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Grooming Gangs

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Question for Short Debate

 4.30pm

Asked by

Baroness Cox [□](#)

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To ask Her Majesty's Government what progress has been made in the prevention of grooming gangs in Rotherham and elsewhere; and what assistance they have offered to victims and their families.

Baroness Cox [□](#)

(CB)

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My Lords, I am profoundly grateful to all noble Lords speaking in this debate and to many other noble Lords who have expressed their support but are unable to be here today.

This is a sensitive and complex subject, which is important to raise on behalf of so many women and girls who have endured horrific crimes and who are still waiting to receive the support, protection and compensation they so desperately need. In Rotherham, hundreds of children were sexually exploited between 1997 and 2013. Girls as young as 11 were raped by multiple attackers, trafficked to other towns and cities, and abducted and beaten. Some were doused in petrol and threatened with being set alight, while others were threatened with guns, made to watch brutally violent rapes and warned they would “be next” if they told anyone.

Repeated calls have been made for the Government to provide sufficient resources to support victims and survivors. Yet still, in October last year, Rotherham Abuse Counselling Service had 260 people on its waiting list, with an average waiting time of seven months. Additional funding is clearly needed for children and young people's services to meet the needs of victims. To quote Sarah Champion, MP for Rotherham:

“If there had been an earthquake affecting the lives of 1,400 children in Rotherham, we would have got emergency funding from the Government to help with their recovery. However, with no such money forthcoming for child abuse, we are largely leaving victims and survivors to get on with the recovery themselves”.—[*Official Report, Commons, 5/2/19; col. 304.*]

Can the Minister therefore say whether Her Majesty's Government will increase their funding to support victims of grooming gangs, many of whom endure long waiting times to access mental health services, at the very time when they say they need it most? Will they provide additional funding as a matter of urgency to facilitate multi-agency support for victims involved with legal investigations?

Child sexual exploitation occurs in many places. Some estimate that grooming gangs operate in 73 towns, from Plymouth to Liverpool, from Cambridge to Glasgow. However, there is currently no single dataset that distinguishes between “grooming gang offences” and other forms of child sexual abuse, many of which occur in families and are unreported. This means that specific

statistics are difficult to ascertain.

However, we know that between April 2017 and March 2018 the police recorded over 16,000 cases of rape of children under the age of 16 in England and Wales.

This implies 44 child rapes per day. Ministry of Justice statistics over the same period suggest that few of these rapes resulted in a criminal conviction. In 2017, only 544 rapists were convicted. What is more, victims and their families often have to endure lengthy delays and uncertainty, both before and after court hearings. In 2017 the median time from offence to completion for cases of child rape was 2,115 days. That is close to six years. It is important to stress that these figures do not necessarily relate to grooming gang offences, but the scale of abuse and the time it takes to prosecute offenders raise serious questions about the criminal justice system's ability to meet the needs of victims.

I have had the painful privilege of being alongside and trying to help some of those who have suffered horrific abuse by grooming gangs. They have described, in heart-wrenching detail, the vulnerability of young girls to persistent, brutal and repeated rape. Noble Lords may be aware of the case of Sarah—not her real name—which has been reported as one of the worst sex grooming cases on record. She describes how she was kidnapped aged 15, imprisoned in a house, forced to learn the Koran and beaten when she made mistakes. She was held as a sex slave for 12 years and was repeatedly raped by different members of the grooming gang. She had three forced Sharia marriages, eight forced abortions and two live births. Her abusers referred to her as “white trash”. They forced her to wear Islamic dress and permitted her to speak only Urdu and Punjabi. She has not received the help she needs from social services and is frequently suicidal.

Noble Lords might also be aware of the case of Caitlin Spencer—another pseudonym—who had the courage to write of her experiences to try to help other vulnerable young girls. Her book, *Please, Let Me Go*, was recommended in the *Sunday Times* as a bestseller. The book is in your Lordships' Library.

Caitlin has described to me how, from the age of 14, she was groomed, sexually exploited and trafficked around this country by gangs of men. She said:

“I have flashbacks all the time. It started when I was so young and to be honest, I'm not even sure it's over. They have done so much damage to me—emotionally, physically, psychologically—that I think I am probably broken beyond all repair”.

Given that Caitlin still sees her abusers driving their taxis with impunity and that other victims similarly see perpetrators living freely and intimidating them, what more will the Government do to bring these perpetrators to justice?

