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# THE CONVERSATION

## In Rotherham blame game, media ignores those who did good work

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Rotherham's reputation will now precede it. Lynne Cameron/PA

Rotherham Metropolitan Council has released its independent report on the handling of child sexual exploitation cases in the borough between 1997 and 2013.

The author of the report, Professor Alexis Jay, is an academic and former Chief Social Work Adviser to the Scottish government. Professor Jay has unquestionably produced an important report, which should leave us in no doubt that many young people in Rotherham were sexually exploited, with some also experiencing severe physical and emotional abuse.

Jay also makes clear that there were serious failings on the part of some officials; failings that allowed children to be abused and enabled their abusers to escape justice.

But as important and impressive as this report is, it is insufficiently balanced. In particular, it does not give enough attention to the broader context in which work to address child sexual exploitation (and child sexual abuse and child abuse more generally) is done.

### Facing reality

For example, Professor Jay criticises a council official who had reportedly stated that "agencies need to retain a sense of proportionality with regard to child sexual exploitation, as it only actually accounts for 2.3% of the council's safeguarding work in Rotherham".

The report's response is that "this is not an appropriate message for senior managers to give". But it's hard to see how else managers can be expected to cope in the face of excess demand and deeply inadequate resources. Surely they have to allocate resources according to levels of demand coming from different areas of their work.

She is right to add that child victims of sexual exploitation are at risk of "serious injury and harm" – but so too are many victims of physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect, countless cases of which are known to agencies throughout the country.

Jay also suggests that the police (and other agency workers) did not deal robustly enough with suspects, the large majority of whom were of Pakistani heritage, for fear of being labelled as racists. Many in the media have seized upon this issue, criticising the police for being "too PC" – even though Jay's claims, in fact, are very clearly qualified.

The UK does, though, have a considerable problem with racism, in terms not only of our inter-personal relationships but also in the public sphere – and it is essential that agency workers should strive to ensure that they are not racist in the delivery of their services. Indeed, in the same week that the report came out, all police services in England and Wales agreed to adopt a new code of conduct on the use of "stop and search" procedures. That code was produced to address concerns that stop and search is being applied disproportionately to black and minority ethnic groups.

The police could be forgiven for being totally exasperated – one day accused of being racists, the next of being too politically correct.

## 20-year trend

My main criticisms are, however, directed at the media, large swathes of which have responded to the report with what can only be described as hysteria.

This is part of a trend over the last 10-20 years that has seen the media become ever more concerned with, and involved in, major child protection cases.

In principle, it is only right and proper that this has happened. Press coverage has over the years made a major contribution to child protection in the UK; in just one example, the investigative reporting of The Times's Andrew Norfolk is widely credited with uncovering the "scandals" in Rotherham and elsewhere in the country.

But the media's response to the Rotherham report has been an altogether different matter, and has shown none of the requisite responsibility.

Excessive attention has been paid to the officials who are or were involved in child protection in Rotherham, with some calls for the wholesale dismissal of staff. It is, of course, quite appropriate for the media to scrutinise officials, and anyone found to have been grossly negligent in their work should of course face sanction. But the media seems to be wilfully overlooking the demands of due process and formal justice – precisely the things the perpetrators of the abuse in question escaped.

Much of the coverage also skates blithely over the fact that the bulk of the report's complaints are directed at middle managers, and even more so senior ones. This is reflected in the subsequent anger at former director Sonia Sharp – now running education services in Victoria, Australia – and strategic director Joyce Thacker. But this overlooks the fact that the report singles out a wide range of front line staff for praise - among them residential social workers and voluntary sector youth workers.

## The bigger picture

Most of the post-report furore has brazenly and irresponsibly failed to consider the broader context in which work to address sexual abuse and exploitation is carried out. This is at least touched in the report, but it seems the media was disinclined to take account of the sections that raise it.

The fact is that agencies involved in child protection face a massive and increasingly unmanageable workload. For example, and only last week, the Audit Commission announced that there had been a 12% increase, over the last four years, in the number of children taken into care. This is at the same time as local authorities and other agencies are having to cut back their services as a result of national government austerity measures – and it is an urgent problem.

Besides this, there has been scant effort to appreciate the difficulties agency workers face when they actually go about helping young people involved in or at risk of exploitation and abuse. Many of the children they encounter are not only vulnerable – they can also be extremely challenging to deal with, often as a result of the situations for which they require help in the first place.

While there has been widespread acknowledgement of the trauma the victims of exploitation and other abuse are likely to experience, inadequate attention is paid to the longtime dearth of psychiatric and therapeutic services for these children.

Most gratingly of all, even while rushing to jump on the anti-PC bandwagon, the media has paid no mind to the rife sexism – white and BME alike - that accounts for much of the sexual abuse of children (to say nothing of women) that takes place on a horrifying scale.

So, yes, agency workers should of course be held to account for failings in their practice. But it is essential that we examine all the myriad issues that are involved in responding to the sexual exploitation of children – and even more importantly, that we face up to the things that explain how that exploitation and abuse comes about in the first place.

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*Next, read: Cultures of all kinds let children down in Rotherham*



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