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Mr Clive Betts MP  
Chair, Communities and Local Government Committee  

**Child sexual exploitation in Rotherham**  

Thank you for your letter of 11 September and the good work the Committee is undertaking to understand and help address what has happened in Rotherham. Such scrutiny and challenge is essential if the response is to be robust. The Home Secretary, Secretary of State for Education and I have written to all local authorities and chief constables urging them to ensure they have adequate systems in place to avoid a repeat of the serious failings that occurred in Rotherham.  

The independent inspection will be carried out under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, as amended by the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014. As the statute requires, the inspection will assess Rotherham council’s compliance with its best value duty, in this case in relation to its governance functions, its functions relating to children and young people and to taxi and private hire licensing. If I am satisfied that there is evidence the council is failing to comply with its best value duty, the 1999 Act gives me the power to statutorily intervene.  

The best value duty is the requirement for the council to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The focus of the inspection, therefore, will be on the arrangements the authority has in place for exercising its functions within the remit of the inspection, and on how in practice they are being operated, rather than specifically on the conduct of individual members of staff. Clearly, however, how individuals have in practice acted, and the council’s actions, or indeed, failures to act, in relation to staff misconduct, may provide evidence to inform the report’s conclusions in relation to the council’s compliance with the best value duty.  

I have asked Louise Casey, in addition to her statutory inspection, to highlight issues that councils, police forces and the justice system generally should consider in their work on child sexual exploitation, and to report on these and any further matters which might help councils and others to improve their services particularly for children and young people. There will be lessons to be learnt that can help better protect vulnerable children everywhere, not just in Rotherham. I set this out in detail in a Written Ministerial Statement to the House of Commons on 10 September. I imagine Louise’s enquiry will consider the
effectiveness of Member scrutiny and may well bear on the question of effective training you have raised.

You ask for a clearer set of benchmarks and national standards around child sexual exploitation. The statutory guidance *Working Together to Safeguard Children* sets out what is required of local authorities and their partners to keep children safe, including from sexual exploitation. Ofsted have announced a thematic review of how local authorities respond to that guidance in delivering services to children at risk of exploitation. In addition, the Education Secretary has asked the Chief Social Worker to consider the lessons for local authorities from Professor Jay’s report and any implications for her Department’s programme of social work reform.

Ofsted guidance to inspectors is clear that both *Working Together to Safeguard Children* and all supplementary guidance (including that on the sexual exploitation of children published in 2009) is the benchmark and national standard with which authorities must comply. Ofsted are taking the findings of the Jay report very seriously and responded quickly to the Ministerial request for swift assurance about the safety of children. They have already commenced a thematic inspection on the sexual exploitation of children.

I agree that there is a pressing need to identify victims and to provide effective support to those who have suffered. Urgent work is underway across government to understand how we might most effectively support victims through the agencies that comprise the Rotherham Safeguarding Children Board.

You will be aware that the Home Secretary is now chairing a group of Secretaries of State to lead our response to these appalling events; the measures that I have summarised in this letter will be reviewed as part of the Secretaries of State Group to ensure we are taking the right action at national, regional and local levels in response to the risk of children being sexually exploited. This Group will build on the existing work of the National Group to tackle sexual violence against children and vulnerable people. With the Prime Minister’s support we will oversee the actions necessary at all levels to ensure such failings do not occur again.

You will also be aware that, following receipt of an advice notice from Sir Michael Wilshaw on 30 September during Ofsted’s on-going inspection of Rotherham’s children’s social services, the Education Secretary has, this week, issued a draft direction to Rotherham council and intends to appoint a Children’s Social Care Commissioner. The Commissioner will examine the nature and scale of the problems, ensure the council takes the immediate steps necessary to stabilise and secure the performance of their children’s social care functions and review the Council’s leadership capability and capacity to drive forward the required changes.

I am copying this letter to the chairs of Local Safeguarding Children Boards who will want to consider the effectiveness of multi-agency arrangements locally for tackling exploitation. This letter has also been copied to Cllr Paul Larkin 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.
Signatures with accompanying text:

Signature: [Signature]

RT HON ERIC PICKLES MP