

Children: Sexual Exploitation

Question

3.31 pm

Asked By The Lord Bishop of Leicester

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to ensure the safety of children, especially of children in the care of local authorities, from being groomed for sexual exploitation.

The Lord Bishop of Leicester: My Lords, following the recent cases of child sexual exploitation that we have seen in the media, I am glad to have this opportunity to raise this important topic today. I very much look forward to hearing contributions from all those who are here. What I have to say arises partly from my own pastoral experience as a parish priest and a bishop and partly from my more recent experience as the chair of the trustees of the Children's Society.

As noble Lords will be aware, child sexual exploitation, as defined by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2009, is sexual exploitation of children or young people under the age of 18 that involves putting the child or young person in exploitative situations, contexts or relationships in which they receive something, whether it is food, accommodation, money or drugs, in return for performing and/or having others perform on them some form of sexual activity.

Sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition of the exploitation, such as being asked to post sexual images on the internet or on mobile phones without immediate payment or gain. Recent reports by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre and Barnardo's have indicated the use of the internet in child exploitation as a growing issue. The Barnardo's report, *Puppet on a String*, which I commend to your Lordships, has highlighted that a number of primary school children have admitted to meeting someone whom they previously met only online.

In all these cases, the person doing the exploiting exercises some form of power over the child or young person by means of their age, gender, intellect or other factors. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common and can involve the child or young person being plied with gifts, alcohol and drugs, which often form part of the grooming process. This all helps to explain why it is often very difficult for some children or young people to accept the true nature of their relationship and to take the risk of exposing the perpetrator.

Any child or young person may be at risk of sexual exploitation, regardless of their gender, race or social background. However, we unfortunately know that factors such as living in care or being runaways or having mental health problems all increase a young person's vulnerability to sexual exploitation. In

particular, we know that the link with running away or going missing is an extremely strong indicator of risk. I shall return to that point later.

As we know, child exploitation has devastating consequences for the individual being exploited. It has an extremely damaging effect on a child's or young person's self-esteem, mental health and, indeed, lifelong ability to form secure relationships, yet, in spite of this, there are no national statistics to map the prevalence of child sexual exploitation. This lack of data works against the children of our country, as it keeps a vital child protection issue somewhat obscured.

I want to draw attention to five issues in particular. First, children of course have a right to be protected from sexual exploitation. This is enshrined in law at national, European and international levels. In this country, local safeguarding children boards are responsible for co-ordinating local responses to child sexual exploitation, yet initial research from the University of Bedfordshire has demonstrated that many local safeguarding children boards still do not consider child sexual exploitation as a priority and have failed to identify resources or plans to address this, with less than a quarter of the boards even having a protocol for child sexual exploitation. This leads to a group of very vulnerable young people being left without adequate and timely services and the support that they so desperately need. I urge the Minister to look into this issue seriously and to let us know what measures he can put in place to rectify this situation.

Secondly, I want to mention the inadequate training for professionals across the front line. Many professionals who work with young people remain unfamiliar with the risks or indicators of sexual exploitation and show little understanding of the issue. Indeed, they often do not know how to support a young person in an exploitative situation who is going through the courts with a case against their abusers. This situation is often exacerbated by the fact that many young people are not willing to identify themselves as being exploited or even to recognise that they are at risk of harm. In keeping with this lack of understanding, the behaviour of children and young people affected is often identified as disruptive rather than indicative of need and they are often met with punitive rather than welfare responses. Research from the Children's Society has shown that victims aged 16 and 17 are particularly unlikely to receive a safeguarding response. These are the young people who are often seen as a low priority, despite the law stating explicitly that they should be responded to and safeguarded as children until they are aged 18. The lack of data and awareness of the issue of child sexual exploitation has led to a significant lack of resources for specialist support services for children and their families.

Thirdly, I take this opportunity to raise the issue of the inadequacies of current law enforcement and police responses to child sexual exploitation cases. These remain primarily reactive rather than proactive. The prosecution relies heavily on the young person to make a complaint and to give evidence in the court against their exploiter. The process of grooming to which children are subjected and the use of threats and coercion make it extremely difficult for

them to go through the criminal justice process. The sexual exploitation of children is, of course, a form of child abuse and should be seen as a child protection issue. It is extremely important that investigations are carried out by officers who are trained in child protection procedures with families showing risk indicators for child sexual exploitation. It is vital that the police work closely with partner agencies to develop a co-ordinated response to ensuring that the welfare and safety of the child is paramount. What is most ironic is that children aged 10 years or over still remain criminally liable for the commission of a prostitution offence such as loitering or soliciting. This is clearly at odds with the intention to make it clear that sexually exploiting children is a form of child abuse. Often it is the fear of being prosecuted under this legislation that prevents children from coming forward to seek help to get out of exploitative situations. I urge the Minister to ensure that it is explicitly clear that any child who has been sexually exploited is supported through the justice system, which is meant to protect them, and that their exploiters are dealt with accordingly.

Fourthly, I want to make a point about the importance of co-ordination and joint working between local authorities and police forces to tackle child sexual exploitation across boundaries. Effective cross-department and multidisciplinary working can make a huge impact on safeguarding children, especially those in care, who are often failed due to a breakdown in communication between different agencies or who get lost in the gaps between them. The Government and local authorities have a duty, of course, to protect all children, especially those who rely on them as corporate parents.

Finally, I urge the Government to respond to the needs of these vulnerable children. I call on the Minister to take the necessary steps to ensure the safety of children, especially those in the care of local authorities, from being groomed for sexual exploitation. In particular, I hope that the Minister will pay close attention to the link between running away and sexual exploitation. I fear that, despite great efforts in recent years to develop statutory guidance and an action plan on runaways, this issue has fallen down the list of political priorities at the DfE. I hope that the Minister will reassure us that this is not the case and that action is being taken to prevent children from being exposed to such horrific abuse, which is happening in far too many of our towns and cities today.