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TX: 11.03.03 – WILL CHANGES TO THE CRIMINAL RECORDS BUREAU PUT VULNERABLE PEOPLE AT RISK?

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ROBINSON

Charities and voluntary groups met with the head of the Criminal Records Bureau yesterday. They were giving their response to proposals to try to improve it. The CRB was set up last March to vet the people who work with vulnerable children and adults but it was quickly swamped by the scale of the task - you may remember that pupils had to be sent home from school because of delays in checking their new teachers. Plans to improve the CRB rest on scaling back its work. Priority is to be given to checking those who work with children, checks on people employed in care homes are going to be delayed until next year and no date has been set for beginning background checks on home helps.

Clare Smith, from Leonard Cheshire, the charity providing care for people with disabilities emerged from yesterday's meeting saying that she was disappointed that all the effort is on making the task easier for the bureau rather than making it work better for the public.

SMITH

Many of the organisations there were concerned about the fact that these domiciliary care staff who work by themselves in people's homes with vulnerable people are no longer to be CRB checked at all at any level, which is very, very concerning. And we did raise the issue that if a minister is going to decide which groups of staff will or won't be checked and at what level, the decisions that have come so far have not been good decisions, certainly not good decisions for vulnerable people who are receiving care in their own home.

ROBINSON

Clare Smith from Leonard Cheshire. Lord Falconer is the minister responsible for the Criminal Records Bureau and I asked him why checks on home helps had been postponed indefinitely.

FALCONER

The position is we've tried to make the CRB able to cope with the checks it's now being asked to deal with. We focused on those who look after children, particularly those in schools, but all people working in residential care homes who start working there - i.e. new staff - have to be checked at the moment. We are determined to introduce checks on people who work in people's homes but there's no point in introducing it until the CRB is able to cope with the demand that that will give rise to. And these proposals that we've been consulting about are the means to make the CRB able to cope.

ROBINSON

Do you have any idea when the checks for home helps will start?

FALCONER

No but we hope within the next year.

ROBINSON

As I'm sure you know your critics say that policy is too often driven by a headline grabbing initiative and that in the aftermath of Soham it was announced that all teachers would be checked but that in fact an elderly person at home is more vulnerable than a child in school.

FALCONER

Well judgements have to be made about where you use your capacity. We've made the judgement that children should be protected, we've made the judgement that new entrants into the residential care home employment field should be checked because there's vulnerabilities there. We are completely committed to introducing checks on those who work in the home situation but we can only do it when we've got the capacity to do it and that's what these proposals are about.

ROBINSON

You keep saying that new entrants to care homes will be checked but of course people already working in care homes will not now be checked, I think it's until - is it March 2004?

FALCONER

October 2004 is the date. Yes because we said new entrants are the people that you need to check first. Again it's a question about how you use the capacity you've got. There is absolutely no point in saying you'll check everybody when the CRB is not able to cope with it.

ROBINSON

Now the agency itself is going to decide which applicant should receive higher level checks and I suppose that means, in effect, civil servants or ministers like yourself will decide because you will put the guidelines together. The charities say it's they who ought to decide.

FALCONER

Well approximately 80 or 90 per cent of the applications made at the moment are for enhanced checks - so that's both the criminal record of the applicant, if he or she has got any, and also asking local police forces where that person has lived are there any - is there any information from the police force that might give rise to concern - that's the enhanced check. The standard check is simply the previous criminal record. We aren't intending to change that approximate percentage - 80 to 90 per cent enhanced, the remainder standard - but what we are keen to do is to ensure that those people who in truth only merit a standard check do only get a standard check. For example, if builders come to do work in a school is it necessary to have an enhanced check? We don't think so - it should be standard. And there needs to be clarity about who gets what check.

ROBINSON

But what if the school does think so?

FALCONER

Well judgements have got to be made because there is a finite amount of capacity in the CRB.

ROBINSON

The Home Secretary has suggested that for those who work with the most vulnerable children that fingerprinting will be introduced or might be introduced so that charities can know that somebody is the person that they claim they are. Some of the charities are saying that they fear that this will put off people from becoming volunteers - is the fingerprinting going to go ahead?

FALCONER

Well again this is something that we're consulting about. We've made it absolutely clear it's only in those few cases where the applicant is going to foster or maybe adopt in certain circumstances children, we need to know what people's views are. We're extremely keen to make sure there is proper security for the children who are going to be looked after but again what are people's views about that - is that being too intrusive, are we going too far to protect children in those circumstances?

ROBINSON

The bureau's published service standards says that it will process within three weeks 9 out of 10 of the so-called enhanced disclosures, the kind of checks that a teacher needs, my understanding is that they're currently managing only 5 out of 10 within three weeks, when do you think they'll actually meet the target?

FALCONER

Well you're absolutely right it's not meeting that three week target, we think the critical thing at the moment is certainty, when will we get to the three week target I don't know but we are trying to do is to ensure that when you apply as a teacher or when you apply to a school there is broad reliability that you'll get your check back within five to six weeks.

ROBINSON

I guess if you had your time over you would do things very differently - is this a question of a task that you just thought would be easier or an agency that you just thought would be able to perform better or a bit of both?

FALCONER

We tried to do too much too early. We should have introduced the checks on a gradual basis, i.e. starting with a particular group, then moving on to the next group, as the CRB built up its capacity. The consequence of trying to do everything too early was we ended up in a situation where the CRB wasn't able to cope with the applications it received in the summer. We've now stabilised what the CRB does, it does double the number that were being done before March, it does it much more stably and much more quickly, we're now building up its capacity to deal with all the groups that we'd like it to deal with.

ROBINSON

The Home Office minister Lord Falconer.