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Stabbed in the head and dumped in a canal: How authorities failed grooming gang victims in Rotherham

The scale of the abuse that was allowed to fester in the Yorkshire town is difficult to fathom. Yet, true justice remains shamefully distant

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Sam Ashworth-Hayes
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The Rotherham story is simple. It's a story about cowardice and evil. For decades, organised gangs of abusers preyed on children in their homes and in local institutions with impunity, while authorities turned a blind eye.

An inquiry led by the academic Alexis Jay, published in 2014, [found evidence](#) that reports had been submitted to authorities in the 1990s. The police certainly had evidence as far back as 2003 and 2006. Little was done to stop the crimes. Between 1997 and 2013, the National Crime Agency now believes, at least 1,500 girls were abused in the town.

Such mass abuse was the result of an instinct to look away and cover-up. In some cases, this appears to have been motivated by fear; fear of being called racist, or fear of what might happen if the majority community were to realise its

More stories

children were viewed as easy targets by many members of a minority. In other cases, inaction is harder to explain away.

The murder of Child S

In 2010, aged just 17, the body of “Child S” was recovered from a Rotherham canal. She had been stabbed multiple times in the head, and pushed into the water while still alive. Later named as Laura Wilson, she had been murdered by 17-year-old Ashtiaq Asghar.



Laura Wilson was just 17 when she was found stabbed in 2010 Credit: South Yorkshire Police

Days before, Wilson had told Asghar’s mother that she was in a relationship with her son. The mother had reacted with fury and racial abuse. Wilson had been met with a similar response from the family of Ishaq Hussain, the 22-year-old father of her four-month-old child.

Hussain was acquitted of Wilson’s killing, but a court heard that Asghar had texted Hussain the day before the killing telling him he was “gonna send that kuffar [a derogatory term for non-Muslims] b---h straight to Hell”. At Asghar’s sentencing, the judge stated that he had followed Hussain “into [a] mindset” where he “regarded girls, white girls, simply as sexual targets”.

Despite this, the judge decided he could not be sure Asghar had set out with the intention of killing Wilson.



Ashtiaq Asghar was convicted of murdering Laura Wilson. At his sentencing the judge said he “regarded girls, white girls, simply as sexual targets” Credit: South Yorkshire Police

Time and time again, the authorities who were supposed to protect Wilson had let her down. A serious case review subsequently published by Rotherham’s Safeguarding Children’s Board found that Laura had slipped through the net despite a string of alarming incidents.

At 13, her mother had found her “in her living room with a 32-year-old male at 5am”, saw her stomach had been burned with a lighter, and called the police. While she told officers that her daughter had been burned by the man, however, Laura told them that she had burned herself. The result was that they took no further action, and failed to inform social services.

These failures were only the tip of the iceberg. The case review released to the public had been heavily redacted, and when a leaked copy made its way to *The Times*, the council took legal action to avoid its publication, abandoning it only when then-Education Secretary Michael Gove intervened.

Once released, the unredacted document showed exactly why the board had been so nervous. Laura was suspected to have been abused by “Asian men”, indicators of grooming were present in her case, she had been referred to a child sexual exploitation project aged just 11, and her mother had “tried to get the police and social care” to do something about her involvement with older men.

The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee judged that in making these redactions the Board had been “protecting rather than scrutinising its members”. Such failures, and the apparent attempt to cover for them, form a theme throughout the Rotherham scandal.

Welcome to Rotherham

For a highly populated borough, the actual town of Rotherham is surprisingly small. Many of its residents live further out, and after only a few minutes driving you could be forgiven for thinking you were somewhere else entirely. The Grade II listed Thomas Rotherham College looks like something from Downton Abbey rather than the usual bleak post-industrial footage seen in reports from the town, and there are leafy homes occupied by the likes of BAE staff working at the nearby facility in Sheffield.

The centre of town is less pleasant. Out of sight, but critical to the local economy, are the steelworks. These can be credited with Rotherham's former prosperity, and also with its new population. Over the 1950s and 1960s, a wave of Pakistani migrants arrived in the town seeking employment and higher wages. Their descendants now live in and around the town centre. The Office for National Statistics census maps are striking; some areas in the centre are majority Asian. Some of the outlying areas, almost entirely white.