Caitlin did not receive the help that she needed following her horrendous trauma. She had to fund her own psychotherapy, with help from friends. The same is true for many others. I gather that the Government have recently allocated up to £12 million in funding sexual violence support services, yet the estimated scale of abuse means that each victim would receive the equivalent of only £48 each year. What steps are being taken to ensure adequate support for the victims of these horrific traumas?

The majority of Caitlin's abusers were men of Pakistani origin. Likewise, in Rotherham, according to the Government's own findings, abusers came largely from

the Pakistani heritage community. Evidence collated by Sikh Youth UK suggests that cases of abuse against young Sikh females by grooming gangs have also been perpetrated by those primarily of Pakistani or Muslim heritage. If media headlines are to be believed, the same is also true for the horrors perpetrated in Telford, Rochdale, Oxfordshire and a growing list of other places.

I must emphasise that that does not mean that all abusers fit the same profile. Child sexual exploitation is not exclusive to any single culture, community, race or religion. However, when it comes to understanding the past and what can be done to prevent future cases, we must be able to have an honest debate. We cannot betray the victims and their families by shying away from the facts.

Over the course of decades, not enough was done to stop these tragedies in Rotherham and other towns. Council staff, social workers and the police allowed the mass gang rape of children to continue. It seems it was far less politically complicated to keep quiet. Many victims did not receive support because of the state's reluctance to interfere in supposed cultural practices. Agencies downplayed ethnic or religiously identified dimensions of abuse. They also applied generic labels such as “Asian” to the perpetrators, which is a source of great concern to Asians who would never indulge in or condone such horrible crimes.

In the tragic cases of child sexual abuse by Roman Catholics or Anglicans, there is no inhibition about identifying these faith traditions, yet there appears to be a degree of censorship when it comes to identifying abusers who call themselves Muslim, or who use warped interpretations of Islam to justify their abhorrent acts. This kind of political correctness is a source of profound frustration and hurt for those, such as Sarah, who have been abducted, raped and trafficked by grooming gangs. Presumably, it is fear of

accusations of racism or Islamophobia that has resulted in the religious identity of these abusers being hidden. However, it is important to recognise reality, because this characteristic often affects the nature of the abuse and suffering inflicted. It is also to be hoped that Muslim leaders will take ownership of policies to prevent these atrocities perpetrated by some Muslims bringing such suffering to vulnerable girls and shame on their faith. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that agencies are not inhibited in the protection of vulnerable women and children by cultural sensitivities or fear of being labelled Islamophobic?

Many victims also report feeling let down by the police and social services. They have often been met with a lack of understanding and feel that their stories are not believed. Some are told that they “brought it on themselves” or that they “must have consented” to being raped. This is profoundly disturbing. The success of prosecutions depends on witnesses and survivors coming forward and testifying. Young girls who have already suffered so much must not be deterred from reaching out for help. Can the Minister therefore clarify the practical measures that are in place to support those who have the courage to speak up, and can she say what is being done to ensure that convictions are obtained and justice achieved?

The scale of suffering far exceeds the preventive measures and support for victims that are currently in place. Until comprehensive action is taken, politicians’ promises of “never again” will continue to remain unfulfilled and vulnerable girls will continue to suffer in ways that would make our suffragettes turn in their graves.

🕒 4.39pm

Baroness Newlove

(Con)

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My Lords, I had little notice of this debate’s time limit of three minutes so I will not go round the houses. I must say that the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, said everything that I believe in. I have met so many victims of this horrendous crime. It saddens me that we label everybody a different sort of victim in all this. Abuse is abuse; it does not matter how you label it.

I have worked closely with Sammy Woodhouse and Louise Haigh, the shadow Policing Minister. Unfortunately, even today, the victims we have highlighted who appeared in the press—we know the cases and the offenders—are still suffering the same abuse but, this time, by the criminal justice system and local authorities. Will my noble friend say whether we can use modern slavery legislation to be more effective in looking into perpetrators? We have lots of county lines and issues around child protection but we are going through the same issue. These victims suffer on a daily basis. There is a lot of internal fighting because they are not getting the correct support; that costs them a lot of money which they cannot afford. I have also met the parents from these terrible families. They feel ostracised because they are worried about their children, but their behaviour is not looked at; it is then labelled as bad parenting.

