



Home Office

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Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for your email of 17 March to the Minister for Safeguarding about the deeply concerning report released by City and Hackney Safeguarding Partnership into the strip search of a 15-year-old schoolgirl (Child Q) by police officers in 2020. Your email has been passed to the Home Office's Direct Communications Unit for a reply.

This experience will have been traumatic for the child, her family and the community, and the impact upon her welfare should not be underestimated. Strip search is one of the most intrusive powers available to the police and the law is very clear that the use of police powers to search must be fair, respectful and without unlawful discrimination. Any use of strip search should be carried out in accordance with the law and with full regard for the welfare and dignity of the individual being searched, particularly if that individual is a child. If police judge it operationally necessary to strip search a child, they must do so in the presence of the child's appropriate adult.

The Government, and the public, rightly expect the highest standards from our police officers. The ability of the police to perform their core functions is dependent on their capacity to secure and maintain the confidence and support of the public for their actions.

This incident has been referred to the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), who have said that they are investigating alleged misconduct by the Metropolitan Police officers involved. At the current time, it is right both for public confidence and for due process that the Government does not intervene in the IOPC's decisions because it takes its decisions independently from the Government and the police.

The IOPC have said the investigation report, which examines whether legislation, policies and procedures were followed during the incident, is now being finalised and will be published shortly. It is the role of the IOPC to consider if the police officers involved have a case to answer for misconduct. If so, disciplinary proceedings would normally follow. We will consider any recommendations made for the Home Office as a result of these investigations very carefully.

The Metropolitan Police recently apologised for their actions and recognised that the search should never have occurred. They have indicated that whilst they await the findings of the IOPC investigation, they will work to refresh officers' and staff understanding of the policy for conducting strip searches and advice around dealing with schools, ensuring that children are treated as children. Further to this, the Metropolitan Police's Specialist Crime Review Group and Continuous Policing Improvement Command will take the recommendations on board for further learning. We will continue to work with the Metropolitan Police and the Mayor of London to ensure officers are held to the highest standards and are able to perform their core functions with the trust and confidence of the communities they serve.

Safeguards for the detention of children are clear; children and young people are a protected group with specific needs and vulnerabilities. Their treatment in detention is governed not only by domestic legislation but also by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which the UK has signed and ratified. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) Codes of Practice set out that any strip search of a child must be carried out by officers of the same sex, in private and with an appropriate adult present unless both the child and the appropriate adult agree otherwise. This must be carried out with respect to the dignity, sensitivity and vulnerability of the child in these circumstances, including in particular, their health, hygiene and welfare needs.

Nobody should be subject to the use of police powers because of their race, ethnicity or background and extensive safeguards such as statutory codes of practice and body-worn video exists to ensure that this does not happen.

More is being done to improve the scrutiny of police powers because transparency is vital to maintain confidence in policing. The Inclusive Britain Action Plan, published on 17 March, sets out the development of a new, national framework for the scrutiny of police powers at a local level in order to enhance trust and strengthen relations between police forces and the communities they serve. Already several forces including Norfolk, Suffolk and Thames Valley have developed independent strip search scrutiny panels, with further rollouts planned.

From December 2022, the Home Office will be publishing more detailed custody data as part of its annual Police Powers and Procedures statistical bulletin. This will include the number of strip searches carried out in police custody and will allow the public and Police and Crime Commissioners to hold forces to account for their use of these powers.

It is essential that frontline professionals recognise vulnerability in children and young people, regardless of the circumstances around any interaction. The Home Office have funded the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, delivering tailored training to social workers, health professionals, police, and safeguarding leads in schools. The Home Office-funded Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice programme (VKPP) shares the very best practice across forces. We also fund the College of Policing's Public Protection and Safeguarding Leadership programme which ensures senior leaders in policing have a strong understanding of vulnerability.

I trust this clarifies the Government's position.

Yours faithfully,

Stephen Gearing

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