Over a quarter of the population in Rotherham South is of Pakistani origin

Proportion of usual residents answering "Pakistani" to the ethnicity question in the 2021 census



Source: ONS

Map data: © Crown copyright and database right 2021

As you enter the town centre the one-way system slows traffic to a crawl, and at night people congregate outside the bus station and the pub opposite. Famous brands are largely lacking. As you head up towards the neighbourhood of Eastwood, where much of the abuse took place, you enter a world of serried houses surrounding a large mosque. Some of the houses have barred doors and windows, and there are

shops serving the Roma population. To the south is the Grade II listed Clifton Park, sprawling, green and pretty in the sun, with a museum, memorial gardens, a children's area and an old bandstand. Today, it's advertised as the ideal day out for families. Previously, however, it too was a known hotspot of abuse.

Professor Jay found meeting minutes from a 2007 meeting which noted that "the methods are the same... girls going to Clifton Park, girls picked up at the petrol station", with the chair adding "this is a fairly grim situation. The men's names don't change but the girl's names change as they become too old to be useful. None of the girls will give a statement as they are scared."

A little way back towards the centre of town, on the other side of the River Don, two buildings watch each other from across the road. On one side is the flat block of Rotherham police station, red brick and stained metal punctured with windows too small for the facade. On the other is Riverside House, home to Rotherham council. The modern plate glass of the building seems to offer transparency, but it's hard to see inside.

Rotherham town centre Credit: Getty Images Europe

How the scandal unfolded

While the grooming gangs would not become known to the general public until the 2010s, their presence had been visible for years. A consistent pattern of authorities failing to intervene, paralysed by concerns over race and community tensions, had left young children vulnerable to predators.

As far back as the 1990s, a woman called Jayne Senior – who ran a project called "Risky Business" working with girls at risk of sexual exploitation – noted that a group of children's home managers had already identified an issue with "taxis driven by Asian males arriving, picking up young girls and disappearing".

Police reports in 2003 and 2006 had noted that "one or two networks of men" were behind the abuse in the town, that they were potentially involved in gun and drugs crime, that abuse had grown from "a few men who were involved for

their own gratification” to an organised network, and that the main “gangs” were “Asian”.

Yet when Senior and her colleague reported taxis to the police with suspicions of abuse, no action was taken. Indeed, the police proved deeply uncomfortable about the ethnicity of suspects and those attempting to raise concerns were warned that passing on information could violate the “human rights” of those suspected.

In 2015, Louise Casey reported after leading an inspection of children’s services at Rotherham council. She found that abusers “seemed to face no consequences”. Rather than accepting the “facts” that “on a significant scale children were sexually exploited by men who came largely from the Pakistani heritage community... I found a council in denial”.

As for the police, officers often seemed to disbelieve girls, or blame them for their abuse. One victim claims a police officer told her she was a liar, pulled the police car over, persuaded her to drop charges, ripped up the paperwork, and dropped her off at a restaurant where girls and abusers used to gather.

As one officer said, “the view was that they were little slags”. Officials believed “the girls were happy, or complicit in it. The sense was that if there had been any offence it had been by the girls, for luring the men in.”

Meanwhile, girls lived in terror. The Casey review heard about crimes including “rape with a broken bottle and girls being ordered to kiss perpetrators’ feet at gun point”. Whistleblowers reported that children as young as 11 were collected from care homes by abusers and by taxis with “no attempts to disguise what they were doing”; staff failed to intervene, terrified of being called “racist”. The taxi drivers, in turn, sometimes met these girls “on official council business”, when they were “taken by cab from the home to the schools”.

The pattern of grooming was consistent: girls would be introduced to men, who would become their “boyfriends”, plying them with gifts, food, alcohol and drugs, then insisting that these were ‘paid for’, turning to sexual abuse with rings of participants. Taxis and cars were used to pick girls up from schools, children’s homes and family homes.

Failures occurred across every service. Laura Wilson’s sister Sarah was raped in a school playground aged 11. She was so young she “had no understanding of sex” when the attack occurred. The incident was the beginning of “her systematic grooming and sexual assault”, which saw her “driven across the country to be raped by multiple men in one night, and ignored by both the police and social services”.

At one point, her mother showed her phone to officers. It contained 177 numbers for adult Asian men. The police

“claimed that the Data Protection Act prevented them from investigating”, and that her daughter’s behaviour was a “lifestyle choice”. When Sarah reported an attack, the officer she spoke to “laughed and refused to investigate”. Moving to a care home didn’t help; when she was driven home by her abusers, workers “used care home funds to pay the taxi fare”.