I visited Operation Stovewood in 2015. I was surprised at how few police officers were on the case but very appreciative of the excellent work they were trying to do. It was hit and miss but we cannot window dress an issue that needs to be thought of as a long-term process. Some of the victims who have been abused and had children by the offenders are being sent to parenting classes to understand what is going on; they cannot interact with the classes, so are labelled as hard people to talk to. The thought of that has never left me. Of course the victims will not interact with the father of the child because he has raped, abused and used them. What is the mentality in saying that better parenting is needed? The victims then self-harm because everybody is saying that it must be their fault—but they want to be good mothers to their children.

Indeed, as we speak, Sammy Woodhouse is facing a huge issue with a local authority. It has gone into a prison to see if the father of her son wants to have care proceedings, so that he can have contact with their son. He was jailed for 35 years. She had no knowledge of this. We must look in this debate at having synergy in all the court processes. We might have the criminal court process but at the end of the day, the family courts do not synergise. As I step down now as Victims’ Commissioner, there is a lot of evidence that we need to look at inquiries into the family courts to see what they are doing to protect the victims of these abusers. More importantly, we must fully understand and support

both victims and families. Moving them away does not support them; it hinders them because the perpetrators and the rest of the gangs will follow them.

I would like to know whether police officers are getting the funding they need to carry out these processes to stop more victims being abused. Most importantly, I found when I met police officers that they had put in an application for a fusion centre, representing a multi-agency approach, but it was turned down. I would like the Government to look into more funding.

🕒 4.43pm

Lord Campbell-Savours

(Lab)

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My Lords, in a three-minute, much-truncated contribution, I want to deal with the money issue. I understand that Rotherham's expenditure on child social care increased by 90% between 2010 and 2016, and that, in the current year, it is having to spend a further £27 million over and above its 2015-16 budget. Where will the money come from?

In a Commons debate on 5 February, Nadhim Zahawi was forced to admit that the council would have to pay the lion's share, at a cost to other services. In 2015-16, the Government paid £750,000 to deal with local pressures. They are setting up two national reviews into funding long-term children's services and into needs and resources—what I call mañana money. They are establishing an assessment on demand arising out of Operation Stovewood, an NCA inquiry into exploitation by criminal gangs. Some £4 million is being allocated nationally for innovation and child exploitation services. This is simply not enough. The crisis is national, not only in Rotherham. The Government should be spending substantially more money in this area.

Sarah Champion has championed the position of people in Rotherham on this matter. In the debate on 5 February, she said:

“If MPs query what the extra money I am requesting is actually needed for, then I beg them to visit their local children's social care teams and listen to what social workers say”.

In a very moving contribution on behalf of her constituents, she also said:

“I therefore beseech the Minister to recognise the value in children's care services and recognise that every child in this country deserves an opportunity to thrive, and that that takes persistent sustained and ambitious intervention from Government to achieve”.

She asked:

“Will the Minister agree today to ask the Chancellor to meet this shortfall in the spending review?”.—[*Official Report, Commons, 5/2/19; cols. 306-07.*]

Finally, on the question of the review, I want to refer to some council taxes which the Minister might have in mind. In Rotherham a former council house in Band C, valued at £53,000, pays £1,528 per annum in council tax. In Westminster a Band H flat in Knightsbridge, worth £120 million, pays £1,507 a year. It is a disgrace. The money is there; the money is in London and it should be transferred out to the provinces to help in the areas where there are major difficulties.

🕒 4.47pm

Lord Pickles

(Con)

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My Lords, we have had two very good briefings for this debate, one from the Library and another from Sarah Champion. I am very grateful for the points she made in her briefing, in particular with regard to the fusion centre. The Government should perhaps relook at this multi-disciplinary approach.

I have some responsibility for this, in that I took the decision to put the commissioners into Rotherham and I asked Louise Casey to do the report. I do not regret that for a moment; we all owe her a great debt. I still think it would be worthwhile re-reading what she said because we have taken too narrow a view of this. What we saw in Rotherham, and have seen in other parts of the country, is a complete breakdown of governance and of local government. Local government and national government are there to protect people, not to abandon them. The noble Baroness referred to some of the perpetrators who called the victims “white scum”. They are not the only ones. The people in charge in Rotherham regarded those girls as not worth looking at or protecting, and not worth thinking about. She is quite right to say that they also had racist views and stereotypes about people of Pakistani origin. It was because they held those racist views that they were too frightened to take issue with people of that origin.

