

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, HC 1857

Tuesday 28 April 2026

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Dame Karen Bradley (Chair); Lewis Atkinson; Mr Paul Kohler; Ben Maguire; Robbie Moore; Chris Murray; Peter Prinsley; Jo White.

Questions 1 - 96

Witnesses

[I](#): Jess Phillips MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls), Home Office; Gisela Carr, Deputy Director for the Interpersonal Abuse Unit, Home Office; and Luke Hughes, Head of the Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation Response Unit, Home Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Jess Phillips MP, Gisela Carr and Luke Hughes.

Q1 Chair: I welcome the Minister to this one-off session that we are holding on violence against women and girls. We were delighted to get the strategy, finally, and look forward to having time to ask some questions about it. In all of our inquiries, we have been putting violence against women and girls questions in there, so it is underlying everything we do. Perhaps the panel would like to introduce themselves, starting with the Minister.

Jess Phillips: I am Jess Phillips. I am the Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls.

Gisela Carr: I am Gisela Carr. I am the Deputy Director for the Interpersonal Abuse Unit at the Home Office.

Luke Hughes: I am Luke Hughes. I am the Deputy Director of the Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation Response Unit in the Home Office.

Q2 Chair: If the Committee will indulge me, I want to thank the Minister on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery for a response that you have sent to our letter. However, you may want to check your addresses because it was addressed to the Baroness Brady and not Karen Bradley.

Jess Phillips: I have to say, funnily enough, when going through my correspondence in the car on the way down and signing it off, I thought, "Has Karren Brady taken over?" Then, when I saw it was your name at the end, I just thought that I must have read it wrong at the beginning. I apologise for that.

Chair: I wish I had £1 for every time we have been mixed up, but maybe in this case £10 is more appropriate. Anyway, let's move on to questions and start with Jo White.

Q3 Jo White: Thank you and welcome to our Committee. What lessons have been learned from previous Home Office violence against women strategies?

Jess Phillips: Obviously I was not responsible for previous strategies, but more broadly, strategies in the past—and certainly ones that I have worked under as both a frontline worker and as an Opposition politician campaigning in this space—were much more focused on domestic abuse initially, and then moving into the space of violence against women and girls.

I would say, not just from looking at other strategies but from looking at other critiques of the strategies, whether that is by the National Audit Office or in fact your own Committee and other Committees, that the real



need to have a very thorough prevention focus is something that I was very keen to try to get right in this strategy.

Also, there has been plenty of criticism—and I have made it myself—around the need for it to be truly cross-Government and to actually mean something, rather than just be that we had a meeting, wrote a strategy, and three different Ministers signed the front page. Obviously, there have been some very good Ministers—I would say that in this instance! There have been some very good Ministers who have had the job.

Chair: Baroness Brady included.

Jess Phillips: Yes, Karren Brady was excellent. As somebody who comes from an area where Birmingham City football club is, I feel I have to say that she was excellent there.

The real need for a cultural shift was why I wanted the strategy to be different. A cultural shift in society is important, but it is very hard for us to ask for that when I did not feel that there was the right culture even within Government Departments, so that some of the absolutely key pillars of the strategy were not my responsibility.

I very much hope that the Health and Social Care Committee is scrutinising it. I very much hope that the Department for Education is also scrutinising the violence against women and girls strategy, because the point was for other Government Departments to put their hands in their pockets and truly take responsibility for some of the actions. That comes from various reports of Select Committees, but also the NAO made that very clear.

Q4 Jo White: What challenges have changed since the publication of the last strategy?

Jess Phillips: The strategy was published in December, and so what is it now? We are four months into the strategy publication, which has 259 commitments in it. We have a really specific cross-Government focus on 15 of those as a priority. That is not to say that others are cast by the wayside; there are expectations on the Government Departments responsible for them to be cracking on with them and we monitor that.

Of the 15 that we are focusing on cross-Government, for example, it was only last week—and I hope all of you, as Members of Parliament, have received this and will be actioning it, because we want Members of Parliament to be involved in this—that you will have received information about the ICBs, the integrated care boards. The Department of Health and Social Care is asking for expressions of interest for the new steps to safety scheme, which will be run by the Department of Health and Social Care and funded by it not just for training GPs but for the support that GPs can then refer into for victims of domestic abuse.

That is a direct and tangible change of something that will happen on the ground, because ICBs were not being asked as a standard to do anything



on domestic abuse or sexual violence more broadly, and it is a cultural change that has happened within the Department. I keep a woman called Brenda who works in Alcester Road in my head. For example, will it affect Brenda who works in Alcester Road in my constituency?

That will make a tangible change to people on the ground, but there are a number of other parts of the strategy that are very much in the process of rolling out. There have been 1,000 domestic abuse protection orders, for example, that have been taken up in the pilot areas. However, the cultural change, the work done by the Department of Health and Social Care, feels like a real sea change in culture.

Q5 **Jo White:** There has been an evaluation of how the previous strategies have been successful or not successful. How has that impacted the development of the current strategy?

Jess Phillips: We take on board the criticisms that have been laid out, and other strategies and suggestions made. We also live in an environment of not just Select Committees but also, for example, the Angiolini inquiry and the IICSA review, making sure that we look at what has been suggested. I personally get very sick of people saying, "Lessons will be learned" and then they say it again in five months' time. It is quite annoying.

In building the strategy, we took on board all of those things and, also, there was a huge amount of engagement with victims, the sector and other countries as well as academics, who have undertaken the most research into the different sorts of violence against women and girls across our country. A huge amount of learning and an exercise in what was needed went into the analysis that built the strategy.

Q6 **Chair:** To reassure you, I have convened meetings of relevant Select Committees to make sure that we are all considering violence against women and girls and that it is on everyone's agenda, so I hope that they are looking at it. As I say, we have made it an underpinning item across everything we are doing.

Jess Phillips: My response to that is I hope that their Ministers also get scrutinised for it. It is very easy to become the face of a thing and then the expectation is—and I am sure you will have felt this in your time at the Home Office—"Oh, that is the Home Office's responsibility." The whole point is that the violence against women and girls strategy is saying, "No, no; it is everybody's responsibility." I look forward to their Ministers being scrutinised as well.

Q7 **Mr Paul Kohler:** Thank you for visiting us. I am going to ask you about governance. Before I do, I want to ask a really basic question: where are we on a definition of VAWG? I know there is one in the strategy, but where are we in accepting that across the sector, in police forces? All the evidence we have heard in the past is that there is no agreed definition.



Jess Phillips: That was one of the specific criticisms that had been made and has been worked on, and I will hand over to Gisela who actually did some of the specific work. The fundamental difference was the definition that the Government were working to and that used by police forces, which is quite a fundamental issue. I will hand over to Gisela to explain that.

Gisela Carr: Absolutely. There was something in the report from this Committee, and it is also a finding from the NAO, on different definitions of VAWG. As you have said, we have very clearly set out the Government definition in the VAWG strategy, and we have been taking forward work with policing to better align the definition that policing uses. We have done that through the new National Centre for VAWG and Public Protection.

We now have an agreed definition around the Home Office list of core offences, which we will be taking forward with policing. We have already done an initial first data share as well with policing to enable that joint working, so we are all now working from a common definition and a common dataset that we all understand. We are very pleased about that because we know that has been rightly identified as an issue in the past. It is important that we and our key delivery partners are all working from a shared understanding of the issue.

Jess Phillips: A threat assessment is done by the NCVPP. I always used to criticise Theresa May's naming of the HMICFRS—or whatever the millions of letters are—and then I did the same thing and gave something a silly name. It undertakes an annual threat assessment, as you might do with terrorism in this space. We were previously not working to the same dataset and now we will be.

Q8 **Mr Paul Kohler:** Ms Carr, you talk about the police as if it is one body. The evidence we heard was that different police forces have different definitions. Have they sorted that out?

Gisela Carr: Yes. As the Minister said, through the new national centre, they are working to standardise that across 43 forces.

Mr Paul Kohler: Working to standardise?

Gisela Carr: We have agreed the list of core offences, which aligns with our definition as well. The next step will be for them to formally communicate that out to forces and use that to inform their next strategic threat and risk assessment, which is coming in the summer.

Q9 **Mr Paul Kohler:** Do we have a timeframe for that?

Gisela Carr: It will inform the overarching risk assessment that comes in the summer, but I would not want to get into any more detail because, obviously, that is a matter for policing.



Jess Phillips: It is an evergreen issue that there are 43 different police forces and very little power to tell them exactly what they have to do on certain things. That is why we set up the national centre specifically because I do not think that what the West Midlands police does on terrorism, for example, is wildly different from Avon and Somerset police—it almost certainly works to the same set of standards—but that is not the case in violence against women and girls. The whole point of creating a policing centre was to try to get standardisation across the board.

Q10 **Mr Paul Kohler:** Are you confident at the moment that looks like it is working as far as you can tell?

Gisela Carr: It is early days. Obviously, it is really good progress for us that we have been able to agree on a core definition. As I said, we have done the first data share from the Home Office to facilitate that happening. As the Minister has said, it is the first time we have done this. We need to learn from it and refine it, but I think we are feeling very positive about the progress that we have been able to make in this area.

Q11 **Mr Paul Kohler:** Thank you. Now, on to governance, there is a VAWG board, a safer streets mission board, a safer streets delivery board and a VAWG strategic advisory board. I am resisting the temptation to ask whether you are bored, but how do they all work together?

Jess Phillips: The way in which the violence against women and girls strategy is governed is that the main board that you identify is the inter-ministerial group on violence against women and girls.

Mr Paul Kohler: The VAWG board?

Jess Phillips: That is the VAWG board, yes. I am never bored on that, actually. I like to give out gold stars and whatever the opposite of gold stars is. That has representation from 14 different Government Departments, including those in the devolved Administrations as well. That is where we track the progress of the violence against women and girls strategy and where we are on the progress of that.

That is the main functioning board, the fundamental one. There is also the VSAB, which is the sector body where we gain advice from sector specialists and other specialists in the field. The police sit on that board and also the LGA, for example, for local authorities. Those two bodies are where it is advised and governed from.

