

Ministers welcome pilot scheme to better support child victims of exploitation

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The Health, Justice and Education Ministers have welcomed Northern Ireland's inclusion in a pilot scheme which will strengthen protection for children at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation.

The Department of Health has received approval from the Home Office to establish a devolved National Referral Mechanism (NRM) decision making panel pilot in Northern Ireland.

The pilot scheme, which was launched across the UK in June 2021, will transfer responsibility for NRM decisions for child victims from the Home Office to specially trained local safeguarding teams, enabling faster, more child-focused decisions about protection and care.

Health Minister Mike Nesbitt said:

“This pilot represents a key milestone in the cross-departmental programme of work to address Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) in Northern Ireland.

“The Northern Ireland pilot will involve all five Health and Social Care Trusts and the Police Service of Northern Ireland in a panel coordinated by the Department of Health.

“The pilot will lead to the earlier identification of victims and aim to strengthen protection for children and young people who are identified to be potentially at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Criminal Exploitation.”

The pilot scheme, which already operates in 20 sites across the UK, will help develop the established partnerships and multi-agency coordination with safeguarding agencies in Northern Ireland, resulting in more integrated safeguarding responses at a local level.

The decision to join the pilot scheme was an initiative involving the Departments of Health, Justice and Education.

Justice Minister Naomi Long said:

“Expansion of this pilot to Northern Ireland will present a huge opportunity to improve understanding and awareness of Child Exploitation across the whole system. This is also a significant milestone in progressing the priorities set out in the cross-departmental, multi-agency CCE Action Plan.”

Education Minister Paul Givan said:

“I welcome this approach which will ensure those young people who have been identified as at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Criminal Exploitation are supported in the appropriate manner.”

Notes to editors:

1. The full announcement from the Home Office can be read [here](#) (external link opens in a new window / tab).
2. The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is the UK’s system for identifying victims of modern slavery. Referrals are made by first responding organisations which, in Northern Ireland, include Health and Social Care Trusts, Police, the Independent Guardian Service and Home office officials. Currently the Home Office establishes whether a child is a victim of modern slavery through a two-stage decision making process.
3. The NRM devolved decision-making pilot will establish a Northern Ireland panel where Health and Social Care Trusts and Police will take on responsibility for making these decisions through partnership with a range of agencies.
4. In September 2024, the Departments of Health, Justice and Education jointly launched [the Child Criminal Exploitation \(CCE\) Action Plan](#) to improve the response of government to the criminal exploitation of young people and to embed this within the child protection system.