There are four things that we need to do. I do not disagree with anything concerning compensation for the victims but we need to recognise that this is a more widespread problem. We need to root it out. We need to look at the root causes of it and, in particular, to recognise that there must be a multidisciplinary approach. We can see that social services, the health service and the police are working together but, to be frank, we need to recognise that the granting of a taxi licence or a fast food licence is just as important. When the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, asked an Oral Question, the noble Lord, Lord Blunkett, made the profound point that we might be able to control taxis in one local authority, but if the number of taxis in another local authority is growing, there needs to be a look right across. In terms of bringing this under control, the number of taxis was brought in. Next, we need to increase the esteem of those young girls and be positive about it. Finally, we need to tackle this within the family.

🕒 4.50pm

Viscount Falkland

(CB)

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My Lords, the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, is surely one of the great humanitarians in our House and perhaps in the country, and it is a great pleasure to speak in her debate. I congratulate her on her speech. I have had to take a lot out of my speech because she has covered so well the terrible violence and the terrible life offered to these poor children in Rotherham. The nightmare of bullying and threats makes one so depressed when one hears about it. The noble Baroness, Lady Cox, has a committee dealing with problems with Sharia law and marriage, which I attend when I can, and a week or so ago she introduced a young woman who had been one of the abused. She had initially been abused at about eight, I think, and had been set upon by men for sexual purposes. When she came and spoke to us, I think she was probably about 17. She spoke so well and so clearly; it was really quite moving to hear her. I am so glad that she

survived and was in a condition to speak in that way. After that, I had great difficulty sleeping at night, but I have somehow become inured to these things.

The Home Secretary at that time was Amber Rudd. She set up an inquiry to which evidence would be given. It was a very surprising episode because she appointed two very eminent women to examine the situation and come to some conclusions, but she chose badly. She chose Professor Jay, who is very eminent in her field, who was later joined by Dame Lowell Goddard, who we all read about in the newspapers. She was from New Zealand and had a very distinguished record in the law. It was odd that as soon as she was appointed to the inquiry, Dame Lowell said that she really could not go ahead with it. I appreciate what she said: she said that she had been chosen for her experience, but, as I understood it, her experience was incompatible with that of Professor Jay, so it became a rather distracting sideshow to something so serious and worrying. That is the situation in which we seem to have ended up.

As the noble Earl is quite rightly pointing at his watch, I will end by saying that there are two questions that need to be answered as early as possible. First, why did the police delay pressing charges for so long after the events? Secondly, why did the Home Secretary decide to go along the route that I have described, with its results? She should really have stopped and started again. I hope something will start again soon.

🕒 4.54pm

Lord Cormack

(Con)

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My Lords, I speak in this debate for two reasons. One is that I have an enormous regard and respect for the noble Baroness, Lady Cox. She has courage and the persistence of a terrier, and long may she retain both that courage and persistence.

My second reason for speaking is that I have three granddaughters and I cannot begin to imagine how appalled, distressed and burnt up with anger I would be if one of those children were violated. We have to remember that, when a child is violated, the man or youth who does it violates his own religion and whatever claim he might have to be a civilised being. When we look at the members of communities in this country who have brought so much to our civilisation and diversity, as the Jews did before the last war, it is deeply distressing that these people are disgracing themselves and their wider community, as well as the British community of which they have become a part. No punishment is really adequate for them.

The most appalling thing that the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, said was when she talked about the taxi drivers going around with impunity, their guilt widely accepted and known, yet nothing being done to bring those perpetrators to justice. I hope that the message that will go out to both local and national government from this brief debate and the series of brief speeches is, “You haven’t stepped sufficiently up to the mark”. If it takes seven months to bring a perpetrator to justice—the noble Baroness referred to that—and if the compensation is so insultingly derisory, we do not honour ourselves as the upholders of a civilised community and a civilised system.

No one should ever be able to shelter behind the word of religion. Be he Christian, Muslim, Sikh or anything else, the violation of a child destroys any

claim that that man might have to being an upholder of his religion. The noble Baroness has been extremely brave. Long may she continue, but may we soon see real priority being given to protecting the weak and the innocent and to punishing the evil.

🕒 4.58pm

Lord Pearson of Rannoch □

(UKIP)

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My Lords, I congratulate the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, on her courage in introducing this debate and on the sensitivity in the way that she did it.