We and other Government Departments have to feed in monthly to No. 10 on the actions of the violence against women and girls strategy, and they take what can only be described as an eagle-eyed and very keen interest in it.

Q12 **Mr Paul Kohler:** Where is the safer streets delivery board?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Gisela Carr: That is the senior officials group that we use to co-ordinate our work across Government. Obviously, VAWG is one part of the safer streets mission. That is a director general or director-level representation.

Q13 **Mr Paul Kohler:** That is the mission board, isn't it?

Gisela Carr: No, that is the delivery board. The delivery board is the officials board for safer streets, and that is directors general and directors from interested Departments. The mission board is the ministerial equivalent.

Q14 **Mr Paul Kohler:** That is right, sorry. Does the safer streets delivery board still exist? We received a parliamentary answer in March saying it has ceased to meet since November.

Gisela Carr: The delivery board meets monthly. I was at the last meeting of it last week, so the delivery board is absolutely meeting monthly. I think the mission board—

Q15 **Mr Paul Kohler:** Has the safer streets mission board stopped working? That is what I meant, sorry; I think it stopped in November.

Gisela Carr: My understanding is that board has always met on an ad hoc basis, as and when it has been deemed necessary to get Ministers together to escalate or to resolve any issues. Obviously, for VAWG we have that regular monthly governance at an officials' level and we have the inter-ministerial group on VAWG that up until this point has been everything we have needed for resolving issues across Departments.

Jess Phillips: I also have their phone numbers.

Q16 **Mr Paul Kohler:** We were looking at an answer from the Advocate General for Scotland to a question in the House of Lords on VAWG strategy. She said in February of this year that the VAWG board reports directly to the safer streets mission board, but you are saying that is not what happens?

Jess Phillips: When the safer streets mission board chooses that it is focusing on VAWG, VAWG has absolutely been discussed there.

Q17 **Mr Paul Kohler:** It is not a formal report as such.

Jess Phillips: I have attended one where that was the case. VAWG is only one part of the overarching mission of the Home Office's safer streets mission.

Q18 **Mr Paul Kohler:** I see that, but you are telling me that the VAWG board always reports to No. 10. That is its firm reporting line.

Jess Phillips: Yes. We report to No. 10. The Prime Minister takes a very keen interest in it. He has held a series of Cabinet-level meetings—of which there is one this week—where he gets the relevant Cabinet Secretaries from the different Government Departments and talks to them about progress against the strategy.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q19 Mr Paul Kohler: You are reporting into the Home Office on an ad hoc basis with the mission board. Are there any other ways you report into the Home Office?

Jess Phillips: I am the Home Office.

Mr Paul Kohler: I know you are part of it.

Jess Phillips: Not the whole of it.

Mr Paul Kohler: No, indeed.

Jess Phillips: I would like to stress that I am not the whole of it.

Mr Paul Kohler: Maybe later.

Jess Phillips: The progress that is undertaken, from the Home Office's perspective of what our deliverables are within the violence against women and girls strategy, is monitored entirely through my ministerial post and all of the ordinary systems. I meet with the Home Secretary every single week and discuss it with her.

Mr Paul Kohler: Yes, good. Thank you.

Q20 Peter Prinsley: I just want to come in quickly. We have been talking about the definition of violence against women and girls. There is a clear definition of rape and there must be figures on the number of reported rapes, but we know that many rapes—probably most rapes—are not reported.

Jess Phillips: That is correct.

Peter Prinsley: In our mission to halve violence against women and girls, let's just talk about, say, rape. Do you think it is realistic to halve the incidence of rape?

Jess Phillips: Yes, of course, otherwise we would not have set out to do it. You will not halve the incidence of rape unless you work very closely on the prevention of rape. The fundamental is: what makes men rape?

Q21 Peter Prinsley: Right. If at the beginning of a Parliament we had the figures on the number of rapes that were reported each year, do you think that a measure of success would be, at the end of a Parliament, that the number of reported rates had halved?

Jess Phillips: No, it would have doubled. The number of reported rapes would have doubled; the number of rapes would have halved. That is why the basis for the metric that we are measuring is not based on reported crime figures, because in violence against women and girls reported crime figures, while an important measure, are completely useless. Most women—in fact, I am going to say all women who have suffered this, and that is most women—have not reported the incidents that occurred to them. You have to do it on the basis of the crime survey.



Q22 Chris Murray: Thank you for coming in, Minister and officials. You said at the beginning about how some of this is the responsibility of the Home Office but a lot of it is cross-Government and a lot of other Departments are key stakeholders in you achieving this. Can you tell me a bit more about how you monitor what other Government Departments do, influence them to do more and understand the effectiveness of what you have asked them to do?

Jess Phillips: We agreed as the inter-ministerial group that we have to focus on the 15 most cross-Government and manifesto commitments in the violence against women and girls strategy. We work as that group on the progress of those, and different Government Departments are expected to bring to that group, and prior to that group, their progress chart. There is literally like a Gantt chart, or whatever they are called; there is a progress chart so that we can address whether we are falling off the edge or running ahead of schedule—if only that was always the case on all of them. That is monitored through that group.

I was glibly saying that I give out gold stars and whatever the alternative to a gold star is. That is absolutely the case. People are held accountable. Where I feel that—I don't know how to say this—people are not pulling their finger out, the Home Secretary or I will then have bilaterals with those Ministers, but actually what the system has been to date, to get the strategy to where it is, is the intervention of the Prime Minister.

Q23 Chris Murray: Thank you. That is very interesting. I suppose that was a good description of the process you follow. Now I want to ask for your analysis of how it is working. I am not asking you to tell tales on ministerial colleagues, but it is important for us as Parliament to understand what bits of the system are clunkier in this field so we can push on them. What parts of the system have you found, in your two years in this role, harder to make work on VAWG, and what parts are getting it and moving ahead?

Jess Phillips: A bit like undertaking a risk assessment, I would say that the risk is dynamic and changing. I would have sat before you—and I almost certainly have—and had a relatively dim view, for example, of the Department of Health and Social Care and its willingness to make a cultural change to understand that violence against women and girls makes both the perpetrators and the victims of it very sick. I felt there was little progress and I found it to be clunky in the beginning. Now I could not praise the Department enough for the progress that it has made. I suppose that is the system working.

There are Government Departments who I thought would be more difficult than they have been. I am going to give the Ministry of Defence a gold star. I cannot say I thought that I would be working with the Ministry of Defence as much as I have been.

Things in Governments are difficult and slow in lots of cases. There are many Select Committees saying the same thing today. There are always



competing interests as well in what you are trying to do and fighting for prioritisation, especially in a time of war. Where I am concerned that things are slow in a Government Department, I do not feel that I don't have the resource and recourse to try to unblock that. I feel that I do.

There is always a tension between the growth element of, for example, online and the need to make an online space safe. For those of us who were there when we were doing the Online Safety Bill, that tension existed for the entire time, and it felt like a decade—it was a decade, in fact. You have to compete with other issues within this space. I have to say, I don't think I have found it particularly hard to push through.

Q24 Chris Murray: Just to check that I understand what you are saying there, are you saying that the competing demands, especially around the online challenges that we face and the social media discussions that we have in Parliament all the time, are taking up a lot of bandwidth to prosecute through other parts of the VAWG strategy? Am I right in understanding that?

Jess Phillips: No, I would not say there is any one. Each Government Department takes responsibility for its own things and takes up as much bandwidth as it needs. My job, and that of Minister Alex Davies-Jones in the Ministry of Justice, feels very much like we are getting into everybody's business in their Government Departments. That can take a varying amount of bandwidth, because Alex and I also have quite important parts of the strategy to deliver from our own Government Departments. That is why I talk about the cultural change, and I am starting to see that I need to get into people's business less than I did certainly in the building of the strategy.

Q25 Chair: How often does the IMG meet?

Jess Phillips: It is bimonthly, so we meet every other month.

Q26 Chair: You are reporting monthly?

Jess Phillips: Monthly to No. 10, yes.

Q27 Chair: Do Ministers always attend?

Jess Phillips: Yes, pretty much. We do not have particular trouble with the attendance of Ministers from—

Q28 Chair: The same Minister comes each time?

Jess Phillips: Pretty much. In some of the cases where it is a Lords Minister, because they are constantly having to rerun everything that we do in here and there is only one of them, they will always send a Commons Minister. I have to say that attendance has not been an issue.

Q29 Chair: How many Departments have a ministerial lead that is a Lords Minister?

Jess Phillips: Two. DWP and the Department of Health and Social Care.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q30 **Mr Paul Kohler:** That was going to be my question, actually, so excellent. These 14 Departments are all coming along?

Jess Phillips: Yes. People are often quite keen. Other Government Departments are often keen to come along. I am like, "I'm not sure what you're going to bring to the party," but I am trying to come up with a way to make solar energy about violence against women and girls, so if anyone has one I am happy to hear it.

Q31 **Mr Paul Kohler:** You will be aware of the letter sent to you and Alex by the Chairs of the Home Affairs, Women and Equalities and Justice Committees about stakeholders feeling they were left out of the process. What have you done since the strategy was published to address the feeling that some of them felt left out?

Jess Phillips: I can only apologise if people feel left out. We undertook a huge series of—I think it was 12—roundtables in the build-up to the strategy and there were 100 different organisations.

Q32 **Mr Paul Kohler:** I know what you did. I have it all here. I am not doubting you did. I just said that they felt left out. What have you done to try to build some more confidence in what—

Jess Phillips: Personally, I have undertaken a series of meetings, not just with—because often here in London, in Westminster, the people you are seeing are from a national organisation that represents as an umbrella. As a federated member of Women's Aid, it was not me who often went to the Home Office meetings, although sometimes it was; it was the head of the national organisation. Therefore, what I have sought to do with all of those umbrella bodies is to hold meetings with the CEOs of their members in the field, which I have done with Rape Crisis, Women's Aid and Imkaan, who are the umbrella bodies that sit on the violence against women sector board that we hold. We have sought to ensure that people feel part of it. We had a very good meeting, was it last week?

Gisela Carr: Last week.

