its work is set by senior officials and Ministers in the Department, but in general, the interactions I have had with it so far have been positive.

Q45 **Chair:** There are 56 members of that unit.

Eleanor Lyons: I am afraid I am unaware of how many of them are in there at the moment.

Q46 **Chair:** That is what we were told. I am just comparing that with your



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number of staff. When do you think your strategic plan will be ready to be published?

Eleanor Lyons: I am looking to write it as quickly as I can. The strategic plan of the IASC office goes through the Home Office system, so it may be delayed on that side of things, but I am looking to go as quickly as possible. Obviously, we don't know when the general election will be, but ideally I want to have my strategic plan out before then to make it clear to all parties that there need to be clear commitments to protect the victims of modern slavery and human trafficking, and to focus efforts on going after criminal gangs.

Q47 **Chair:** Do you think you might have something to submit to the Home Office by Easter?

Eleanor Lyons: By Easter, I think I should have something to submit to the Home Office, and then I will be pushing to have it published as quickly as I can.

Q48 **Chair:** Right. Tim Loughton has already explained that when things go into the Home Office, it is quite a battle to get any response or to get reports published, so it would be very helpful if you could let the Committee know when your strategic plan goes into the Home Office so that we can monitor how long it takes to come out the other end.

Eleanor Lyons: I am very happy to do that. In general, over the course of my three years, I am happy to keep the Committee updated about all my work.

Q49 **Chair:** That would be very helpful. Are you expecting to have milestones within your strategic plan so that when you come back to the Committee in the future, we are able to gauge what success you have had with the milestones you set yourself?

Eleanor Lyons: I am planning for the strategic plan to be a relatively visionary outline of the work of the office, and I will use my own annual reports to reflect back on the strategic plan and the work I have been doing.

Q50 **Chair:** Okay. One of the issues that the Committee was concerned about was the undercounting of people involved in modern slavery and human trafficking in the United Kingdom. The numbers going into the national referral mechanism have obviously grown. The estimate is that about 100,000 people in the United Kingdom are involved in modern slavery or human trafficking. Do you think that figure is accurate or a proper reflection?

Eleanor Lyons: That is something I have started looking at since coming into role. It is very important that we look afresh at the prevalence of modern slavery and human trafficking in this country. The scale of the issue is far greater than 100,000. I think it is likely to be around 130,000. This is work that the Nottingham Rights Lab is doing at the moment. It is important in understanding the prevalence of the problem.



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As I mentioned, particularly with UK nationals, there are times when we are not identifying potential victims and referring them to a duty to notify or the national referral mechanism. I am concerned that we are not capturing them within the picture of everything that is happening across the UK.

There are also offences such as cuckooing, which I would count as modern slavery, and which needs to be recognised in the Criminal Justice Bill as a criminal offence. We need to recognise modern slavery in all its forms to really understand the prevalence.

Q51 Chair: I think Iain Duncan Smith has an amendment down around cuckooing, so you would support that.

Eleanor Lyons: Yes, he does. I do support it—I think that is very important.

Q52 Chair: That is helpful. I want to ask you about some other amendments that are down for various Bills. One issue the Committee was concerned about was the penalty for section 53A offences—paying for sex subject to force. There is a very low penalty payable, and there are very few convictions for that offence. Would you support an increase in that penalty to reflect that it is a crime around human trafficking? Obviously, the penalties for other offences around trafficking are much higher. Would you support a change in the law? That is one of the things the Committee was concerned about.

Eleanor Lyons: Absolutely. I was going to say, Chair, that the work you have done on tackling sexual exploitation is incredibly important. I saw that recommendation as part of the human trafficking inquiry, and it is important. I do not think the Sexual Offences Act is acting as a true deterrent at the moment for people buying sex.

Q53 Chair: That is helpful, because there is an amendment down on that. There is also an amendment from one of the other members of the Committee, Carolyn Harris, on taking action against pimping websites. The Committee was again concerned that they were enabling trafficking to be carried out very easily across the whole of the United Kingdom, transporting mainly women up and down the land. Would you support action on pimping websites?

Eleanor Lyons: Yes. I saw Carolyn Harris's amendment and agree that those websites are enablers of sexual exploitation.

Q54 Chair: That is very helpful. This is the other question I wanted to ask you: at the end of your three years in post, what are the things you will have achieved?

Eleanor Lyons: Ideally, at the end of my three years in post, I would have wanted to do all I can to make sure that modern slavery and human trafficking is a priority area again for everyone. That is my big ultimate goal, which I want to work across stakeholders to achieve.



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I also want to make sure that I am improving the knowledge and understanding of modern slavery and human trafficking, so that we treat those victims in the same way that we would victims of other crimes, and give them the same support that we would for other individuals, rather than sometimes treating them as perpetrators.