I start with the assistance the Government are giving to the victims of grooming gangs in Rotherham and elsewhere. The noble Baroness suggested that this could be as low as an average of £48 per victim, but a Written Answer to me—HL12518—on 20 December 2018 points to a much lower figure, because £4.7 million of the £12 million mentioned by the noble Baroness was a one-off payment. Therefore, the basic support seems to be running at some £7.2 million per annum, and that is for the victims of all sexual abuse, not just for the 250,000 victims of radical Muslim grooming gangs, which in itself is probably an underestimate.

I say that because, if you take the accepted figure of 1,400 victims in Rotherham alone and extend it across the country, you come to a much larger figure. Indeed, Rotherham’s MP, the courageous Sarah Champion, has put the figure at 1 million. The amount spent on helping each of them now becomes derisory. In fact, the vast majority are getting no help at all from the Government. I look forward to the Minister’s comments. It is still going on. I have contacts on the ground in Rotherham who say that grooming gangs are still active there. Traffic wardens turn a blind eye to Muslim taxi drivers who park on yellow lines, and so on.

Turning to what can be done to stop this colossal social scandal, I fear we must start by accepting that the perpetrators are indeed radical Muslims. They should not be confused with other, decent men of Pakistani and Asian origin. Noble and Islamophiliac Lords may not like me saying that, but the excellent Quilliam Foundation found that it is true of 83% of the criminals concerned. If anyone is in any doubt, they should read Peter McLoughlin’s 2016 masterpiece *Easy Meat: Inside Britain’s Grooming Gang Scandal*, which should be compulsory reading for the Government. Indeed, I brought a copy with me and will give it to the Minister at the end of this debate. I trust that her civil servants will read it too.

I also suggest that we should look for more help from within our close-knit Muslim communities, which pretty much know what is going on and should be very ashamed of what their radical menfolk are doing. I suggest we might also try to learn to talk openly about the tenets of radical Islam. I have mentioned before in your Lordships’ House the tenets of abrogation, Taqiyya, Al Hijra, the lesser jihad and the pursuit of a world caliphate. However, there is another, which may lie at the root of the grooming gang scandal: namely, the radical Muslim tenet known as,

“what your right hand possesses”.

I am advised that this allows Muhammad’s followers to have sex slaves among their captives and among non-Muslim, or kuffar, girls.

The trouble is that as soon as you start talking about radical Islam, you are immediately accused of Islamophobia, even if you can say what you like about any other religion. Perhaps we can return to this when the Brexit muddle is over. In the meantime, we should heed the words of the Home Secretary. If we turn a blind eye to the fact that the vast majority of grooming gang criminals are radical Muslims, we fuel the voices of extremism. That is exactly what is happening.

🕒 5.02pm

Lord Singh of Wimbledon

(CB)

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My Lords, I too thank the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, for securing this very important debate. If we want to address any issue affecting society, we need to understand the cause. For example, cholera was endemic in the mid-19th century and was effectively tackled only when it was shown to be linked to poor sanitation and contaminated drinking water. The problem of gross physical abuse of young women and children by organised grooming gangs also affects lives, and to tackle it, we need to identify responsibility and motivation.

To me, it is a matter of real concern that, instead of pinpointing responsibility, the media, government and other authorities, including the police, absurdly mask the identity of the perpetrators out of misplaced political correctness, calling them “Asians”. We do not refer to the perpetrators of the genocide against Jews as “Europeans”. Why diffuse blame for the actions of mainly Muslim grooming gangs on innocent communities?

I believe the real problem lies with negative cultural attitudes which attach themselves to religion. Negative, demeaning attitudes towards women are still all too prevalent in the subcontinent of India, particularly in that part of it that now forms Pakistan. The Sikh religion started in that part of the world and the Sikh gurus condemned the demeaning attitudes towards women, stressing their dignity and complete equality. Despite the clarity of such teachings, negative cultural attitudes still sometimes exist, even in Sikh families and, indeed, in western society. The presence of grooming gangs in the Muslim community arises from these negative cultural attitudes to women, which leads some to believe that they are part of the religion and that there is nothing wrong with the demeaning treatment of women and girls, particularly those outside the community.

Having identified the perverse culture behind grooming gangs, what work do we do to tackle the problem? More rigorous policing and application of the law can help, but it cannot eradicate deeply ingrained cultural attitudes, and well-meaning attempts to do so can easily be seen as an attack on religion. It is the Muslim community, particularly Muslim leaders, who must take the lead. It is not easy to take on centuries of negative culture wrongly attached to religion. We must help these leaders place the teachings of a great faith in the context of today’s times to stamp out the scourge of sexual grooming, with its negative impact on victims and the fair name of Islam.