Jess Phillips: The weeks merge into one. We have started to properly focus now on the delivery of the strategy. We had a deep-dive session on the Department of Health proposals with Ministers and advisers. I have to doff my cap to Jess Asato. She has been taken on as a health adviser in VAWG by that Department, so that the sector could sit and talk to her, to make sure that in that deep dive about health, it was not just the static members of the board. We have rotating seats on the board so that the organisations that are specifically about health and working in that environment were invited along as well.

Q33 **Mr Paul Kohler:** Ms Carr, you looked like you want to say something.

Gisela Carr: Yes. I can give a bit more detail. We have very much understood some of the concerns that have been raised in letters from



yourselves and also directly with us by the stakeholders or organisations with whom we work. We have done some tangible things to respond to that feedback, including transparency around some of the discussions in the stakeholder advisory board and making that accessible for membership organisations in particular.

The one thing I will stress is that we really want this to be an advisory board and, as the Minister has just talked about, we had our first deep-dive session with this group last week on a specific area of the strategy. To be able to do that, we need to keep the meeting a manageable size. Therefore, we are constantly trying to balance the representation and, as the Minister said, bring in specialist organisations, but also make sure that we and the other Departments that are represented and presenting get the benefit of expert discussion and a deep and rich discussion.

I will just highlight that this is only one way in which we engage with experts across the board sector. I also chair a quarterly stakeholder group, which is about 40 to 50 organisations, including at practitioner level, from across England and Wales. Our team works very closely on specific issues, for example with the by and for sector on migrant victims, so we have strong relationships directly with organisations.

One of the things we have done for a while in the Home Office and in the Ministry of Justice, and we are excited to see other Departments doing as well, is direct stakeholder engagement and consultation on the commitments in the VAWG strategy that they are rolling out. It is a really good thing. Obviously, we will continue to strengthen and expand where we can what we do from the Home Office, but we have done some work to co-ordinate the other ways that the sector can engage directly with the Departments that are delivering bits of the strategy. For us, that feels like a really good thing, because we want those Departments to have the benefit of working with the experts.

Jess Phillips: MHCLG has a specific housing-related one—and it also deals with local commissioning, with the vast majority of it being done through local councils. As Gisela has said, the Ministry of Justice also has a stakeholder board. I attended one at DSIT recently with the violence against women and girls sector on their sections of the VAWG strategy. In the building of the proposals for the Department of Health, they were heavily involved and engaged with that throughout. It is good that other Departments are doing it now as well.

Q34 **Mr Paul Kohler:** Do you feel confident the sector is feeling more involved in the process? Is that your real feeling?

Jess Phillips: I am not here to speak for them any more. I used to be one of them. The relations between me and most of the sector are lifelong. I spoke to the head of Women's Aid this morning, so I don't feel that there is any particular animosity between us.

Q35 **Mr Paul Kohler:** I do not think there is animosity, but do you think



things are improving?

Jess Phillips: I would say so.

Q36 **Mr Paul Kohler:** The response to the strategy has been good. One of the criticisms is that there is not enough focus on prevention. I will read something that I received from a constituent of mine, who I have been working with for the last two years, who was the subject of a terrible sexual assault. She said, "I recently attended a speed awareness course. One thing that really struck me is how much the police care about the effects of speeding. Now there are far fewer accidents because of their strategy, which is improved education, consistent strategy and meaningful consequences for offenders. From a survivor's perspective, I can say the following needs to happen. Education needs to start at primary school, be focused, age appropriate and perpetrator based. The law needs to be consistently applied, and minor offences need to be taken more seriously." I would like to hear your response to my constituent on that.

Jess Phillips: I would say that everything that she has said is exactly right and every single suggestion that she makes is in the violence against women and girls strategy. I would joke that part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act made women's safety and refuge matter as much as bins. I think it is a completely fair criticism to suggest that the laws and the resource over generations has gone into cars or parking. We have people stopping people from parking in the wrong place in a city centre. There is no same ticketing system, is there, if somebody is awful to me in the city centre.

Our desire to protect people from cars has outstripped attention on the violence that women and girls suffer for many, many, many generations. She is absolutely right. The point on prevention and the point about having to go on a course, if you will—although I wonder how many people go on that course more than once—is exactly right.

We have to make sure that there are change programmes as well, as she has identified, and evenly distributed and properly distributed justice, but also that there are change elements. That is why a huge part of the strategy is about rolling out perpetrator programmes at varying risk levels, standard and medium risk, to talk in the old terminology of the risk assessment, and high risk, which for the first time the strategy commits to rolling out entirely across the country.

The education piece of work is absolutely fundamental. If I look at the data around the falling age of perpetration of child abuse and other VAWG crimes, the idea that we can tackle this and prevent it from getting worse in the future without looking at interventions in education is for the birds. There has been very little research and evidence built up over the years about what works in that space, and so we are going to have to invent it. She is right there. Tell her she is bang on.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q37 Mr Paul Kohler: I will indeed. Thank you. My last question is that there is some doubt over the funding and a lack of clarity over whether it is new funding or existing funding. Are you clear about the funding you have for VAWG?

Jess Phillips: I am clear about the funding that I have for VAWG. I am clear about the funding within the Home Office, although when you say VAWG, even within the Home Office, Gisela's budget is the classic thing that we would describe as being the VAWG budget. We would not describe Luke's as being the VAWG budget, or Christian's, or in fact the modern slavery team. Yet, of course, they are all part of the action on VAWG.

Some of the money is new and some of it has been allocated before. In most of those cases, it has been uplifted. If I think of the MHCLG part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act funding specifically for accommodation-based services, when we came into government we increased that by £30 million a year, and that will be maintained over the next three years as well. That is part not-new funding, part new funding.

In other Government Departments—for example, steps to safety, which I have already spoken about—there is entirely new funding going to domestic abuse services within the field, and the Child House model of sexual violence counselling for children is entirely new money coming from the Department of Health. It is a mixture of both is the actual truth. It is never ever going to be enough, though, is it? That is the truth. The fundamental in any Government Department is that no Minister is ever going to sit in front of you and go, "Nailed it—got exactly what I wanted."

Q38 Mr Paul Kohler: Ms Carr is about to give me some figures, I think, are you?

Jess Phillips: You go ahead.

Gisela Carr: If there is anything specific I can go into more detail on, I am really happy to.

Q39 Mr Paul Kohler: If we could just have—not now, but if the Committee could have—what is new funding in actuals and figures, that would be useful, if you are saying there are new figures.

Gisela Carr: Yes, we can. I think it would be helpful to understand, because new funding obviously in some areas is where we have—are you looking for the uplifts and for programmes that existed already or completely new budget lines? It is a combination of the two.

Mr Paul Kohler: What we would like is how much more money is being put into this issue, whether it is uplifts or new.

Chair: We have some questions from Ben Maguire on funding for victim and survivor services, so that might help to lead. We would be interested in new services.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q40 Ben Maguire: Thanks, everyone, for coming in today. Could you give us a bit of an outline of the money spent on support services for victim and survivors as part of this strategy? Then I have one more follow-up on that.

Jess Phillips: There are two big headlines in victim support funding, and then there is almost certainly other victim support funding within different Government Departments. There isn't one Government pot for victim support where everybody gets to apply for the amount that they want for victim support.

The two big headlines are, first, the £550 million from the Ministry of Justice, which is devolved down through police and crime commissioners, some of it really specifically on sexual violence and domestic abuse and some of it as part of broader victim support funding. There is also the £499 million—they could have given the extra £1 million, really, couldn't they—that comes from MHCLG, which is specifically to fund domestic abuse-related, accommodation-based services, as part of part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act. Those are the two big pots that are specifically for victim support.

The commissioning of the funding that the Home Office is putting into perpetrator programmes, for example, has to fund victim support services as part of it. There will be £50 million going in from the Department of Health specifically to build the Child House model of child sexual abuse counselling and support for child victims of sexual abuse.

There is a number of other pots that exist here and there. I think £18.6 million comes from the Home Office pot into both advocacy and helpline support for victims. There is a number of different pots. It isn't just, "We're going to give £1 billion to victim support," although it all adds up to more than £1 billion.

Q41 Ben Maguire: Great, thanks. That all sounds really good, particularly the helpline that you mentioned. Having met with various stakeholder groups—bar councils, Surviving Economic Abuse, Lawyers Who Care and many more—one of the persisting concerns that they all have is the passing reference in the strategy to legal aid. I have mentioned this to the Minister before, and I know you said earlier today that you would give the MOJ a gold star, and you have mentioned the £550 million that it has given, so that is obviously really positive.

Jess Phillips: I think I gave the Department of Health a gold star.

Ben Maguire: I thought you said the Ministry of Justice.

Jess Phillips: No, I gave the Ministry of Defence a gold star.

Ben Maguire: Okay. The Ministry of Justice doesn't get a gold star?

Jess Phillips: No, no, it can have one. It does a lot of work. It is not in the giving out area. It sits alongside me. It does the giving out.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q42 **Ben Maguire:** Right. I guess what lots of those groups raised through me is that that is a vital support service for victims and survivors of domestic violence and domestic abuse. What are the Government doing to address that?

Jess Phillips: Which specific thing? In most cases, certainly that I handle personally—for example, the need for legal aid for assistance within the family court—victims of domestic abuse are entitled to legal aid because of their status as victims of domestic abuse. Even for the means test, there is quite a lot of case law. Certainly, I can think of a specific example where if you own a property, that cannot be taken into account if it is part of a domestic abuse settlement for you to access legal aid. Is there a specific area where they are missing legal aid? Divorce proceedings potentially.

Q43 **Ben Maguire:** On the point that you have raised there, Minister, it is actually up to £100,000. For lots of domestic abuse victims, if they have property of more than £100,000, that—

Jess Phillips: There is a case precedent where that is not taken into account. There was a case that was fought. I cannot remember the name of the case, but there is a case that was fought.

Q44 **Ben Maguire:** Moving away from that specifically, I am quite interested to know what your Department and, as you said before, Departments across Government, are doing to make sure there is legal aid provision for those survivors, leaving the specific cases aside.

Jess Phillips: I am not from the Department that deals with legal aid.

