

Priti Patel publishes new strategy to protect children from sexual abuse

The Home Secretary has today published a first-of-its-kind national strategy to protect children from all forms of child sexual abuse.

The Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy sets out how the Government will use new legislation and enhanced technology to stop offenders in their tracks.

This includes investing in the UK's world-leading Child Abuse Image Database to identify and catch more offenders quicker – for example, by using new tools to speed up police investigations and protecting officers' wellbeing by avoiding them being repeatedly exposed to indecent images.

The Home Office will make it easier for parents and carers to ask the police if someone has a criminal record for child sexual offences as the department commits to a review of Sarah's Law.

These measures are on top of civil orders to stop reoffending and introducing stronger sentencing so that serious violent and sexual offenders remain in prison for longer.

The government will support local areas to improve their response to exploitation with funding for The Children's Society's Prevention Programme initiative, and will introduce the ground-breaking Online Safety Bill to ensure that technology companies are held to account for harmful content on their sites, and do not compromise on children's safety.

The publication comes as new Home Office research estimates that the social and economic cost of the crime over the victims' lifetimes was at least a staggering £10 billion for the victims who experienced child sexual abuse in the year ending March 2019, with the full emotional cost being immeasurable.

The strategy also aims to improve the data that is available on offenders following the publication of the paper on the characteristics of group-based offending which found that it was difficult to draw conclusions about the ethnicity of offenders as existing research is limited and data collection is poor.

This commitment includes working with local authorities to understand and respond to threats within their communities and collecting higher quality data on offenders so that the government can build a fuller picture on the characteristics of perpetrators and help tackle the abuse that has blighted many towns and cities in England.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

Victims and survivors of child sexual abuse have told me how they feel let down by the state. I am determined to put this right.

This first-of-its-kind national Strategy will tackle and respond to all forms of child sexual abuse, relentlessly going after abusers, whilst better protecting victims and survivors.

Crucially, it contains a commitment to collect higher quality data on the characteristics of offenders, so that the government can build a fuller picture of perpetrators, and tackle the abuse that has blighted many towns and cities across our country.

The group-based offending paper demonstrates how difficult it has been to draw conclusions about the characteristics of offenders. That is why the government's forthcoming Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy will commit to improving our understanding of child sexual abuse – including around ethnicity.

This will enable us to better understand any community and cultural factors relevant to tackling offending – helping us to safeguard children from abuse, deliver justice for victims and survivors, and restore the public's confidence in the criminal justice system's ability to confront this issue.

The Strategy drives action across every part of government, across all agencies, all sectors, charities, communities, technology companies and society more widely to stop abusers and place victims and survivors at the centre of the approach.

Rob Jones, NCA Director of Threat Leadership, said:

The NCA welcomes this strategy at a time when the threat to children is more severe than it has ever been. Last year, we released an assessment that there are at least 300,000 people posing a sexual threat to children in the UK.

The NCA in partnership with UK policing will continue to drive the investigation and arrest of offenders. Joint working led to 4,760 arrests and over 6,500 children being safeguarded in just six months. Many offenders feel they can operate with impunity online, but as we have shown we have enhanced our capabilities and remain committed to tracking them down.

These are not just images or videos being viewed online. What we are uncovering here is evidence of the horrific, real-world sexual abuse of children. It's really important that connection is not lost or diluted.

The government remains at the forefront of international efforts combat CSA, working with partners overseas to strengthen child protection systems in countries where children are particularly at risk, and clamp down on individuals who travel abroad to rape and abuse children.

In addition to the ground-breaking Online Safety Bill that will tackle online

harms, the government has also asked GCHQ to work with the tech industry, to identify and develop solutions to crack down on large scale online child sexual abuse.

GCHQ's Director of Serious and Organised Crime said:

GCHQ will continue to bring its unique cyber and intelligence capabilities to bear alongside its technological expertise as part of this cross-government effort to protect families from these awful crimes.

Our work to tackle systemic internet problems, the insight we provide into offender behaviour and our efforts alongside law enforcement to identify and pursue the worst offenders will help to ensure there is no safe space online for these people to operate.

As part of the publication, the Safeguarding Minister virtually visited the NSPCC on Thursday and spoke to staff in Sheffield and Camden about their Letting the Future In service which uses therapeutic art and play to help children move on from abuse and recover with the support of parents and families.

Safeguarding Minister Victoria Atkins said:

Children across the country and beyond, continue to be subjected to horrific sexual abuse which has a devastating impact on their lives.

The public expects the government to do all it can to prevent child sexual abuse, particularly during this difficult period, and we are delivering on this promise by publishing our Strategy.

The publication demonstrates that, as a government, we are committed to tackling this crime on all fronts and will leave no stone unturned to prevent and pursue offenders, and will protect children and young people.

Susie Hargreaves OBE, Chief Executive of the Internet Watch Foundation, said:

We welcome the government's focus on tackling child sexual abuse and exploitation, particularly online.

We have seen increases in online child sexual abuse material coinciding with more people spending longer at home on the internet – due in part to the Coronavirus pandemic. In 2020, we removed more criminal videos and images of children than ever before.

It is important that we not only look at the online element of these crimes but the impact that it also has on communities. At the

IWF, we are committed to working with the government, industry and the third sector to play our part in removing child sexual abuse material from the internet. We welcome the strategy's focus on the importance of safeguarding children from sexual abuse whether that be online or offline.