 5.05pm**Lord Paddick**

(LD)

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My Lords, time is short and I will be brutal. The greatest threats of child sexual exploitation are from within families and online. Grooming

gangs exist in all communities, and just as it would be unfair to characterise the Anglican Church as a centre of child abuse, even if 18 members of the clergy were convicted of offences over a 50-year period in the diocese of Chichester alone, it would be similarly unfair to highlight any other religious or racial group as responsible for child sexual exploitation.

Victims are far more likely to be disbelieved because of their standing in society compared to that of their perpetrators than because of political correctness. At the time, no-one believed Sir Jimmy Savile OBE could do such things, for example. When CSE results from a failure in safeguarding, the temptation for responsible authorities to deny it happened at all may be strong.

I commend the NSPCC website for setting out so clearly what needs to be done. Compulsory sex and relationship education in all schools, without an opt-out, to teach children what is and is not a healthy relationship so that they realise when they are being exploited is essential. CSE within families is a major area of concern and perpetrators will not want their children to realise that they are being exploited. Education about the realities of membership of criminal gangs and county lines should also be taught. The Government must raise awareness of the signs of CSE among the public and professionals, and clearly signpost how to report it.

The Government must also take steps to reduce the susceptibility of young people to being exploited. In-work poverty—having to work 16 hours a day to make ends meet—means that parents cannot always be there for their children, who then look elsewhere for the acknowledgement, recognition and acceptance they need. Criminal gangs, terrorist groups and predatory sex offenders create

the illusion of providing what these young and vulnerable people are seeking. The Government must do more to tackle inequality and to provide healthy alternatives to gangs and groomers by better funding youth services in local authorities.

In addition to the lack of support for victims that so many noble Lords have highlighted, the Government must do more to ensure that we have enough appropriately skilled and experienced detectives to identify and prosecute those responsible for what can be difficult and sensitive investigations. The whole issue of child exploitation is a national disgrace for which no one group, or community, can be held to blame.

🕒 5.08pm

Lord Rosser

(Lab)

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My Lords, I add my congratulations to the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, on securing this debate and on her campaigning skills. I support the thrust of her comments on the issue of victims and their families. Vulnerable people who have been encouraged or forced into crime as part of their exploitation should not then be treated as perpetrators of criminal acts but as victims.

A further issue is why vulnerable people who are meant to be being protected still end up being subjected to awful exploitation in the first place. This debate relates to grooming gangs, but on the overall position the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse estimates that 15% of girls and 5% of boys experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16. The National Crime Agency has said that, at a conservative estimate,

around 80,000 people in the UK present some kind of sexual threat to children online. However, there seems to be a lack of reliable up-to-date information on the extent of child sexual abuse, much of which seems to occur in the home. Do the Government have any plans to obtain more reliable information on the nature and level of child sexual abuse?

The Library briefing for this debate contains a speech by the Home Secretary from last September on online child sexual exploitation, in which he said:

“I will continue to make sure that the police have all the powers and tools they need to fight child sexual abuse and to bring offenders to justice”.

“Tools” must include resources. Can the Minister therefore confirm that it is actually the Government’s view that the police currently have all the necessary resources, both human and financial, to fight child sexual abuse and bring offenders to justice, and that there are therefore no issues on that score? In that same speech the Home Secretary referred to the,

“horrendous abuse perpetrated by gangs”.

He went on to say:

“I’ve instructed my officials to explore the particular contexts and characteristics of these types of gangs”.

In answers to an Oral Question last October, the Government said:

“Child sexual exploitation is not exclusive to any single culture, community, race or religion; it happens in all areas of the country and can take many forms”.

I agree. The Government went on to say that,

“we must look at the perpetrators and understand the characteristics. On 3 September, the Home Office tasked a working group to look at what characteristics are involved”.—[*Official Report*, 18/10/18; col. 562.]

I have some questions about this working group, assuming it has not reported already. Who is on it and who chairs it? What is its budget? What are its specific terms of reference? Does it cover just grooming gangs, or the perpetrators of child sexual abuse across the board? How many times has it met? Within what timescale is it due to make its findings known? Has it issued any interim findings or conclusions? Will its findings be made public?