Q45 **Ben Maguire:** Cross-departmentally though, going back to your—

Jess Phillips: It is absolutely cross-departmental, and ensuring that people can access support is absolutely part of the strategy. As I said to you in the debates, I am not in the weeds. I am not in the weeds of what they are doing about GPs either. I am not in the weeds of what the Ministry of Justice is specifically doing on those particular areas of work, but I have to say that it was not an issue that came up during the roundtables and built the strategy.

Q46 **Ben Maguire:** Would it be helpful if I got those groups together and wrote to you with specific issues?

Jess Phillips: Obviously, we work with Surviving Economic Abuse all the time and, in fact, the Home Office funds Surviving Economic Abuse to do its work.

Q47 **Ben Maguire:** You would be open to hearing its suggestions on that.

Jess Phillips: Of course. I speak to Sam regularly. She was on the VSAG—not the last one, but the one before.

Q48 **Lewis Atkinson:** Minister, can I ask a bit more about the way that victims funding will be directed in the future in the context of police



accountability reform? I know you mentioned about police and crime commissioners receiving some of that funding at the moment. Whatever the rights and wrongs of police reform in terms of police force accountability, I have heard from some who remember the instigation of PCCs who recognise that, in some cases, the introduction of those roles allowed more direct engagement with victims locally in a way that was more responsive and understanding than previous structures.

In the context of the abolition of PCCs in 2028, what is your view about the way that funding for victims might be directed in the future? How are you treating that?

Jess Phillips: My view is currently being built along with sector colleagues. Last week the Policing Minister and I held the first meeting as part of the police reform programme with the violence against women and girls sector to talk specifically about what works in the current system. You are quite right, and I would argue as somebody who has been commissioned by these services, that the police and crime commissioners were not bad, but that is only because the bar was quite low. Certainly they had a convening power that definitely should not be lost in any new system that is brought about. I think accountability came up very clearly in the conversations about what was good, what was bad, what they would want to see and how can we improve the commissioning system.

Part of the violence against women and girls strategy commits us, and it follows very much on the work that your Committee did on commissioning, and how woeful, difficult and hampering the commissioning environment is across the board. We have committed to a cross-Government process of looking at commissioning and how that is done in a standard set from the centre, which will be part of the strategy's works.

We specifically met with them to talk about their fears around the transition and what could be improved. There is a review being undertaken about what that will look like. From what the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister have already said, the commissioning function in the new police force areas—and I do not wish to anticipate what that review finds—has to be maintained.

Also, as this is running along the track, the duty to collaborate will become a fundamental part of the system as it comes into law. On exactly how that duty will start to work in practice for different commissioners in local areas—that convening issue—there is quite a lot of work for me, the Ministry of Justice, MHCLG and others to do to look at that. However, I think that you are right, police and crime commissioners have not done a bad job on that.

Lewis Atkinson: Thanks. We will probably keep an eye on that.

Q49 **Peter Prinsley:** I would like to ask about the National Centre for VAWG



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and Public Protection. First of all, is it actually a place? Is it a centre?

Jess Phillips: Yes.

Q50 **Peter Prinsley:** Where is it and can you describe it?

Jess Phillips: You go for it.

Gisela Carr: It has a building at the College of Policing in Ryton.

Jess Phillips: Ryton?

Gisela Carr: Yes.

Jess Phillips: Not Brighton. I need to be clear: it is Ryton, not Brighton.

Q51 **Peter Prinsley:** Okay. How does this thing get funded and does it have a long-term funding plan?

Jess Phillips: It gets funded by us. It is funded directly through the IAU budget within the Home Office, and it has the long-term funding for the current spending review period. Obviously, I cannot commit to anything beyond that—or to even being here.

Q52 **Peter Prinsley:** Can you describe how this centre actually works to deliver the VAWG strategy? What does it do?

Jess Phillips: The centre's job is not to deliver the Government's VAWG strategy. It is part of the Government delivering the VAWG strategy. It is headed up by Helen Millichap. She was on the Terrace at an event last night. The centre's job is to train and standardise because, as you have identified, there are 43 different forces with 43 different ideas about what they should be doing. It is to train and standardise practice on violence against women and girls and public protection, so child abuse as well.

Q53 **Peter Prinsley:** Do you want to come in?

Gisela Carr: Would it help if I give some specific examples of things it has done over the past year?

Q54 **Peter Prinsley:** Perhaps also tell us how you will measure how effective it is.

Gisela Carr: Yes, absolutely. I can give some examples and then talk a bit about the governance and the strategies that we have. Obviously, it is operationally independent; it is part of policing, so it will do a mix of tactical delivery. It has supported on the pilots that we have running for Raneem's law, and for domestic abuse experts in 999 control rooms. It has supported the roll-out of rapid video response to all forces, which can be a really powerful tool for the policing to use in DA cases in particular. Then it has done work to continue to embed the Operation Soteria principles into forces and to roll out the manifesto commitment on specialist rape and sexual abuse teams.



It can really do that kind of leadership and tactical work with forces. It also has a convening power, bringing together chief constables and chief officers to talk at a strategic level about how policing is improving its response to VAWG. It also has regional practice teams who will go out into forces and get into the detail of how well they are delivering against the strategic ambition and objectives that we have set and where they need greater support. Having the strategic leadership combined with being able to go out into forces and give them specialist advice is really powerful from the centre.

On its objectives, it is operationally independent. The budget comes from us as the Home Office and, alongside that, we set a series of strategic deliverables for the centre. Effectively, for the last year that looked like us saying, "We would like you to have delivered x, y and z commitments across policing." That will be really tactical things like supporting the Raneem's law delivery, and it will be strategic things like building training pathways, and then that is reported to us.

This is done through a grant to the College of Policing. We have the mechanisms that we would have for any other grant from the Home Office for quarterly reporting and annual reporting against progress on the deliverables of the grant. That gives us the assurance that the money that is going across is being spent in the areas that we would expect it to be.

At a strategic level, we have an officials regular delivery board where we work with senior leaders in the centre to understand what is working well, where they need support from us, what we could collectively be doing even better. They will periodically meet with the Minister as well. There we really look to—

Jess Phillips: Sometimes they need us to do something that they cannot do. For example, they recently undertook a piece of work about the risk assessments, so the DASH risk assessment versus the DA risk assessment used variously by different police forces. Police forces don't even all use the same risk assessment; they do not use the same follow-up risk assessment on cases of domestic abuse, and other partners use other ones.

We asked them to undertake a specific piece of work on the nature of risk assessment. Sometimes they will come back and say to us, for example, "We need a legislative change here," or, "We need this," so there is a symbiotic relationship.

Q55 Peter Prinsley: My sense is that a new organisation has been invented, which is very effective. Do you think the public know about this new organisation, which is so effective and is dealing with violence against women and girls, or is it something that has disappeared into the miasma of government?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jess Phillips: Do I think that the country knows? I mean the people of Birmingham hardly speak of little else than the College of Policing or the inspectorate. I'm not sure. I agree with you. Actually, in the first phase, do I think that everybody knows that Scotland Yard does the national policing on terrorism, for example, and that there is a different stratum? Yes, I do. We may need a rotating sign for people to stand outside of.

The very first and most important job we have to do in embedding the centre is to make police forces know about it and respect it. I emphasise the need for respect in that, so in the way that Matt Jukes is considered as the terrorism lead in policing, Helen should have the same status. Actually, that is the job of work, because my frequent refrain is, "I want what counter-terrorism has." I am not there on the money, but hope springs eternal. Yes, that is the real issue. It is not necessarily something that the public—an individual—is ever going to interact with, though. They are going to continue to interact with their police force.

Q56 **Peter Prinsley:** When we say we have changed something, we really have changed something, haven't we? We have invented something new and we need to tell people about it.

Jess Phillips: Yes. I shall get a loudhailer.

Q57 **Chris Murray:** Can I ask a small follow-up on the centre? How does it work with devolved Administrations and what is the relationship like with other parts of the UK?

Jess Phillips: You will know, I don't need to tell you, there is Police Scotland and the PSNI, and the national centre covers England and Wales, because of the slightly odd system that we have in the UK. Obviously it works closely with counterparts and works with them on the standardising and learning as well. I am not sure whether there is anything more formalised than that.

Gisela Carr: Not at this stage. For the first year, the centre has had quite a big job centralising programmes across England and Wales and really establishing itself. I know it has had some initial contact certainly with the PSNI. I am not sure yet about Police Scotland, but I know that it wants to do that for sharing best practice. In addition to that, we have supported things directly with other police services—the PSNI and Police Scotland—on specific projects. On DAPOs, for example, the Met hosted the PSNI to talk about what the DAPO process looks like here as it thinks about whether that is something it wants to adopt.

Q58 **Chris Murray:** Obviously policing is devolved, as you understand, but it is not independent. There is a lot of really good learning that can be spread between Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. I would encourage that.

Jess Phillips: Yes. I am often surprised by the difference between the schemes that we have, certainly in domestic abuse. For example, only now are domestic homicide reviews or their counterparts actually being



HOUSE OF COMMONS

used in Scotland so, yes, there is often cross-learning. Also, Wales is undertaking a different scheme at the moment that it is piloting, so there is difference there. We will absolutely work with them on the stuff that we think works well, because I don't think I am just the Minister for England and Wales, if I am honest.

Q59 Chair: How much is the annual funding for the centre?

Jess Phillips: It was £13 million in the first year and I think it is £14.6 million this coming financial year.

Q60 Chair: Will there be opportunities for legislative change if needed? You said that they put forward proposals for legislative change.

Jess Phillips: There is always legislative change that needs making, isn't there? I have to say in this area, though, I think there is quite a lot of legislation on the books. It is about making that legislation actually mean something, especially when I think about the parts of action and inaction, literally in legislative terms and in reality terms of the Domestic Abuse Act, for example. I am not entirely sure that big legislative changes are necessarily needed in this space. We just need the legislation to actually be used.

Q61 Chair: I agree. On the Modern Slavery Act, I keep reading cases that seem to me to be cut and dried, fitting within the offences of that Act, and it just was not used.

Jess Phillips: I agree. I find that to be a maddening truth. We digress, but part of the action plan about modern slavery is a really specific focus on the policing and the criminal charging of it, because after all these years it is still woefully low. It seems like the bar must be—there is a lot of work that needs doing on that.

