

Home Office reclassifies modern slavery as illegal immigration issue

Exclusive: Charities working with victims say it should not be taken away from the safeguarding minister

Based on an article by Emily Dugan, *Thu 13 Oct 2022, The Guardian*

The Home Office has taken the modern slavery brief away from the minister responsible for safeguarding and classed it as an “illegal immigration and asylum” issue, updated online ministerial profiles show.

The move is seen as a clear sign that the department is doubling down on Suella Braverman’s suggestion that people are “gaming” the modern slavery system and that victims of the crime are no longer being prioritised.

The previous safeguarding minister, Rachel Maclean, had modern slavery on her official list of ministerial responsibilities but her successor, Mims Davies, has no mention of the crime on her list. Instead, modern slavery is listed at the bottom of the “illegal immigration and asylum” brief of immigration minister Tom Pursglove.

Under Theresa May, the government pledged to be world leaders in combating modern slavery but Braverman said last week that trafficking claims from “people gaming the system” were “derailing the UK’s policy on illegal migration”.

The shadow home secretary, Yvette Cooper, said: “The largest single group of modern slavery victims under the referral system last year were British children – including those who were exploited through county lines.

“The evidence shows the majority of exploitation takes place in the UK rather than across borders.

“The government should be treating this as an enforcement and safeguarding issue and taking stronger action against the crime of modern slavery wherever it takes place.”

Charities working with victims say characterising the crime as an illegal immigration issue is dangerous. More than a quarter of all people identified as potential modern slavery victims

are British, according to official statistics.

Olivia Field, head of policy at the British Red Cross, said: “Modern slavery is a crime that can impact people no matter where they are from or where they are in the world.

“From our work supporting people who have been through horrific experiences including sexual exploitation and human trafficking, we know there are urgent improvements needed to better protect and support survivors.

“So it doesn’t become any harder for people to get the help they need, we would urge the lens on tackling modern slavery to be a safeguarding one focused on protecting people impacted by this crime, as opposed to being treated as an immigration issue.”

Despite Braverman’s claims of people “gaming” the system, 97% of all modern slavery referrals concluded in the first half of this year were confirmed as genuine by the authorities.

The home secretary’s comments were contradicted by the chief executive of the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, Elysia McCaffrey, who said: “We don’t see people gaming the system ... What we see is vulnerable people who are being exploited by opportunists and criminals.”

Kate Roberts, head of policy at Focus on Labour Exploitation, said: “Modern Slavery is a serious crime which is carried out against individuals and to see it as an immigration matter is wrong and is risky.

“Preventing and addressing modern slavery should take a person centred approach – starting with safeguarding and ensuring the rights of potential victims. While restricted or insecure immigration status can be abused by exploiters who use immigration detention as a threat against seeking help from the authorities, this is only one of many tools traffickers use, as evidenced by the fact that many British people are victims of trafficking.”

In another sign that the government is no longer prioritising tackling the crime, there has been no independent anti-slavery commissioner in post since Sara Thornton left in April, despite it being a legal requirement since the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act in 2015.

A Home Office spokesperson said: "We are committed to tackling the heinous crime of modern slavery and in the UK we have a world-leading response. However, it is clear people are abusing our system when they have no right to be here, in order to frustrate their removal."