I ask these questions since things seem to have gone very quiet since the Home Secretary announced the creation of the working group, yet one would have thought that the work it is apparently doing was crucial and urgent in addressing the horror of child sexual exploitation.

🕒 5.12pm

The Minister of State, Home Office □

(Baroness Williams of Trafford) (Con)

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My Lords, I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Cox, for securing this important debate. It is a shame that we have only an hour to talk about it, because we really could give an awful lot more time to discussing the Government's efforts to tackle the terrible crimes of child sexual exploitation. Cases such as Rotherham and all the others we have heard about are really shocking, with some of the most vulnerable in society being preyed upon by ruthless individuals—mostly criminals.

Vulnerability goes to the heart of what we are talking about. My right honourable friend the Home Secretary has been quite clear—the noble Lord, Lord Rosser, alluded to this—that cultural sensitivities

should not get in the way of dealing with this issue and bringing perpetrators to justice. However, we must also be quite clear—I am grateful to the noble Lord, Lord Paddick, for widening this out—that grooming gangs are not confined to any particular colour, creed or geographical location. To assume they would be not to get a grip on this issue. The noble Lord talked about how the Catholic Church and the Church of England are not clean in this regard. We have also heard about some of the colleges of music near where I live and the media figureheads who have or have not been brought to justice, as the noble Lord mentioned.

The noble Lord, Lord Singh, talked about leadership. I totally agree that no one area of society has its conscience clear on this. Whatever the organisation or the religious sector, its leadership needs to show real leadership in this regard. The noble Lord, Lord Rosser, talked about the victims being treated not as perpetrators but as victims. It is quite clear that some of those victims can come to be seen as perpetrators because of some of the things that they have to do as victims of sexual abuse, quite often as children.

I want to pay tribute to the victims and survivors, some of whose stories have been outlined today, for the incredible effort and strength that it takes to come forward to report what has happened and actually share their experience, having gone through such trauma. It is the Government's priority to ensure that all victims feel that they can come forward to report abuse and that they will get the assistance they need. Whether they are male or female, a child or an adult, the same principle must apply.

To answer a question from the noble Lord, Lord Rosser, no, we do not think that we are there yet. So much has been uncovered in a historical sense that we clearly have an awfully long way to go. That is why the cross-government *Victims Strategy*, published last September, outlined our commitment to improve support services for victims of sexual abuse. We are also working across government and with the NHS to implement the strategic direction for sexual assault and abuse services, and to deliver the vision of radically improved access to services for victims and survivors of sexual assault and abuse, supporting them to recover, heal and rebuild their lives.

My noble friend Lord Pickles talked about a multidisciplinary approach. I was a great fan of the troubled families programme when I was in the MHCLG—when he was my boss, in fact. I have always been a huge supporter of a multidisciplinary approach to get to the heart of child protection in particular and to deal with some of the things that these children have to endure. We have increased grant funding for victim support services across the country to support a service which victims and survivors can access throughout their lifetime to cope with and, as far as possible, recover from the terrible impact of abuse.

Lord Blunkett □

(Lab)

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The noble Lord, Lord Pickles, raised the licensing of taxis. Taxi drivers may be licensed on one side of the Pennines and operate in another, in this case in Rotherham. Do the Government have any further measures in line to strengthen the law and stop this happening?

Baroness Williams of Trafford □[Share](#)

I totally recognise the point that my noble friend made. In fact, I was going to get on to it later.

Lord Blunkett □[Share](#)

I apologise—I thought the Minister had moved on.

Baroness Williams of Trafford □[Share](#)

No, the noble Lord, Lord Blunkett, has raised a valid point. Taxi drivers can not only operate in another local authority but cross local authority boundaries into the one where they originally perpetrated the abuse. I will take that back because I do not know what the up-to-date position is on taxi licensing. I take it as a valid point but perhaps I can go on to talk further about funding, because a number of noble Lords have raised that.

In the last three years, the Government have provided over £7.2 million in funding for rape support services, which I think were mentioned by the noble Lord, Lord Pearson of Rannoch. This supports victims and survivors of rape and sexual abuse across England and Wales. These services provide independent, specialist support to female and male victims of sexual violence, including victims of child sexual abuse. Our ambition is to support victims and survivors wherever and whoever they are. That is why, from April this year, government funding for these support services has increased by 10% to a total of £24 million over the next three years. This will ensure, for the first time, that there are government-funded rape and sexual abuse support services in all 42 of the country's police and crime commissioner areas.