Chair: We have questions on human trafficking coming up, but I think the point has been made that we would like to see the police and prosecutors using those offences more.

Jess Phillips: Agreed.

Q62 Lewis Atkinson: Minister, the strategy recognises that VAWG is increasingly perpetrated online. Could you start off this section by saying a little about your assessment of the online environment faced by women and girls in this country and how you are measuring the instances and prevalence of different types of VAWG online?

Jess Phillips: My own assessment is biased and clouded for obvious reasons. My own personal experience is that the online environment is not safe for women and forces women to opt out of that particular part of life. It is easy to say that you should just do that, but it is a fundamental part of life. I do not undertake any social media whatsoever in my life because it is too dangerous for me.

Chair: I gave it up when I was doing your job and have not gone back. I



will not go back.

Jess Phillips: I want to say for the record that my life is happier as a result. Recognising that enormous Pandora's box, what we have to do is focus on the art of the possible. With regard to the Home Office and the types of crimes, certainly within the violence against women and girls strategy, there are broad commitments to work with DSIT specifically on the broader harms. Liz Kendall and I met with the tech leads for many of the big online companies recently to push them on what they should be doing, what the Government will expect and what the Government will do if they do not get what they expect.

From a Home Office perspective—and it is one of the 15 priority areas identified for the IMG on VAWG—the issue of child sexual abuse online is one where you cannot come into the Home Office and do this job and unsee some of the things that I have seen. The raw data, the monitoring of child sexual abuse cases and online grooming cases would make your toes curl, both in quantity and in content.

If a kid were to turn up tomorrow to a school and say, "I have been raped by my uncle," it might not be perfect but a pathway exists. If a kid turns up and says that another kid in her class has sent naked images or made her do sex acts online, or in the worst cases I have seen, a man in Tennessee is making her do sex acts online for 8 Robux in Roblox, we as a country have not made sure—certainly as multi-agency partners, as somebody who has worked in this particular area for a long time—that there are those same multi-agency pathways. Whether it is in health, children's social care or with the police, we are not at the level of seriousness about child sexual abuse online where we need to be. There is a huge amount of work that needs to be undertaken, and I work very closely with Josh MacAlister on that.

What needs to happen, and what the violence against women and girls strategy commits to, is that we will make it impossible—and I stress the word "impossible"—for children to take, receive and share naked images of themselves. When I was a child, I could not have taken such images without having to take them to be developed or having a Polaroid, which cost endless amounts of money for the film. I think I had a Polaroid camera that my mum bought me one set of film for and that was the end of the Polaroid camera. The ability for children to take naked images of themselves has to be stopped, and the violence against women and girls strategy commits to that.

Q63 **Lewis Atkinson:** One of the other things the strategy involves is "making the UK one of the hardest places for children to access harmful content and misogynistic influences online." Given the scale of the challenge you have outlined, what further decisive action do you think may be required by this Government to achieve that?

Jess Phillips: What is required by this Government may well be legislative, in lieu of those who could do it tomorrow doing it. For the



people who could do this tomorrow, it is perfectly possible, for example, for naked images to be blocked on a device. I have seen the devices and the technology exists. I do not know why a technology company would not want that to be standard on every single phone in this country. Sorry, I do know why—it makes loads of money. Everything the Government will have to take action on, as was the case with the Online Safety Act and the age-gating of pornography—I do not know why the companies would not want to have a child protection element to that themselves.

I seek to work with those companies to do the thing that needs doing and push them to go further, which is certainly what Liz Kendall and I were doing when we met them. The Prime Minister has said very clearly that where regulation and legislation need to change, that is what we will do.

- Q64 **Lewis Atkinson:** Ofcom published its guidance about this to the technology companies in recent months, separating it into mandatory foundational guidance under existing legislation and a section that it called “good practice”. An example of what was classed as good practice would be demonetising user-generated content that promotes misogynistic abuse and sexual violence. Is Ofcom currently operating with the severity that is required for the level of crisis?

Jess Phillips: To be fair to Ofcom—and it can answer for its own performance—it is doing what Parliament has given it the power to do in legislation. It does not have the power to do more. As a Government, we have had to put a lot into the Online Safety Act to make anything to do with adult women priority offences. Child abuses and terrorism offences are relatively well covered, but we had to make a priority offence of intimate image abuse, for example. In its codes of practice, Ofcom is living within the legislation it has. Do I think all regulators should do more and have more teeth? Always. As I often say to people, if you rely on regulators to do all the work, I invite you to drink the water from the Thames.

- Q65 **Lewis Atkinson:** My final question is on prevention online, not about the technology but the misogynistic environments. We have a situation where some regard the likes of Andrew Tate as role models and algorithms push that content to young men and boys. In your view, what should technology companies—and, if they fail, Government—do to shape the online environment and reduce misogynistic influences?

Jess Phillips: There is a huge amount of misogynistic content. The Home Office does not just worry about the misogynistic content in itself but also about the Venn diagram of how it interacts with ultra-violent content. The Southport inquiry findings have to be taken on board alongside the consultation currently ongoing about what children should and should not be able to access online and the commitments to not need further 10-year-long primary legislation. I look around this Committee and note that most of you were not here for what was an incredibly painful time in getting the OSA over the line. It took a huge amount of cross-party effort and good will to work on it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The regulating power has been given to the Secretary of State to do that quickly, based on the consultation. I am the mother of two teenagers—I keep saying this, but one of them is 21, so he is not a teenager any more; I cannot quite give it up—so I do not find myself in a comfortable position saying what people should and should not look at, particularly when talking about young men finding their way in the world. What is not safe for them, and what is definitely causing alarm in the data that I see about the perpetration of violence against women and girls, whether that is child abuse, domestic abuse, or, in the worst cases, murder—is that you do have to think about what is inappropriate for children to be looking at. I do not find it comfortable to say, “You should look at this, and you should not look at that,” but feeding boys very misogynistic content is not something we allow on our normal televisions. That is not allowed on television, yet it is on the device my son takes to his room every night. I would like it to be like television. I would like it if we could make it just like the television and watch the snooker.

Q66 Chair: You will know that when I was doing your job, I met a survivor, and I asked her, “What is the one thing we should do?” She said, “Stop people watching pornography.” I was determined to do it, and I tried to do it in the Digital Economy Act. We got the legislation passed, and it was never enacted. We had to wait for the Online Safety Act. It is tough to get this done.

Jess Phillips: It absolutely is, and you face an enormous backlash. The public is now in a different place even from where it was then. It is easy to blame parents and say they should control what their children watch. Parents must take responsibility, although my children know far more about technology than I do. The truth is that I would not put my children in a car that had not been safely regulated and did not have seat belts, and I would not allow somebody with wildly racist views to drive them around the corner. I would not say, “Jump in, kids. This racist person is going to drive you around in a car that has no seat belts.” Parents feel that this is where they have been left. I can only speak for myself, certainly.

Q67 Chair: Likewise, we would not let them play in the park unless there were fences around the playground to keep the bad guys out. We do not mind them doing it online, however.

Jess Phillips: What I want is to feel that my children are safe playing outside. I do not want them to be kept inside or kept away from the world. I want to feel that everything possible has been put in place for them to play safely in the front garden. My children often tell me that they wish I would not use them as examples, because they are not five. They can play out in the garden. They both have jobs.

Q68 Chris Murray: I want to take us back to the metrics and how we are evaluating the strategy. You have talked about standardising definitions, the reliance on the crime survey and its usefulness and limitations, and some of the key indicators—sexual harassment, domestic abuse and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

homicides. What are you doing to improve, specifically, the police's collection of data on VAWG?

Jess Phillips: One thing we are doing is signing up to common standards and reporting mechanisms. We are also going through an enormous police reform piece of work in the Department, and part of that concerns what metrics police forces are going to be monitored against. It is very rare that VAWG metrics are even included in the returns to the centre, so they have not been prioritised to date. Specifically on police reporting, I think we will probably address that when we talk about the grooming gangs cases. There are specifics about areas where the data is just awful and has not been collected, even when the frameworks were in place, and some forces do it and some forces do not.

As part of policing reform, we will look at whether legislation, specific guidance or changes to codes are needed to mandate proper recording. The data is not good enough. The example that is often raised is the ethnicity data for perpetrators, but I do not even know the ethnicity or migration status of victims, and that is a real problem in policy decision making.

Gisela Carr: The primary focus for us in engaging with policing on data has been on reaching a common definition, because that underpins how we will improve the picture. The Minister has talked about the technicalities around coding and individual officers recording individual crimes. Beyond that, we are doing strategic work through the national centre to try to build awareness, improve training and raise understanding of the complexities of VAWG. We hope to see all of that translate into improved responses and improved recording.

Q69 **Chris Murray:** What about the specific gaps in the current situation? You have alluded to the lack of knowledge about victims. We have talked about rape, but online abuse is also completely uncaptured, and under-16s are a massive gap. What are you doing to address those massive gaps in the system, and how are you balancing the paradox at the heart of this, which is that by focusing on data collection, you will drive up the recorded instances of these crimes rather than down, when your target is to halve them?

Jess Phillips: To be completely clear, my target is not to halve recorded crimes. In fact, I expect the figures to go up, certainly in particular crime types. I expect increases in adult sexual violence in particular and I think we are already seeing some of that through Operation Soteria taking on cases that previously might not have been taken on. Sexual violence is further ahead in its improvements on this. The balance to strike is ensuring that we get the right data so that people can be held accountable and make local or national policy on the basis of that data, while not making data collection so onerous for the police that data collection ends their curiosity.



When I was on Birmingham city council, I made every single person who worked at the council ask a series of questions of people, like a routine inquiry. I sat in a housing office and I watched the person in the cubicle next to me. The housing officer asked, "Have you ever been a victim of domestic abuse?" The woman said, "Yes." The officer asked, "Have you ever been a victim of sexual violence?" She said, "Yes." Then the officer asked, "Have you got any pets?" I thought, "Oh God, follow up on the thing that the woman said. This is terrible, and it's my fault because I made them collect this data."

