

Calls for public inquiry into child sexual exploitation intensify amidst political pressure

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In recent developments, the issue of child sexual exploitation and grooming in the UK has once again surged to the forefront of public and political discourse.

Notably, influential figures such as Elon Musk, the billionaire owner of X, have joined the chorus demanding a Home Office-led public inquiry. This push for action comes in the wake of Safeguarding Minister Jess Philips' refusal to commission a national inquiry into the disturbing revelations in Oldham, leaving the decision to Oldham Council on whether to convene an independent inquiry. The Oldham scandal involved reports of authorities failing to adequately respond to or address reports of child sexual abuse due to various reasons, including fears of being accused of racism or due to the complexities of prosecuting such crimes.

Telford and Wrekin Council commissioned an independent, non-statutory inquiry in 2018 into child sexual exploitation within the Borough. The independent inquiry examined abuses dating back to the mid-90s and published its findings in July 2022, setting out 47 recommendations. A follow-up review in July 2024 revealed that a majority of these recommendations had been implemented, highlighting the potential for positive change through concerted action. However, the need for broader legislative and national reforms to address the remaining challenges is becoming increasingly apparent.

Amidst growing frustration, Kemi Badenoch, the Leader of the Opposition, has called for a "long overdue" full national inquiry into what has been described as the "rape gangs grooming scandal." In a significant move, the Conservatives plan to introduce an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing Bill, aiming to mandate a comprehensive national investigation.

The State-related Deaths (National Oversight Mechanism) Bill 2024-25: A step towards accountability

Parallel to the outcry for a public inquiry into child sexual exploitation, the UK is also witnessing significant legislative efforts aimed at enhancing accountability in instances of state-related deaths. State-related deaths include those in police custody, prisons, mental health care settings, and those resulting from incidents such as the Grenfell Tower fire and the Hillsborough stadium disaster, as well as broader issues like systemic failures or negligence within NHS bodies. The common thread in state-related deaths is the involvement or potential accountability of state institutions or their agents. These deaths often raise significant public interest, concern, and demand for accountability because they involve individuals who were under the care or authority of the state at the time of their death.

Spearheaded by the 'No More Deaths' campaign by INQUEST, the bill seeks to establish an independent body tasked with monitoring the implementation of recommendations from inquests, public inquiries, and reviews. This initiative addresses a critical gap in the current system, which lacks a legal framework to ensure that the lessons learned from tragic incidents lead to tangible improvements in public safety and governance.

However, the bill's journey through the legislative process is still in its early stages, with its second reading in Parliament scheduled for 17 January 2025.

There is no doubt that the Government will be under continued pressure to address, nationally, the standards and practices in relation to how child sexual exploitation is reported, investigated, prosecuted and prevented. This in turn is likely to have implications for the

progress of the National Oversight Mechanism Bill, as the announcement of such a public inquiry will undoubtedly place a further spotlight on ensuring that lessons are learned and real change is affected.

Whilst a statutory public inquiry would be lengthy and costly, the alternative is to rely on local authorities to sponsor non-statutory independent inquiries which are also lengthy and costly and focussed on local issues which benefit the local community. Child sexual exploitation should be seen as a national issue and arguably needs the national spotlight and national improvement.

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