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False child abuse claims to be kept on file

Allegations to stay on record until retirement date

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ALL adults who work or volunteer with children must have abuse allegations made against them investigated by council officers and kept on file until they retire, even if they are totally groundless.

Local authorities are setting up databases to hold records of accu-

sations made about anyone from teachers and doctors to Scout leaders, priests and private tutors.

They are employing staff just to look into the claims – which can be made anonymously – who are required to contact police, social services or the adult's employer and then keep track of the case.

Details of the allegation will be kept on the accused's personnel file until they retire so they can be seen by potential employers. They will only be deemed innocent if they can prove it.

The system was introduced in the wake of the Soham murders to make sure authorities keep track

of anyone suspected of child abuse.

Critics argue that it gives too much power to unaccountable council officers, creates extra red tape for bosses and will lead to innocent professionals having their careers blighted by malicious claims. They also say it will put off many men from working with children for fear of being labelled a paedophile. At present, only two per cent of teachers of the youngest primary school pupils are male.

The plan comes on top of the new vetting system being implemented for everyone who works with under-16s, the Independent

Safeguarding Authority, which will lead to 11.3 million adults having their backgrounds checked.

Professor Frank Furedi, a sociologist at the University of Kent, said: "Those who are accused may become the lifetime victims of these allegations. It then creates an incentive to make those sorts of accusations by people who know it can affect someone's career."

"This will play into the hands of those who believe there is no smoke without fire."

John Dunford, the general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, added: "There's got to be a balance

between child safety and the duty to look after employees. There are certainly a disturbing number of allegations which have to be dealt with, and they are very difficult for head teachers to look at." Councils, police and employers have long held files on allegations made against employees, but the investigation into the killings of schoolgirls Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells by Ian Huntley in 2002 uncovered flaws in how the information was being used.

He had been suspected of carrying out a string of sex offences but was allowed to work as a school caretaker, befriending the girls he

went on to murder, because police and council bodies had neither kept nor shared relevant information on him.

After the Bichard Inquiry into the murders, which called for the creation of the new nationwide vetting body, the Government published guidance that told local authorities to do more to investigate allegations of harm of children.

Since then they have been recruiting "local authority designated officers" to investigate any claim against any adult who works with children. They are being told that there are four possible outcomes for each claim "sub-

stantiated", "unsubstantiated", "unfounded" or "malicious".

The guidance states that "unsubstantiated" does not imply guilt or innocence, just a lack of evidence, while for a claim to be classified as "unfounded" or "malicious" the council must have evidence to disprove the allegation.

A spokesman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said: "It is quite right that records of all allegations are kept on file for an appropriate time. This saves the need for unnecessary reinvestigations, and provides concrete evidence relating to an allegation rather than rumour or hearsay."