Whenever the issue was raised, it seemed, the authorities didn’t want to know.

Louise Casey’s 2015 inspection of Rotherham children’s services found abusers “seemed to face no consequences” Credit: Geoff Pugh

Political cowardice and complicity

Time and time again, stories emerged of authorities attempting to suppress discussion of the issue. When a youth worker raised concerns over “Asian taxi drivers” and children, they were told off, and told “not to mention ethnicity”. Other professionals claim that when they tried to present evidence that specific taxi drivers were involved in sexual abuse, they were “constantly being reminded not to be racist”. Officials were “terrified” of the effect on “community cohesion”.

Around the town, found the 2014 Jay Review, pressure was put on people to “suppress, keep quiet or cover up” abuse, with a former senior officer commenting that people “didn’t want [Rotherham] to become the child abuse capital of the north. They didn’t want riots.”

Part of the issue appears to have been the result of politics colliding with ethnicity. Police interviewed, as part of the Casey report pointed to, two Asian heritage councillors in particular that they felt would “push back” on discussions around the abuse, even when particular families were named as being of concern, arguing that it would “cause a lot of community tension if they are targeted specifically”. It was alleged that other councillors allowed this to go on as “they were seen as the experts on Pakistani heritage issues”.

Indeed, there was “a sense that it was the Pakistani heritage councillors who alone ‘dealt’ with that community”.

The concerns over race, whether real or cynically used to suppress the issue, resulted in absurdities. One social worker claimed they had to discuss “men of a certain

ethnicity, engaged in a particular occupation”, and a witness to the Casey review claimed that the council’s “number one priority was to preserve and enhance the [Pakistani-heritage] community... it was difficult to stand up in a meeting and say the perpetrators were from the Pakistani-heritage community and were using the taxi system — even though everyone knew it”.

As late as 2010, a Safeguarding Children Board report in Rotherham found that grooming had “cultural characteristics... which are locally sensitive in terms of diversity”, with “potential to endanger the harmony of community relationships”. The result: “great care” was taken in writing up a report “to ensure that its findings embrace Rotherham’s qualities of diversity. It is imperative that wider suggestions of a cultural problem are avoided”.

Then in 2016, it was reported that a victim of grooming in Rotherham had alleged that she was raped by a town councillor – allegations he denied. Whatever the reasons for official reticence, inspectors concluded that the council went to great lengths to “cover up information and silence whistle-blowers”. In the words of witnesses: “If you want to keep your job, you keep your head down and your mouth shut.”

Witnesses told inquiries that Pakistani heritage councillors had “a disproportionate influence in the council”, and in one case a councillor was alleged by police officers to have “influenced our operations”. At one point, a local taxi driver allegedly arranged for an abused girl to be handed over by her abuser – a relative of his – to a police officer without prosecution. He would later become a Labour councillor.

The PC involved in the handover – Hassan Ali – would later be investigated for failing to investigate claims of exploitation, with allegations he was regularly called by an abuser from a public phone box. On the day he was told he was under investigation, however, he was struck by a car and killed. The driver was found not guilty of causing death by dangerous driving.

Hassan Ali was killed on the day he was told he was under investigation Credit: Ben Lack

Police failings

The failures of South Yorkshire Police went well beyond Hassan Ali. At one point, a senior officer told the father of a victim that the town “would erupt” if the routine abuse of white children by Pakistani-heritage men became public knowledge. In another instance, an officer allegedly said the abuse had been “going on” for 30 years, adding that “with it being Asians, we can’t afford for this to be coming out”.

Angie Heal, a former police researcher, believed concerns over ethnicity were not the only reason for inaction. The Rotherham force had failed to tackle suspected criminals in the Asian community involved in grooming and drug crimes. This was hard to explain: “Whether it was a too close and unhealthy relationship with the council, whether they were protecting their own interests, their own positions...”

It is certainly the case that one victim alleged that a police officer had bought steroids from a known abuser, and that the officer had implied to the victim while in a cell that they would look after her as they knew she was the abuser’s “girl”. As the officer in question had resigned from the police, they couldn’t be made to attend a misconduct hearing. In another case, a victim described how she was in a car with an abuser when they were stopped by an Asian police officer, who spoke to the abuser in a non-English language but didn’t try to stop him driving around with an underage child. Authorities were later unable to identify the officer.