We need to work with the centre to look at what we need to make sure that there is accountability and monitoring of things like how many stalking protection orders were given out. Some forces will have done 1,000 last year; some will have done two. It is making sure that we know what we are looking for in the data and that that it is not too onerous for policing. There are gaps—there are no two ways about it—and the online one is probably the biggest.

Gisela Carr: I can give a little more detail on how we approached this for the strategy, because we heard the feedback from this Committee's inquiry and from the NAO about the need for a robust performance framework. We had a choice between working only with existing datasets or pushing out into new and different areas. We chose the latter, which is why some of the performance metrics in the strategy are still under development. In some areas—for example, in the NHS—there is good data that we need to work with colleagues to extract and integrate into our reporting. That will not be new data collection, but it will be newly integrated to us.

In areas such as online harm, we need to think about how we build proper prevalence measures. On under-16s specifically, the crime survey does not survey those under 16. We know that is a gap and we are determined to find a way to do it. I was speaking again to the ONS only last week about how to address it. The work is under way. It is not straightforward but it is essential, and we are making good progress with the ONS on understanding what our routes might be to collect that critical data.

Alongside that, I have talked about outcome data, which will help us understand whether we are driving the changes that the Minister has talked about. For the strategy, we have a robust set of delivery metrics that we report in to No. 10, for example roll-out of Raneem's law for the Home Office or roll-out of DAPOs.

Q70 Chris Murray: You say that the strategy has 250 interventions listed in it. I understand that the Cabinet Office and the Treasury have set up an evaluation taskforce to look at all 250 of these interventions, to see what works and what does not. How will you decide if something is not working and stop doing it? I am not talking only about low impact; they may be too hard or too resource-intensive. What is your thought process on



ending interventions that are in the strategy? Even at this early stage, are there some you can see are becoming too difficult to operationalise?

Jess Phillips: Not yet, but I very much think there will be. The 250 does not stay fixed; there are things that will be added as the work goes on. It is the first step; it does not sit in aspic. We have agreed to update Parliament on the strategy annually. You are absolutely right: I will not keep something going out of embarrassment or if I do not think it is working.

In the space of prevention for young people, there is a huge amount going on in the field. I have written two education programmes on domestic abuse and sexual exploitation for the Home Office in my career, but I do not have evidence that they worked long term. With the work we are doing on education and prevention, we will focus hard on learning what works. We will try some things that will not work. I will try to do no harm to anyone in the process.

Chair: We are going to move on to by and for services and then we want to cover grooming gangs and trafficking before the end.

Q71 **Robbie Moore:** Minister, staying with the VAWG strategy, concerns have been raised over the lack of focus on migrant and asylum-seeking women in the strategy. What assessment have you made of the impact of the changes to the immigration rules on migrant and asylum-seeking women at risk of VAWG?

Jess Phillips: One of the big things campaigned for by those who represent migrant women was the need for a firewall between immigration services and policing. It was the subject of a super-complaint in which one of my own constituents was involved—it is always good to go into a Department that you have taken legal action against. The firewall, developed with the sector, is very much within the violence against women and girls strategy. The commitment that data will never be passed from the police to Immigration Enforcement without the consent of the victim is fundamental to ensuring that migrant victims feel they can come forward. The immigration White Paper specifically states—and I know because I wrote this part into it—that any new policy will take account of the needs of victims of certain crimes, including domestic abuse and violence against women and girls, in any changes that are made. Our immigration system, as it is today, has a different system for victims of domestic abuse than it does for others, notwithstanding that that is not always the easiest thing for people to use.

Q72 **Robbie Moore:** Concerns have been raised—I have raised them to do with my own constituents in Keighley, and it may be similar in your own constituency; the BBC has also been reporting on this—about false claims by migrants purporting to be victims of domestic abuse to remain in this country. The numbers are quite staggering. According to the BBC, in the 12 months to September last year, 5,596 migrants made applications for indefinite leave to remain as victims of domestic abuse, and there is a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

perceived loophole in the system where false claims are being made and the claimants are being protected by the state. There is an element of challenge that would rightly be put to the person the claim is being made against by the appropriate police force, and that investigation proves the claim to be false. The claimant is then able to still proceed with their application and be effectively protected by the state, enabling that route to citizenship to continue.

Do you have any understanding of the scale of this issue? I have raised it in West Yorkshire; it happens in my constituency. I have had multiple constituents talk to me about it.

Jess Phillips: The BBC case involved one of my own constituents and references my own interaction with the Home Office as a constituency MP, so I am familiar with the matter. On scale, from the point of view of the Home Office, it is definitely an issue, and I asked for work to be undertaken—and work is in train—on it from the moment I took on this role, because I have handled hundreds of such cases in my career. It used to be called the Sojourner project, then it became the domestic abuse concession and it is now the MVDAC—they are essentially the same thing. I have to say, in all those years of the scheme, I did not see these cases in the manner in which I have seen them in the past five years. I am not talking as a Home Office Minister now; I say that as a constituency Member of Parliament.

I am also seeing, across domestic abuse cases more broadly, the issue of claim and counterclaim becoming the game in town. A woman comes forward and says she has been a victim of domestic abuse; the man comes forward and he says he has been also. It is as though perpetrators of domestic abuse all have one massive WhatsApp group where they learn the current thing to do. I have seen a growing number of these cases that you are referring to, and I have raised the issue with the Home Office, as you have done. However, I have seen thousands more of those cases that are completely legitimate.

The balance is to say that the evidence required in such circumstances—nobody who has ever worked with a migrant victim who might have been brought to this country, has no connection with our laws and has no family to rely on, would want to see that woman have to jump through multiple hoops to get away from being raped or held down until she was pregnant, which are cases that I have seen, or think that she has the resource to do that. The evidential bar must be fair. It must stop the issue that you are talking about, but it must allow people who have very little recourse to the law to be kept safe from terrible perpetrators of some of the worst crimes I have seen. That is the absolute tension that has to be worked on, and that is what the Home Office has been working to do. I can't say how many are fraudulent, but the vast majority are legitimate.

Q73 Robbie Moore: The scale is obviously increasing, given the 5,596 I referenced earlier. According to the BBC, 1,424 of those were cases



raised by men, a rise of 66%.

Jess Phillips: Yes, there has been an increase in the use of it by men.

Robbie Moore: Applications by women rose 47% in the same two-year period. It is definitely an increasing trend. In addition to raising the evidential bar, what is the Home Office doing about it?

Jess Phillips: To raise the bar, one must tighten the evidential threshold without requiring a conviction—a victim would be dead by the time a conviction was secured in these circumstances. Some of the evidential thresholds used in the past—for example, a support organisation confirming that someone has used its services—need to be tied very tightly to trusted organisations. Someone could simply set up DVAdviser.com, and we see that happening in other areas where there might be a pot of money going around, and suddenly there is an organisation that is a specialist. One cannot say that men must be held to a higher standard than women, because that would be unlawful.

Q74 **Robbie Moore:** In addition, what the Government are doing to help those against whom a false claim has been made? In my constituency, a false claim was made against the mother of a daughter who had come over from Pakistan. The mother was a teacher at one of my schools, who then lost her job because of the false claim and accusation of domestic abuse against her. West Yorkshire police dropped the case, but the impact on her credibility within the community was substantial.

Jess Phillips: In cases of all false claims such as that, and I am doing this work with my own police force, it is about making sure that the police are better at—what I see in my own police force has been a justified reaction to us saying the police do not respond enough to domestic abuse. They then go to a position of not investigating the possibilities, such as claim and counterclaim and false allegation, which I am seeing more and more across the board, not only in immigration. We need to make sure that people understand that that is being used as a tactic in the field, and it should form part of training on what is happening. The canary in the coal mine is usually the family court; it has been present there for some time and is now reaching out into criminal law. People who make false allegations should be held accountable. It is quite difficult to say that because something is not founded in these cases, that means it is not true. That would mean that the vast majority of rape in this country never happened.

There is a balance to be had. I am sure your constituent is completely upstanding, and it is not as easy as saying, "Do take these cases for certain, or don't." There is a nuance that has to be maintained, and as somebody who is quite well trained, I personally think I could tell the difference.

Q75 **Robbie Moore:** I would like to move on to the rape gangs and child sexual exploitation. Do you agree with all the recommendations in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Baroness Casey's report, which was published in June?

Jess Phillips: Yes, I agree with the recommendations—and the Government agree with them.

Q76 Robbie Moore: One of the key recommendations—it will hopefully come as no surprise that I reference it—is the one on data collection, specifically the requirement on pages 151 and 152 of Baroness Casey's report that all data must be retained by all organisations: police forces, local authorities and any organisation with a safeguarding responsibility. Baroness Casey said that direction effectively had to be given to those organisations, and it was not. We know that as a Committee because the Home Secretary wrote to the Committee to say so. Why was that direction not issued, even though it was a recommendation provided by Baroness Casey?

Jess Phillips: The direction given by Baroness Casey is that records must be retained. To be clear, people should not be destroying records at all. It is the law that, for example, children's safeguarding records must be kept until the child is 75. Police have all manner of record keeping. Is there a particular record-keeping holder that you are concerned about that does not fit within those rules?

Q77 Robbie Moore: Baroness Casey's recommendations specifically say, "Local authorities, police forces and other relevant agencies should in the meantime"—between June, when the report came out from Baroness Casey and the point at which the national inquiry was set up—"be required not to destroy any relevant records."

Jess Phillips: They are required. That is absolutely correct.

Robbie Moore: Baroness Casey felt strongly enough to write that as a recommendation for a direction to be issued. Why was no direction issued by Government?

Jess Phillips: The direction is that Baroness Casey said that they were required to do that, and so they are required to do it. I shall hand over to Luke.

Luke Hughes: First, Mr Moore, you and other members of the Committee will know well, as do we in the Home Office because we have heard it directly from victims and survivors, the staggering lack of trust—for good reason—that victims and survivors have in state institutions in this space to respond to them and then to be held accountable. That is exactly why the inquiry has been established and why we have established the national police operation alongside.

As the Minister said, our judgment at the time was that, given the extant legal obligations on organisations and public authorities to retain records—obligations arising from existing codes of practice, regulation and legislation, and from the fact that an inquiry had been announced—



the best time to write to relevant organisations to remind them of those obligations was alongside the publication of the draft terms of reference.

