Child sexual exploitation in Rotherham

The Communities and Local Government Committee took oral evidence yesterday from the out-going Chief Executive and from the Strategic Director of Children and Young People’s Services at Rotherham Council on child sexual exploitation in the borough. The session showed frightening levels of child sexual exploitation and my Committee decided to write to you highlighting a number of matters. After our meeting you made a written statement to the House announcing your decision to appoint Louise Casey CB to carry out an inspection of the Council’s exercise of its functions on governance, children and young people, and taxi and private hire licensing.

We welcome the inquiry and I am pleased that it will include several of the matters we wanted to raise—specifically, the adequacy of scrutiny by councillors and the arrangements for ‘whistle-blowers’. On the former, the hearing yesterday raised the need for much better training for council members in both managing and scrutinising children’s services and child sexual exploitation cases.

In your statement you said that Louise Casey would examine whether Rotherham “took and continues to take appropriate action against staff guilty of gross misconduct”. Can you clarify the scope of her inspection on this point, please? Will she be looking at (a) the procedures in place to report, investigate and deal with misconduct, (b) the actions and responsibilities of individual staff and (c) what action to take in respect of staff responsible for misconduct. Clearly there needs to be a comprehensive and impartial examination of the conduct of staff at Rotherham. The evidence we took yesterday highlighted concerns about senior staff up to and including chief executive with responsibilities for investigating and tackling child sexual exploitation in the period 1997 to 2013 who no longer work for Rotherham. They need to be subject to review as the current staff will be. To make the examination of these staff both thorough and fair we consider that there has to be a process established which includes an independent element. I am copying this letter to Cllr David Sparks, Chairman of the LGA as the LGA, working in combination with the appropriate professional bodies, would be well placed both to devise arrangements for further personnel investigations and to advise on the need and scope of further disciplinary and managerial action to be taken in respect of those still in employment and any necessary referral to a professional body. Given the extent of public concerns and the need for credibility of the senior staff with past responsibilities in Rotherham we urge Ms Casey to examine arrangements for the review of the conduct of senior staff who have changed employment.
Another area which needs to be addressed by Ms Casey was the lack of benchmarks and national standards in respect of child sexual exploitation. We formed the view that Rotherham, and probably many other authorities, were left to themselves with undesirable consequences. In addition, some of the Ofsted reports on Rotherham's children's services at best provided mixed and confusing signals which compounded the obliviousness to child sexual exploitation. The Government needs to be clear that benchmarks, national standards and guidance are now in place and to ensure that Ofsted can do the job the public expects it to do.

One area where your statement is silent is on resources. On Rotherham, while the authority has improved its performance, it is clear that its resources are stretched to the limit covering children currently at risk. Of the 1,400 children estimated to have been exploited between 1997 and 2013 possibly around 15% of their names are known to the Council. We heard from the officers a commendable determination to review all past files and to identify these victims. But that is a massive exercise. Moreover, victims identified will need support and counselling to address mental health, addiction and other problems. We encouraged the Chief Executive as a matter of urgency to identify in detail the resources needed to deal with this work. Will you be in apposition to respond positively to a request for these resources?

In the light of the revelations at Rotherham we warmly welcome your decision to write to all the leaders of principal councils asking them to consider the implications of the Jay report for their own authority. They now need to benchmark their services. The Deputy Children’s Commissioner’s 2012 report found that the sexual exploitation of children was widespread. But the chilling message that came home to the Committee from yesterday’s session with Rotherham was the scale of the problem. Rotherham would appear not to be an outlier but representative of an endemic problem and a frightening pointer to the scale of the problem. The Government in responding to Louise Casey’s report needs to be clear about the extent of the problem and it is going to have to address what resources will be provided to investigate, tackle and put right the damage caused by child sexual exploitation.

I should be grateful to have a response to put to the Committee when the House returns after the conference recess.

I am also copying this letter to Cllr Paul Lakin, the acting Leader of Rotherham Council, and Martin Kimber, the Chief Executive as well as Rt Hon Kevin Barron MP, Rt Hon John Healey MP and Sarah Champion MP.

Clive Betts MP
Chair, Communities and Local Government Committee