Whatever the explanation, inaction led to horrific outcomes. Around the town, children were “doused in petrol and threatened with being set alight”, “threatened with guns”, “witnessed brutally violent rapes and were

threatened that they would be the next victim if they told anyone. Girls as young as 11 were raped by large numbers of male perpetrators, one after the other". Yet in at least two cases, when fathers tracked down their daughters and attempted to rescue them, the police arrested the fathers.

Similar events unfolded in the case of "Paula", who had been referred to Risky Business aged 14. Her case had been discussed repeatedly with police officers and social services; taxi drivers were giving her drugs, and driving her from Rotherham as far as Birmingham. While her grooming and abuse were escalating, authorities did nothing. Eventually, her father confronted one of the men she was "hanging about with": "I go shooting, and I've got a shotgun. If you keep carrying on with my girl I'll use it on you". This finally spurred the police officers into action: they severely reprimanded the father.

Time and time again, victims and likely victims faced the full weight of police attention while potential abusers were shielded. When a 13-year-old girl was found at 3am, drunk in a derelict house with a large group of men, with "disrupted clothing", she was arrested for a public order offence, detained, prosecuted and sentenced by a youth court. The men walked away free.

Jayne Senior reports the case of two girls who were physically assaulted and required hospital treatment. The police officers attending their case did not arrest the attackers, but followed up the abusers' complaint that the girls had used racist language. The same men later allegedly broke into a house to threaten a seven-year-old child whose sister might have "grassed".

One parent concerned about a missing daughter was told by the police that an "older Asian boyfriend" was a "fashion accessory" for girls in the town. The father of a 15-year-old rape victim was told the assault might mean she would "learn her lesson". The ordeal had been so brutal that she required surgery.

The protection of offenders may have gone further still. In at least one case, when a victim found the courage to go to the police, their abuser appears to have been tipped off. While still in the police station, one child received a text from her abuser informing her that he was with her 11-year-old sister, and that it was now "your choice...". The child chose not to go through with the complaint.

Witness intimidation

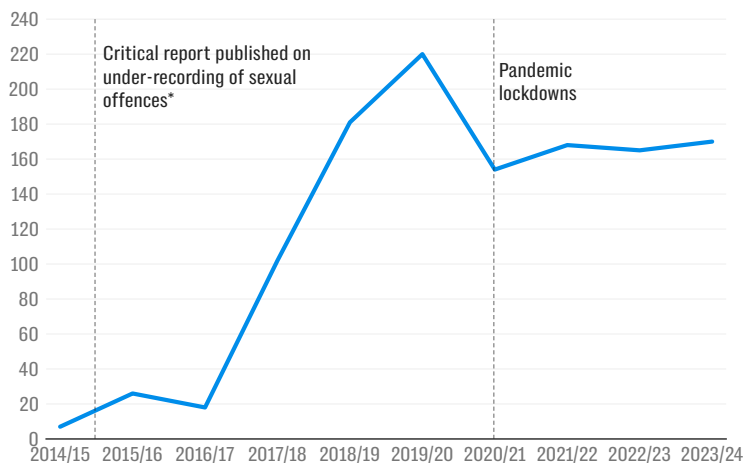
Children faced death threats to which the police reacted with boredom, advising people to turn their phones off. Tip-offs were neglected. Children terrified of their abusers were relied on to build cases which frequently didn't proceed; the failure of the CPS to prosecute a Rochdale case in 2009, failing to see children as credible witnesses, had had a chilling effect.

Even when intelligence was available, the police were unwilling to use it. After Operation Central, set up in 2008 by South Yorkshire Police to investigate abuse allegations, and which led to five convictions, officers had identified 80 suspects. Yet later they failed to follow up on those who hadn't already been convicted.

This attitude was prevalent in the town. One member of the council described the prosecution of abusers as “the icing on the cake”, and the Home Affairs Committee subsequently found that “senior council officers” seeing “the prosecution of child-sex offenders” as of “secondary importance” might well partly explain “why so few prosecutions have taken in Rotherham”.

