



# THE MP WHO WON'T BE SILENCED FROM TALKING ABOUT CSE

Sarah Champion resigned as shadow equalities minister after writing an article in *The Sun* claiming Britain had a problem with Pakistani men abusing white girls. The MP for Rotherham – where the scale of child sexual exploitation was revealed in the Jay report – talks to **Anthony Dhadwal** about improvements in Rotherham, how the Government is failing social care... and her recent controversy

***Your article in The Sun caused a fair amount of controversy. Do you think your main message was lost in the noise that followed?***

The reason I went on the *Today* programme and the *Victoria Derbyshire* show and did *The Sun* article is because I am very aware that there are still vulnerable children being exploited and that in some cases we haven't dealt with the identifier of ethnicity of these perpetrators. It is annoying that it became 'is Sarah a racist?'

It got hijacked, which gave the far right an open goal to spread their message of hatred and Islamophobia to stir up racial tensions. We still haven't dealt with the issue of ethnicity being an identifier and we need to get this debate back and own it.

***What issues, in Rotherham, have been dealt with since the Alexis Jay report?***

When the Jay report came out it clearly showed in black and white the scale of the abuse, and it meant the police couldn't sweep it under the carpet. But in terms of support, not a lot has changed. There are still vulnerable children and women, who are often mothers themselves, not getting the support that they need.

***Compensation is surely one mechanism of support, though one which seems to be routinely denied to survivors of sexual abuse due to technical legalities, especially in cases involving grooming. Is the Government failing these people?***

Absolutely. When I was door-knocking for the election I came upon a woman who told me she had been abused, had gone to the police and her abusers were subsequently jailed. But she was denied compensation by the Criminal Injury Compensation Authority (CICA) as she had been 'complicit' in her abuse.

This Government agency is denying survivors of child abuse the compensation that is rightfully theirs because they apparently 'consented'. The law is very clear: children can't consent to their own abuse.

Since then I've been writing to the Government and recently challenged a minister in parliament on this. The Government has agreed to review the guidelines and I will keep pushing until they act.

But there are two further specific issues that they need to address. Firstly, part of the grooming process has involved victims being coerced into committing criminal acts so that

perpetrators can use it as leverage over them and to discourage them from seeking help from the police. This is now being used against these victims by the CICA. The Crown Prosecution Service recognise this but CICA still doesn't.

Secondly, CICA have said that any form of abuse that happens under the same family home before 1979 won't get compensation. So, some survivors will be denied compensation before they even start.

***Let's talk prevention. What extra methods are being deployed now to stop routes into child sexual exploitation (CSE)?***

We've been helped enormously by Barnardo's on this. After the Jay report, a team was formed comprising social workers from Barnardo's, the police and the council. This really helped the police and the council to understand the dynamics of the crime but also to be victim focused.

There is also a special team set up that goes into schools to educate about signs of CSE, what to look for and how to report it.

We also have the NSPCC that goes into primary schools and discusses abuse with children. I've joined them on occasions and was amazed that primary school children already know what is appropriate touching and kissing and what isn't – but they don't know how to report it. So, the NSPCC and other charities teach them how to report it, such as find a trusted parent and calling Childline.

***Are these extra methods readily available and being utilised nationwide?***

No, I'd love it if it was. The sadness is that these resources only go in after there is a big court case on CSE. My argument is that we should have the resource across the country as prevention should be the aim. Unfortunately, it is patchy right now.

***Are Rotherham's children safer than before and what needs to be improved?***

I am confident we are in a better position but we must remember we are coming from a very low base. It is a three-pronged approach of prevention, action and resource.

It's about prevention of CSE and recognising signs of child abuse in all its forms. Then it's about being victim focused on CSE, not just talking about it. Finally, it is about having the resources to address the crime.

A message that has been hard to get across in Rotherham is that we must

understand a lot of victims of CSE present themselves in different forms.

For example, we can get victims of CSE that have children, who may be in need due to whatever reason. So, a social worker might go in to protect the child but not adopt a 'whole family approach', of seeing the mother as a victim too.

Another is that in some cases you can have a child that is 'kicking off' and wanting to leave their family, but is a victim of CSE and is being coerced into leaving their family home to be placed somewhere else. The perpetrators of CSE know it is even easier to exploit a child when they are away from their family unit.

***From social workers' perspective, they may say the profession doesn't have the resources to allow for this kind of reflective thinking due to austerity cuts?***

And they would be mostly right. A lot of this does come down to the bottom line of Government funding. The pressure on social workers is massive as they have limited resources internally to do their job.

But also, because all their early warning/support systems – the Sure Starts, youth services, mental health projects and community outreach – are gone or going. This means that social workers (or the police) have become the last resort, they are bought in at crisis point and I completely understand that there is no time to do the maintenance work.

***What did you think of the UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing study revealing over half of social workers intend to leave the profession because of deteriorating working conditions?***

The Government clearly aren't doing enough. I don't think most people understand the level of deprivation, abuse and desperation that some families are trying to survive under.

To be frank, I didn't want to know either. I would rather bob along in my middle-class-everything-is-lovely life. It's almost like there are two parallel universes and social workers are expected to live in this dark and desperate world trying to supply service, while carrying massive caseloads, without the resource or professional support and supervision that one would normally expect in such circumstances.

The most alarming thing is that this study along with other recent research shows the situation is getting worse.

***Does the media have a greater role to play in this situation?***

When there is a horrendous crime of some kind I question why social workers are always the scapegoat in these cases and why we are not angrier at the perpetrators. There seems to be a witch-hunt every time there is a serious case review to blame either social workers or the police, rather than looking at how to prevent the perpetrators. As a country, we need to have a rethink.

***What impact will lifting the public sector pay cap have?***

I have yet to meet a social worker or police officer who enters the profession for the money. They do it to help people and not giving them the resources to do it is appalling. It seems providing the necessary resource would help stop the increasing number of social workers leaving the profession as the *UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing* study highlights.

The situation we are in is bonkers and to think a one to two per cent pay rise will solve the structural inadequacies we have is naïve.

***What are you working on now to help prevent CSE?***

Dare2Care is an initiative which brings together around 50 charities, academics, professional bodies, parents and young people to make a cultural change. One of the things that we all agreed on was the importance of relationship education in primary schools. We need to teach tolerance and to prevent hate crime.

The Government has accepted this and put it into the Children's and Social Work Bill. My job is to see it implemented and rolled out.

Consultation for this should have been done in the summer for implementation in 2018/19, but the Government has yet to make a start, so we are pressing them hard to get it back on track.

***Is 2018/19 still an achievable target?***

It's possible. We've failed children for generations so this needs to happen. As long as it is actually and properly implemented, then I can accept it slipping for six months. We are trying to make the politicians and decision-makers understand that legislation without resource behind it is just words on paper.