- Q78 **Robbie Moore:** That was six months after the publication of the Casey review. That was the first time that it came from the Home Office. It was a further eight months before MHCLG wrote to local authorities with that level of instruction. Given that trust is a key issue here, as you have rightly identified, would the Government not have been better placed to re-establish that trust by reassuring victims and survivors that a direction had gone out off the back of the Casey review that no data should be destroyed in the meantime, as Baroness Casey asked?

Luke Hughes: As the Home Secretary's letter set out, our judgment was that those obligations existed. A letter issued before the draft terms of reference were published on 9 December would not have been able to say anything about the scope of the inquiry—which organisations were in scope, over what time period, and what issues were to be examined. It could only have restated what was already in the public domain, that an inquiry had been announced and that organisations already had obligations to retain records. Our judgment was that the right time to act was through the chair to the Cabinet Secretary on 9 December, which was what we did.

Jess Phillips: Do you have evidence about some of the records? I do not expect you to give it to me here, but give it to them.

- Q79 **Robbie Moore:** I come back to the point that it was a recommendation within Baroness Casey's report, and there is real concern that it might be happening, in correspondence I receive from constituents. Given that it was raised in the report, I simply wanted to get to the bottom of that.

Jess Phillips: The concern is real. I have heard of people's records—whether for malign or benign reasons—not being available in various circumstances. The benign situations are where, for example, different local authority boundaries change and a children's home comes under the jurisdiction of the MOJ—there was a lot of that during IICSA. That seems benign.

However, I am not sure that any letter would stop deliberate destruction. When I have spoken to the chair, other panel members and Louise Casey, the absence of material must fundamentally be explained as part of the inquiry. If there is an obvious thing that is missing that should have been there, that tells a story just as much as the data being present. You are right about trust, and some of that will be completely benign. Where malignancy has happened, I expect the inquiry to look into that.

- Q80 **Robbie Moore:** On the local areas to be included in the inquiry, the Government were confident enough to announce that Oldham would be included as far back as January 2025, when the previous Home Secretary said it would be included in local inquiries. I am curious as to why



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Bradford has not been announced so far. Given that it was referenced in IICSA, given that it was referenced in Baroness Casey's audit itself as a "key area of concern" and given that Operation Dalesway has been running across the Bradford district since 2014, why do the Government not feel confident enough to announce that the Bradford district should be included? Baroness Casey recommends that local investigations should commence sooner in areas where the independent commission and the Home Office agree that sufficient evidence already exists. What more evidence do the Government need to announce that the Bradford district and Keighley must be included?

Jess Phillips: It is an independent inquiry. The reason for the Oldham decision was that the Home Office was already a long way down the path of commissioning an independent inquiry into Oldham. To talk about a problem with lack of trust, then to say, "Well, Oldham might not get it," when we were down the line, felt cruel. It is now for the inquiry to decide and publish the criteria it will use to select the local areas of investigation. Personally—and I cannot say this enough—I think it should look into Bradford and it should look into Birmingham. What I personally think is entirely academic, however, because it is an independent inquiry that must lay out the publication of the criteria and select the local areas from that. It is my experience of working in the field, between my city and yours, that there are problems in both. I do not deny that, but I could say that evidence for a lot of other places as well.

Q81 **Robbie Moore:** On funding, £65 million has been allocated to it. There is a narrative of more than 50 towns that could warrant having an inquiry. I have mentioned Bradford and you have referenced Birmingham, so £65 million does not seem like a lot of money. For the 50 towns that have been referenced, that is £1.3 million for each town. Why has only £65 million been allocated? On the timeframe, is it realistic to achieve results within three years, given that we will not know which local areas are going to be focused on until at least the end of July this year, and the announcement for the independent inquiry terms of reference was nearly two months ago?

Jess Phillips: One of Baroness Casey's recommendations—I think it was recommendation 12—was that the inquiry had to be properly resourced. I have had many conversations with her throughout the process of this. The resourcing was one thing that she was pleased with, not something where she came back to me with concern. The £65 million is made up of cross-Government contributions to ensure that this happens and that is quite important as well.

Do I think three years is enough? That is the way that Louise Casey designed the system and, yes, I do think it is enough and that they will do it within that time. I have been absolutely bowled over by the timeliness, for example, of the Southport inquiry. When you look at it, I think you said it was £1.3 million per town. Even if that were the case, which is a totally rudimentary multiplication based on a number of towns—50 was the number that you used—the initial inquiry into



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Rotherham was done for a lot less than that, to be clear. However, it is for them to decide. Also, should they not be able to do it within that amount of money, they will make that clear quite quickly. As somebody who has a number of different inquiries that sit under me, people are not shy of saying that.

Q82 Robbie Moore: I have a final question to do with the positioning of the whole of the Government on this issue. Given that it is the biggest national scandal that has hit this country for a long time, did the Government ever consider repositioning this from being controlled effectively by the Home Office to the Cabinet Office?

The reason I ask is that local authorities and all safeguarding organisations are involved, including care homes and, of course, police forces. When the independent infected blood inquiry was set up it was initially controlled by the Health Department, but then one of the key recommendations was to reposition it at the centre of Government so that it had full reassurance that all arms of Government and their statutory agencies could be properly explored.

What reassurance can you provide me that even though this is controlled by the Home Office, the inquiry will go into all areas, not just those sitting under the Home Office's jurisdiction?

Jess Phillips: Gosh, no, absolutely not. I already talked about the Southport inquiry, where the vast majority of recommendations were absolutely nothing to do with the Home Office. Of the 20 IICSA recommendations, three were for the Home Office or sat under the Home Office's auspices. Angiolini is similar, or more so, because it is specifically about policing but also has recommendations for DBT and others.

The assurance I want to give in that regard is not just that it will look into other things. The panel was selected because of a variety of experience—local authorities, health and policing—for the exact reason that you are pointing out. I want to give more of an assurance that where the Home Office has a case to answer in the inquiry, or where any Government Department, Government institution or arm's length body has a case to answer in the inquiry about how it might have, malignly or benignly, taken part in this problem being a national scandal, as you describe it, that will absolutely be the case. Just as the covid inquiry has had to hold the health service, the Treasury and others to account, that will absolutely be the case in this. There have not been any particular representations or recommendations to move it to the Cabinet Office by them, us or anyone, until this very moment.

Luke Hughes: Having previously led on cross-Government Inquiries Policy in the Cabinet and given evidence to a House of Lords Committee on exactly that question, there are real benefits to having a home Department with a Minister absolutely invested in the issue as the sponsoring Minister for the long-term response. Fundamentally, the inquiry has to deliver on its terms of reference, which are set out. That is



established under the Inquiries Act. There is no way that it being sponsored administratively by the Home Office is going to constrain that in any way.

Q83 Jo White: I want to think about the thousands of young women and girls and the confidence that they need to have to give evidence to the inquiry. With the institutionalised nature of this, the turning of a blind eye by all elements of the state, how can they have the confidence that they will be believed and trusted when they come forward?

Jess Phillips: I can only imbue the confidence in them through changed action. That is not something that will happen overnight. It will take a long time.

In building the terms of reference, the chair worked with a large number of different victims groups as part of the beginning of the inquiry. In tandem, we have been undertaking this work with the policing side of this, Operation Beaconport, to ensure that there are proper victims charters. If you think about Beaconport, we are looking through thousands of old cases. I have spoken to victims myself who have said, "I don't want the police rocking up. I am now 45, I have two kids and I have moved on with my life. I don't want you to now say, 'We're opening up your case'."

There has to be very sensitive handling of this from the victim's perspective. The inquiry, when it comes and speaks to you, will talk about what its plans are for that. It was a fundamental part of commissioning the inquiry that there has to be a victim and survivors' charter, and we are working alongside the NCA on the policing element of that. It has been weeks and weeks of work on my part and others, including specialists, to try to make sure that we get that exactly right. A fundamental part of what gets funded through those things will be the support for victims going through it.

"I believe you." I stand here and I say, "I believe you. I believe bad things happened to you." I think that in any inquiry there is an amount of rigour that has to be put to evidence, but I do not want anyone to ever perceive that that is because of disbelief. The inquiry comes from the perspective of believing the girls and believing that there was a failure. It would not exist otherwise, would it? However, these are fine words; they mean nothing, until things change, to any of these people.

Luke Hughes: Briefly, it is a sad but obvious fact that these statutory inquiries are often established in circumstances where victims and survivors have an extremely low base of confidence and trust. We have seen cases like the infected blood inquiry or the Grenfell Tower inquiry that have been able, over time, to build trust and confidence with the affected communities. I know the chair and panel are absolutely seized of that, as they have demonstrated in the past few months.



Jess Phillips: Yes, the feelings towards the chair of the infected blood inquiry from the perspective of my own constituents were remarkable. I am sure that is not always the case and there is not one sort of victim. If IICSA taught us anything, it is that there were varying feelings towards the inquiry. There is no one perfect system but we have to try to do the very best.

Q84 **Ben Maguire:** Very quickly, following up on Jo White's point, I had quite a startling meeting recently with a representative from a charity. I will not go into detail, to protect their anonymity, but she had been subjected to quite severe psychological and physical domestic abuse. It transpired that the same perpetrator had done very similar to other victims, who had not decided to go to the police because they did not have the confidence they would be listened to or believed, to your point earlier, Minister.

She subsequently discovered another victim who had brought her case all the way to court, only to be told by the CPS the night before the hearing date that it could not go ahead. Apparently, suddenly there was not sufficient evidence, despite 14 witness statements, including from one of the other victims. Then she herself experienced almost the identical thing, albeit I think her case was postponed because there were no judges available to hear the case. To the point about trust and confidence in the system—

Jess Phillips: Why would you have any?

Ben Maguire: What can your Department do to work with the Ministry of Justice on that?

Jess Phillips: There is a fundamental failure. When I was working in the field in the beginning, especially if you are talking about grooming gang cases, they are multi-lawyer, multi-perpetrator and multi-victim, and the time that it takes—and this is another thing. If we all truly want to win back trust with the victims, we have to tell the truth. We have to stop pretending that there is a simple overnight solution to this, even before the backlogs.