Sexual grooming offences recorded by South Yorkshire Police

Changes in recording practices and reporting frequency have a large hand in the increasing trend



*HMICFRS in November 2014 | Source: Home Office

Another explanation was that prosecutions required children to speak out. Witnesses who did so faced serious threats to their safety. Jayne Senior writes about the case of “Katrin”, who had decided to go to the police. Her brother was attacked in the street by unknown assailants, abusers called her home to ask about her little sister, and when she did give a statement, an officer warned her that in court the men who had attacked her would “all be there, watching you when you give evidence. They’ll know exactly who’s told the police about them”. “Katrin” did not take the case further.

In one case, a child was groomed by abusers from the age of 12. When she turned 13, she was sexually assaulted, beginning a period where she was “raped every week on a regular basis”, and “sold” by her abuser “to his friends and his brothers”, who branded her a “white slag”. In her words in 2016, the pattern of their abuse was that the victims were “always white girls”.

When her abuser struck her and “tried to set [her] face on fire”, the girl told him she would tell someone. The result was that he sent “two men up to my house to come and kidnap me”, startled away when neighbours called the police suspecting a burglary.

The girl’s mother subsequently contacted the police. When officers arrived, they told her she was “involved with some very dangerous people”, and took away the clothes she’d been raped in as evidence. They subsequently reported that they’d lost them.

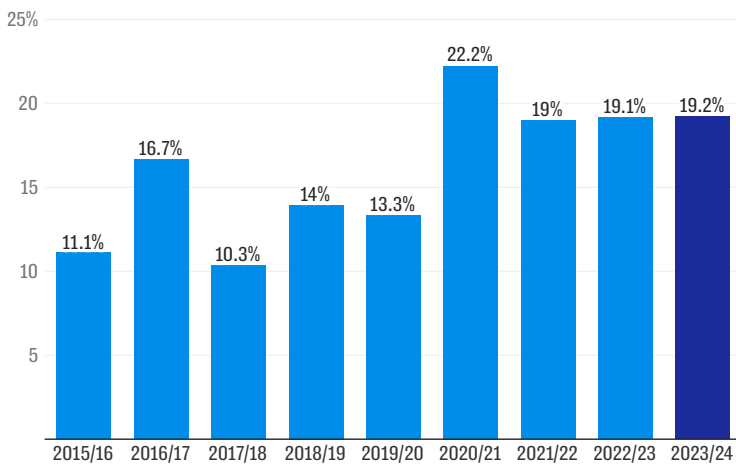
Despite having acknowledged the girl’s abusers as “dangerous”, and knowing that they were out on bail for assaulting a witness in another case, the police “could not offer [her] any protection”.

The police were not the only institution to fail this victim. The girl’s child protection officer told her that “if it is any consolation, you are not the first girl that has been abused and raped, and you are definitely not the last”. When a social worker was informed that abusers claimed the child owed them £500 and would “kidnap” her, the social worker advised her parents to meet with the men and pay them.

Reports of the abuse were made to social workers, to the council, to the NHS, to her local MP who wrote to the police, and to then-Home Secretary David Blunkett, who did not reply. Eventually, the family moved abroad to try and escape.

1-in-5 sexual grooming offences result in a charge by South Yorkshire Police

Offences assigned a charge or summons outcome in the quarter, per financial year



Source: Home Office

Missing evidence

Witnesses were not the only group who faced intimidation. Researchers who dug into the abuse experienced curious setbacks.

Jayne Senior has alleged that a Home Office researcher working to map the gangs in the town in 2002 had their office raided. Case studies, files, and information went missing; password protected computer documents had been deleted, while documents were created showing that the researcher had agreed to limits on their work.

In order to access the room, Senior explains, the perpetrator would have had to enter the building, disarm an alarm, enter a locked security door, unlock the door to the correct

part of the building, unlock the door to the room, unlock the desk, and find the key to the filing cabinet. There was no sign of forced entry, and it was suggested that there was no need to inform the police.

Giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, the researcher attested that two police officers had “made me fear for my personal safety”; she was pulled over in her car, and quizzed extensively about her MOT, car tax, insurance, brake lights, to the point that she asked the officer “are you warning me or are you threatening me?”.

The officer allegedly replied: “I’ll leave that up to your imagination but I don’t want to see you here again”.

In a second conversation, a police officer allegedly said to her “wouldn’t it be a shame if these men found out where you live”.

In a separate incident in 2011, some 21 laptops were stolen from council property. There was no sign of a break in, no investigation, and no report made to the Information Commissioners Office. These laptops held as much as 50 per cent of the children’s data held by the council at the time. The whistleblower who reported the theft was subsequently made redundant.