I also want to have rebuilt the IASC office, and for there to be a team there that is producing solutions-based and evidence-based work, which is directed by those who have lived experience in this space. It is also important for me that I can see, at the end of three years, that the IASC role, for whoever is the next lead, is taken incredibly seriously by all policymakers as the place to go to understand those voices that are often overlooked.

- Q55 **Chair:** Do you think that you will see the rates of prosecution increase? We are very concerned at the very low prosecution rates in trafficking, in particular, but also in modern slavery generally.

Eleanor Lyons: The prosecution rate of 2% at the moment is obviously unacceptable. That does need to change. I think it is something that law enforcement agencies need to work together on. As I have mentioned, I think there needs to be better awareness about this space, we need a more victim-centric approach to potential victims, and it needs to be a priority for all forces. Absolutely, a focus on tackling the criminal gangs behind a lot of this exploitation would be incredibly welcome, and we do need to see that going up.

- Q56 **Chair:** What do you think prosecution rates will be at the end of your three years?

Eleanor Lyons: That is too difficult for me to predict, I'm afraid, but I hope to see that our effort is focused on going after the criminals behind these offences, rather than on the victims.

- Q57 **Chair:** What about the NRM? There is a lot of discussion about whether it is fit for purpose, particularly because of the number of UK citizens who are referred to it, and whether it is an appropriate mechanism for UK citizens. I think the view is that it is often seen as something that you would use for people coming into the United Kingdom, rather than for people who are living here in the first place. Do you think the NRM needs reform?

Eleanor Lyons: First, I recognise that the NRM has faced an increase in demand of 625%. I have met the people providing support through the NRM and I do believe they are saving lives. The amount of work that has gone in since the NRM was founded is incredible.

That being said, we do need to look again. Over 500 days for a conclusive grounds decision is undoubtedly too long. I think you are right that we need to look at groups that perhaps naturally would receive support better in a different way. One of the issues for UK nationals, who were the largest group within the NRM in the latest statistics, is that, at the moment, those providing support through the NRM think it is the job of



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statutory services, but statutory services are not set up to provide priority access to either mental health support or housing support for UK nationals who are victims, so they are often trapped in the middle of two systems and are not getting the care that they need. That is something that I want to look at more in role.

- Q58 Alison Thewliss:** I want to pick up a “File on 4” report last year about a shoplifting gang. Retailers Against Crime had tracked 56 shoplifting groups that were going on to fund organised crime. It seems to me that trafficking is constantly evolving, and that new ways of exploiting the system are emerging. Some of the people involved in that gang had apparently been arrested and imprisoned. Are the people in that gang victims or criminals, in your view?

Eleanor Lyons: It is such a difficult question, and I would need to understand a bit more about that individual case, but, looking at criminal exploitation across the country, it is incredibly difficult sometimes when victims can be forced to commit crime. We know that is one of the most prevalent forms of exploitation in the NRM. What you said about understanding that the ways that criminal gangs are exploiting people are ever changing and evolving is very important. We do need to get far better at recognising victims and, of course, identifying the perpetrators and those behind the crimes.

- Q59 Alison Thewliss:** I understand that there is a strategy coming forward about recognising trafficking victims in the prison system. I had heard that often, when people are released from prison, the traffickers are waiting to scoop them back up again and get them back into this very unsafe situation. If those are the only people you know, that is what you are going to be caught back up in. Can you tell me how much priority is going to be given to this prison strategy and to identifying people who are actually victims of traffickers, rather than just criminals in the very simplistic sense of having shoplifted?

Eleanor Lyons: That is something that I will need to look at as I come into role, to work out how much I can do in the space and what I can focus on, but it is absolutely a problem. I remember from my last role that for some of the victims of domestic abuse that I met, when they left prison, their exploiter was waiting for them. We need to understand more about those pinch points of vulnerability for people, whether it is being in prison or being homeless. Actually, I have seen some good work going on in this space to understand when individuals are more vulnerable and when they may be open to exploitation.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming along this morning. I think this was a very helpful setting of the scene of what you are planning to do in the next three years. We are very keen to keep in touch with you. We look forward, obviously, to the Government’s response to our trafficking inquiry. There are a number of things in there that you have indicated support for, so we are hoping that the Government may also support what we are saying. It would be very helpful to have you back, perhaps on a yearly basis—obviously we have a general election coming—to see what



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progress is being made in this area. I think the Committee would like to see a return to the focus that we had back in 2015 when the Modern Slavery Act came into force.

Thank you very much for your time today. We wish you all the very best with your endeavours—we will certainly be watching—and we will look forward to having you back in the future.