Lord Campbell-Savours □[Share](#)

Why should Rotherham have to pick up the lion's share of this bill when this is a national problem and it already has high council tax arrangements, while other parts of the country with very low council tax, such as here in Westminster, do not have to pay or make any contribution at all? Surely the balance is completely wrong.

Baroness Williams of Trafford □[Share](#)

I remind the noble Lord and others that we are now seven minutes into my 10-minute response, so there will be a number of questions that I will not get to. Of course, the amount of council tax set is entirely a matter for local authorities. I was always proud that Trafford had the lowest council tax in the north-west. It is a matter of individual decision-making. We could have a whole discussion on council tax, but I will not go there. I will say that it is an individual matter for local areas, and that the Government will increase spending from £31 million in 2018 to £39 million in 2021 to improve services and pathways for survivors and victims of sexual violence and abuse who seek support from sexual assault referral centres, regardless of age or gender.

Recognising the devastating impact of sexual exploitation by organised groups, the Government have also awarded £1 million through the tampon tax fund to the organisation Changing Lives to provide trauma-informed support to vulnerable women who have been groomed by groups of men for sexual exploitation in locations across the north-east and Yorkshire, including Rotherham. The project will result in the production of a toolkit to enable the approach to be replicated nationally.

We also remain committed to providing specialist services to support victims of child sexual abuse. In each of the last four years we have provided £7 million of funding for non-statutory organisations that support victims, and we have invested £7 million in the pilot of a "child house" model in London, which provides a victim-centred multiagency approach to supporting child victims of sexual abuse under one roof, based on international best practice.

However, ensuring offenders do not get the opportunity to exploit our children is key. Prevention and disruption are crucial parts of our response to tackling child sexual exploitation. That is why we launched our trusted relationships fund, which supports local authority-led projects working with children and young people to build resilience to harm through fostering healthy, trusting relationships with adults, protecting them from sexual exploitation, gang exploitation and peer abuse. As part of this, over £1 million has been awarded to Rotherham for the four-year programme.

The Government have also launched the new tackling child exploitation support programme to help safeguarding partners in local areas to tackle a range of threats to children from gangs, sexual and criminal exploitation, online grooming, trafficking and modern slavery. As part of our £40 million package in the child sexual exploitation progress report, we have recently published a child exploitation disruption toolkit, which brings together existing legislative powers to help local agencies to disrupt, deter and tackle sexual and criminal exploitation of children. Since 2016-17, we have provided £23 million of special grant funding to South Yorkshire Police towards the cost of Operation Stovewood, referred to by the noble Lord, Lord Campbell-Savours.

In September 2018 my right honourable friend the Home Secretary committed to providing an extra £21 million over the next 18 months to improve how law enforcement agencies pursue the most dangerous and prolific offenders. This includes further funding of regional organised crime units to tackle online grooming of children. The 2019-20 police funding settlement provides the biggest increase in police funding since 2010, including more money for local police forces.

The noble Viscount, Lord Falkland, asked why the police delayed pressing charges in the Rotherham cases. The key principle underpinning our policing model is the operational independence of the police and the CPS from government, and that they carry out their duties free from political interference, but it is a matter for the police to review what went wrong and, where appropriate, make a referral to the Independent Office for Police Conduct to investigate misconduct.

My noble friend Lady Newlove asked about the link between modern slavery legislation and this issue. We published a child exploitation disruption toolkit that brings together legislation, including the NRM and the modern slavery legislation, that safeguarding agencies can use and explains how they can use it to protect children from sexual and criminal exploitation. The noble Lord, Lord Paddick, made a very good point about RSE: if children do not know what a healthy relationship looks like, they will not know when they are being exploited.

The final point was made by the noble Lord, Lord Rosser. He asked what the Government are doing to improve the understanding of the true scale of child sexual abuse. We recognise that there is a need to better understand the scale and nature of it. Looking at some of the mistakes of the past, scoping reports published by the centre of expertise in 2017-18 found that, due to inconsistent definitions and research methods of previous surveys, it is currently very difficult to make comparisons and track trends over time. Better data is most definitely needed. The centre of expertise is working with partners to develop a detailed proposal for a national prevalence survey on child sexual abuse.

I realise that I have gone a minute over time. I will provide the noble Lord with the answer on the group that was set up, and share it with the Committee. I once again thank the noble Baroness, Lady Cox.

🕒 5.26pm

Sitting suspended.

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