I could sit and tell you about how in the strategy and the manifesto there are things about specialist rape courts, recognising the need for specialist domestic abuse courts, and that we are putting in advocacy for rape victims so that they have lawyers themselves, or whatever it is—all of those things to try to make the system seem a bit more worth trusting. However, the reality is that these are complex, multi-perpetrator, multi-victim cases where a victim will have to be cross-examined often not by one lawyer but by multiple lawyers. I cannot tell you how proud it makes me of the people who go through with it, but I am in no way judgmental of anyone who might not want to because that is a big ask. It takes years, even before all the delays.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Yes, I will do everything that I possibly can to make it so. Most victims will tell you, whether it is grooming gangs or domestic abuse, "The system that I went into was worse than the abuse that I suffered. The fact that they tried to take my children away, the fact that they criminalised me, the fact that"—whatever it is, whatever your poison is. When you are a kid, you believe if you go to a police officer, the police officer will help you. Your teacher will help you.

The sense of aloneness and abuse when that foundation is taken away from you, when you have already suffered a harm, is the thing. If the strategy is to try to do anything, it has to, wherever you stand up, make the person who stands in front of you better. It has to make the person who hears it better, whether it is your GP, your doctor, your youth coach, the person you talk to online—whoever it is. Only then—I could lie, but I will not still be in Parliament by the time we achieve this. That is the reality. It is going to take a long time and we should stop pretending otherwise.

Q85 Chair: You need to be believed, you need to be listened to, and you need to have people who are on your side and trusting you.

Jess Phillips: That is it. The advocacy of a trusted adult, especially with children. It doesn't matter who that is.

Q86 Chair: We need to stop box-ticking and saying, "It's okay, we've ticked every box," like you talked about earlier, and instead listen to what is being said.

Jess Phillips: Yes. It is just shocking.

Chair: We have a few more questions on human trafficking, if you are okay with that.

Jess Phillips: You can go for it quickly, yes. Are you all right? People forget that they also have diaries and I am not the centre of the universe.

Luke Hughes: Yes.

Gisela Carr: Yes.

Q87 Chris Murray: Thank you. I will just put on record a declaration that I am a trustee of the Human Trafficking Foundation.

Chair: As am I.

Chris Murray: The previous Home Secretary came before us over a year ago and said that the national referral mechanism, which is the way that we protect victims of trafficking in this country, had become a bit stuck. What have you been doing over the last year and a half to improve and reform the national referral mechanism?

Chair: How long is it taking at the moment?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Jess Phillips: I do not have the direct details about it but let me tell you that it is the lowest it has been in a long time. I think we had reached a point where it was 565 days on average. I apologise and maybe somebody will hand me the exact data, but the time that it is currently taking is at a 20-month low.

That said, that is not because of any reforms to the national referral mechanism; that is entirely because resource was put into it and prioritised. We prioritised having extra people in the single competent authority. It is amazing that it is called "the single competent authority" and it is not the single authority; there is another authority that does it. We put extra resource into that, which has brought the backlog down dramatically.

We have undertaken a consultation about access points, the identification of victims of modern slavery and the national referral mechanism as it is today, and a bit more broadly about what needs reforming in that space. I think we would all agree that it is absolutely trailblazing—and I go to countries around the world; I was in Romania recently because we do quite a lot of trafficking bilateral work that we fund with Governments jointly. The national referral mechanism, which we all moan about, is still seen as being an absolute gold standard of identification and monitoring of victims of modern slavery.

However, the system as it is today—and the grooming gang victims are included in this—is not the one it was designed for. When I was first working in the field, we were talking about around 4,000 cases a year, largely of people trafficked from outside the country into our country. You were not talking about 25% of them being British children, as in the last full year's data—and they have been a huge portion of the data consistently for many years.

The system for identifying people well, whether in the immigration system, the children services system or the adult services system, needs some work. That work is ongoing, based on the consultation, and will be forthcoming soon.

Q88 **Chris Murray:** Do you have any idea when?

Jess Phillips: The consultation is complete and work is being done to analyse that. I do not wish to get ahead of the King's Speech.

Q89 **Chair:** Please feel free to share with the Committee.

Jess Phillips: I am looking forward to all the cap-doffing, the people with a pool cue and weird things that happen in this place around Prorogation. I am sure it is not a pool cue.

It might be about legislative change, but quite a lot of it can be done with other changes. Some modern slavery changes that have been pushed for by very eminent people will need legislative change. On the timeframes and exactly when that will happen, I cannot say at the moment, but we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

will be releasing the work on what we will do with the national referral mechanism by the end of the year.

Q90 Chris Murray: Thank you. I have two follow-up questions on specifics. We were just talking about system failure for victims, and how a trusted adult is an important mechanism. You have committed to a contract for child trafficking guardians. I have seen at first hand the massive impact that guardians can have. Is that contract out for tender? What is the status of it?

Jess Phillips: I never know what I am allowed to say because of “commercial”. I find it infuriating the number of conversations that I am in as a Minister where “commercial” gets said to me. Yes, we have committed that the Government will expand the ICTG—that is the name of it, the independent child trafficking guardians. I do not like that name; I feel like we need a marketing agency to work on what we call things.

Chair: It was something that the House of Lords insisted on in 2015. I remember it well.

Jess Phillips: ICTG—it does not sound that friendly.

Chair: It was ICTA then. It was advocates. They came up with “guardians” later.

Jess Phillips: It will be rolled out. The adult modern slavery contract is in the process of being redone at the moment and has been at market participation. I think the same is true of the ICTG. The plan is to roll it out across the country, like you said. I know that you have been an advocate of devolved decision making.

Q91 Chris Murray: That was going to be my next question. You have committed to rolling that out for a long time.

Jess Phillips: Yes. If there has been any reform to the NRM that has definitely worked and has been tested now, it is that decision making on children being devolved to local authority areas. I went to see it in Warwick, which is my nearest authority that was doing it. It is speeding up the decisions and fewer are liable for appeal. It is a better system. There are some up in Scotland, definitely, and it is rolling out to a further 10 authorities. It is a system that is better, not necessarily cheaper but no more expensive, and it is definitely a better system.

Q92 Chris Murray: The goal is for that to be nationwide. This is about protecting child victims of trafficking. Why the delay and why are you not making it nationwide now?

Jess Phillips: I think it is simply a matter of making sure that as it gets rolled out, there is evaluation of the different sorts of areas. Like I say, Warwick was done. That is completely different from doing it, for example, in Birmingham and the west midlands. It is just making sure—like you say, we are dealing with children—that we have that completely right. Like I say, there is no financial benefit and/or barrier to doing it, so



HOUSE OF COMMONS

it is nothing to do with the idea of cost. It is just making sure that those things are done properly so that the system does not fall over or break down at a certain point.

Q93 Chair: It has been put to me that the NRM does not work brilliantly for UK nationals, because they do not access the services in that way.

Jess Phillips: It does not.

Chair: If they had not gone through the NRM and they had gone through other pathways, they would be accessing different services on housing and so on. They do not get that with the NRM.

Jess Phillips: I totally agree with you. When I think about grooming gang cases that I have sought to take through the NRM, it was usually children who were groomed into adulthood and are now adult victims of modern slavery but British.

Chair: Exactly.

Jess Phillips: Especially if you are not a child and you have that pathway, the difference in what is available to you—there is a fundamental imbalance between if you are there from a different country and if you have access to public funds, which British people all do. It is, “Get on your housing waiting list,” and that sort of thing.

I totally agree with you. I am not willing to take them out of it, when I think about what best needs to be done, until there is the same exact, robust system. Look across all accommodation or advocacy support for people with complex needs. I think that, “Go to a women’s refuge,” would be one of the arguments in that circumstance, but if you are enslaved, you have substance misuse issues and you have a criminal record as a part of it, safeguarding would say that you cannot stay in a women’s refuge. Complex needs environments are the solution in this space. Until such a time as enough of them exist, I cannot take them out of that particular system.

Chair: Absolutely.

Q94 Chris Murray: Very quickly on that final point, obviously the NRM does not just look at women and does not just look at sexual exploitation; it looks at all kinds of exploitation. The Fair Work Agency is now operational but it is outside the Home Office’s control. What work are you doing to ensure the Fair Work Agency, which has a lot of important things to do beyond this, actually—

Jess Phillips: I am meeting with the Minister who will be leading on the Fair Work Agency tomorrow. The gangmasters part of the Home Office, which sat under my purview, becomes part of the Fair Work Agency. I have been working with gangmasters, the Fair Work Agency and the Ministers involved. I will keep my hand in, even though it will no longer be my responsibility, to make sure that the gangmasters part of it, which



has the actual enforcement powers, is not lost to people who do not pay the minimum wage. It is a very real risk that we have been alive to as those two bodies go into one.

You say sexual exploitation. When I worked in the field, that was the vast majority of modern slavery cases. The vast majority of people within the system were women and the vast majority of cases were either domestic or sexual, with sexual outstripping almost everything else. That is not what the data says now. The majority are men, and labour or county lines-style abuse is the majority.

Q95 **Chair:** As you know, the APPG are looking closely at it with Baroness Brady—don't worry.

Jess Phillips: Don't worry—that and Birmingham city, she is on it, or West Ham or wherever she is now.

Q96 **Chair:** I have one final point and it goes back to the use of the Modern Slavery Act. It worries me that unless a victim has gone through the NRM, law enforcement does not even consider the Modern Slavery Act offences. If I look at something high profile like the Al Fayed cases, admittedly some of them will predate the MSA but they classically fit within the description of exploitation that the Modern Slavery Act sets out.

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree with you. In that as well, there is an idea of what a victim of modern slavery looks like. In that case, the idea that a police officer sits in front of a well-to-do woman and says, "I'm going to put this woman through the NRM," seems quite unlikely to me. It is certainly one of the things that the Al Fayed victims have raised with me.

Chair: Those cases are definitely there. I need to wrap this up because I know the Minister needs to leave. We could stay and spend all day, but I want to thank the Minister and officials for coming and giving your time. Apologies for keeping you here a few minutes later. Thank you so much for your evidence today.