

Thursday 31st January 2008

HOME OFFICE

Care for children in the immigration system

Earlier this month I set out the ten key changes to Britain's border security and immigration system that we will deliver in 2008. As part of these reforms I said that it was important that we act more sensitively to the children in our care and to the victims of human trafficking. I would like therefore to update the House on measures being taken forward by the Border & Immigration Agency in relation to children.

First, I am pleased to announce to the House today the commencement of the public consultation exercise on the draft Code of Practice for Keeping Children Safe from Harm. The consultation will last for 12 weeks and copies of the consultation paper and the draft code of practice have been placed in the libraries of both Houses. As part of this consultation we will be talking to children to get their views.

The Code will guide BIA in fulfilling its new legal duty to keep children safe from harm. In drafting it the Border & Immigration Agency has already consulted widely. During the period of the consultation Border & Immigration Agency officials will hold a series of conferences so that interest groups can express their concerns to us in detail and in their own words. These conferences will be devoted to the themes that have been put to us so far as important, such as children in detention, referrals to statutory agencies, and other key areas where children come into contact with our immigration system; as well as seeking to identify what can be learned from others. In particular there will be conferences on children's issues in each of the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Second, I also today publishing the responses to the public consultation exercise "*Planning Better Outcomes and Support for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children*". We have considered carefully the responses to this document and taken account of the clear consensus that central government and local authorities need to work together to improve the way in which these children are referred to, cared for and supported by local authorities. Our main areas of reform in this area are:

- Placing unaccompanied asylum seeking children a network of with specialist local authorities to ensure they receive the expert services they need.
- Better procedures to assess age in order to ensure children and adults are not accommodated together. We will establish a working group with key stakeholders to gain consensus on how we move forward in this complex area of public policy.
- Ensuring that we resolve a child's immigration status more quickly and therefore enable care planning to focus on integration or safe early return to the country of origin for unaccompanied young people.
- Putting in place better procedures for identifying and supporting asylum seeking children who are the victims of trafficking paying particular attention to those who are at risk of going missing or at risk of further harm or exploitation. We will ensure that

proposals around reform are developed in accordance with the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings.

Third, the Home Secretary announced a review of the UK's reservation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child on 14 January. I know this review has been widely welcomed. I am therefore launching a consultation today to run in parallel with that on the Code of Practice. I wish to take full account of the views of others in deciding whether the time is now right to withdraw the reservation.