When Jayne Senior and a former police analyst submitted a complaint about the failures of high-ranking officers in South Yorkshire Police to protect children, they were told by the Independent Office for Police Conduct that they would be “seen as... vexatious”, and that they could as a result “be looking at two years’ imprisonment”. They persisted, and their complaint was eventually upheld.

Alexis Jay with her landmark 2014 report into the abuse in Rotherham Credit: Tom Maddick

A community’s shame

In the view of one victim, the council didn’t want to address the grooming gangs in case they found out “how big” the problem was. This fear, and the fears over community tensions, were not groundless.

Not only was the offending concentrated within the Pakistani-heritage community, the patterns of offending were also unusual, with family networks at the core of the gangs.

As *Times* journalist Andrew Norfolk put it to the Home Affairs Committee, there had to be “something” underlying the pattern of offending as it was “often” a “normalised group activity – not among a major criminal gang, but among friends, work colleagues and relatives”, as opposed to the lone offender patterns based in fear of being reported observed elsewhere.

As uncomfortable as it may make many, the link between community and issue is hard to deny. It’s not only the racialised pattern of offending, with predominantly Pakistani-heritage men assaulting predominantly white children, or the language used as they did so, beating girls who were called “white slag” or “white c---”, or justifying their behaviour because their victims were non-Muslims. It’s the extent of the offending, and the degree to which it had taken root in the community.

As Mr Norfolk noted, while many of the young men he had spoken to were appalled by the events and “disgusted” by the offenders, they would “never have dreamt of going to the police about it, because you do not turn on your own community”. Alyas Karmani, who was the co-director of teenage-outreach charity Street, similarly stated that “many” in the community “would fail to recognise it as a problem they ought to address, seeing it instead as a societal problem”.

As Chief Crown Prosecutor for the North West Nazir Afzal said in 2012, “cultural baggage and the status of women among some men in these communities contributes to their disrespect for the rights of women... group grooming is a particular problem in Asian communities”.

By 2018, the National Crime Agency inquiry into the scandal had identified 110 suspects, of whom 80 per cent were of Pakistani heritage. By 2022, more than 200 people had been arrested as suspects. If the same figure of 80 per cent held, that would mean 160 of the 200 suspects were of Pakistani heritage.

At the 2011 census, just 3 per cent of Rotherham’s population of 257,280 was of Pakistani heritage, with 2,529 Pakistani-heritage men over the age of 15. So 160 suspects would mean that more than one in 16 Pakistani-heritage men who had lived in Rotherham in 2011 had been arrested as part of the inquiry into child abuse.

These numbers make it difficult to talk about the phenomenon. It’s easy to see why the authorities were so anxious; a wide swathe of the town’s minority community had banded together to attack the children of the majority. But by burying the story rather than attacking it head on, the police and council enabled this pattern of offending.

These numbers may still be an understatement; one girl alone is believed to have been abused by “at least 100 Asian men” before the age of 16, while Sarah Wilson’s phone was

found by her mother to have contained 177 numbers for adult Asian men.

Unfinished business

When many people think of Rotherham, they now think of children. The town’s attempt to rebrand itself this year as the “children’s capital of culture” is not the reason why.

The scandal that unfolded in the town is not over. No police officer or government employee has ever been imprisoned for their misconduct. Investigations into 265 allegations against 47 police officers in the town resulted in eight being found to have a case to answer for misconduct and six for gross misconduct. Of those 14, only five have faced sanctions, ranging from management action to a final written warning. None were fired or jailed.

Justice has not been done, and lessons have not been learned. As one police officer said: “If someone had had the guts to stand up and say ‘I don’t care what colour you are, that’s a child’”, then the scandal might have been averted. It wasn’t.

There are still questions to be answered. The Jay and Casey reports did excellent work on uncovering what happened in this town. There are still questions, however, about the actions of individuals that an inquiry with the ability to compel witnesses to give evidence may be able to dig deeper into.

As the Jay report in particular notes, the abuse in Rotherham was not confined to the town. Instead, children were trafficked from Rotherham to other towns and cities. Some of these cities, such as Bradford, are resistant to the idea of further reports. And until the links between cities and perpetrators are fully unfurled, we will not be able to say we have done everything within our power to end this scandal, or to stop what might be happening now.

No matter how uncomfortable it might make Westminster, Rotherham needs to be revisited.

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