

Knights of Saint Columba

Accrington Council 188

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Source Christian Institute

World

A loophole which allows sports coaches and religious figures to have sexual relationships with young people must be closed, a group of MPs has said.

Currently, children under the age of 18 are protected in law from being abused by those in a position of trust, and the law is particularly relevant for 16 and 17-year-olds, who are over the age of consent.

While the law protects them from being abused by adults in a position of authority such as teachers, social workers and police officers, it does not apply to sports coaches or church leaders.

Protecting young people

The Christian Institute has been calling on the Government to close the loophole since 1999.

In 2017, the Government said it would change the law to make it illegal for sports coaches to take advantage of 16 and 17-year-olds in their care, but backtracked on its decision the following year. It has subsequently committed to reviewing the Sexual Offences Act.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Safeguarding in Faith Settings has now launched an inquiry and is calling on the Ministry of Justice to widen the scope of the law.

A Government spokesman said: “we are looking at how the law around sexual offences is working, to check that it is protecting young people.”

Football coaches

It comes in the wake of a series of revelations about football coaches sexually abusing young people at the clubs they worked for.

Last year, Barry Bennell was charged with 50 offences during his time as a scout at Manchester City and Crewe Alexandria, and was later jailed for 31 years.

Former Newcastle United coach George Ormond was also jailed in 2018 for 20 years following a string of incidents over a 25-year period.

Churches

Revd Matthew Ineson told the Independent Inquiry into Child Sex Abuse how he was sexually abused by a church figure as a 16-year old.

He told The Telegraph he thought changes to the law are necessary, saying: “I think it’s spot on – I don’t see why religious figures should be exempt or excluded from it.

‘High time’

The Christian Institute’s Deputy Director Ciarán Kelly said: “We have been calling for this loophole to be closed for more than 20 years.

“It is high time the Government took this obvious step to help protect vulnerable teenagers from sexual exploitation.

“It makes no sense that a teacher is subject to these rules, but a sports coach or a youth leader is not.”

Improve safeguarding

The APPG, which is co-chaired by Sarah Champion, is calling for victims to come forward to give their testimonies as part of a call for evidence in October.

It is also asking professionals and organisations to submit evidence of how changes to the law might help improve safeguarding in the future.

Bernard Holden MBE JP

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