

Independent inquiry CSE in Rotherham - Alexis Jay
(Taxi Elements)

January 2010

Operation Czar began – a joint Police and Children and Young People’s Services investigation involving multiple perpetrators and victims. Abduction notices were made, taxi licences were revoked, but no convictions followed.

January 2011

Operation Chard began, a joint investigation into multiple perpetrators and victims. Arrests and abduction notices were made, and taxi licences were revoked. One case was referred to the Crown Prosecution Service, but the decision was taken not to proceed.

Rotherham Children’s Services were removed from Government intervention.

Barnardo’s ‘Rotherham Practice Review report’, October 2013

Schools raised the alert over the years about children as young as 11, 12 and 13 being picked up outside schools by cars and taxis, given presents and mobile phones and taken to meet large numbers of unknown males in Rotherham, other local towns and cities, and further afield. Typically, children were courted by a young man whom they believed to be their boyfriend. Over a period of time, the child would be introduced to older men who cultivated them and supplied them with gifts, free alcohol and sometimes drugs. Children were initially flattered by the attention paid to them, and impressed by the apparent wealth and sophistication of those grooming them.

It is important to emphasise that even when agencies intervened appropriately to protect and support children and young people, the impact sexual exploitation had on them was absolutely devastating. Time and again we read in the files and other documents of children being violently raped, beaten, forced to perform sex acts in taxis and cars when they were being trafficked between towns, and serially abused by large numbers of men. Many children repeatedly self-harmed and some became suicidal. They suffered family breakdown and some became homeless. Several years after they had been abused, a disproportionate number were victims of domestic violence, had developed long-standing drug and alcohol addiction, and had parenting difficulties with their own children, resulting in child protection/children in need interventions. Some suffered post-traumatic stress and other emotional and psychological problems, often undiagnosed and untreated. Some experienced mental health problems.

Taxis and Licensing

One of the common threads running through child sexual exploitation across England has been the prominent role of taxi drivers in being directly linked to children who were abused. This was the case in Rotherham from a very early stage, when residential care home heads met in the nineties to share intelligence about taxis and other cars which picked up girls from outside their units. In the early 2000s some secondary school heads were reporting girls being picked up at lunchtime at the school gates and being taken away to provide oral sex to men in the lunch break.

A diagram and backing papers supplied to the Police in 2001 by Risky Business linked alleged perpetrators with victims, taxi companies and individual drivers.

In the Borough at present there are 1200-1300 licensed taxi drivers, though they may not all be active. There are also well over 100 licensed taxi operators. The licensing of the vehicles and drivers is the responsibility of the local authority. There are statutory tests that must be complied with before a driver licence may be granted. The primary concern is for the 'fit and proper' test of the individual, although there is no legal definition of what this means. In Rotherham, applicants are obliged to obtain an enhanced disclosure from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). The DBS check uses the same Police National Computer (PNC) information as the standard check but also includes a check of police intelligence records held locally. Any information held locally can at the discretion of the Chief Officer of Police be disclosed on the certificate.

The occupation of 'taxi driver' is a notifiable occupation. If a taxi driver is arrested or charged or convicted or is the subject of an investigation then the Licensing Authority is informed. The Licensing Authority may immediately suspend or revoke the licence if it is in the interests of public safety to do so. In 2010, the Council decided to locate all matters of temporary suspension with the relevant director, rather than with a less senior member of staff.

The Responsible Authorities' meetings in Rotherham were introduced in 2006 to share and discuss matters in relation to licensed premises such as late night takeaways, but they were later extended to include other matters related to licensing such as taxi and private hire licensing and safeguarding issues. Taxis are a standing item on the meeting's agenda. They are now held once every eight weeks with members including the Police, Fire, Child Safeguarding, Public Health and others. In March 2005, the Council's Task and Finish Group on CSE asked that discussions take place about safe travel, though there is no record of what specific actions followed. In June 2008 the Safeguarding Board learned that work had started involving taxi drivers and licensed premises as part of the preventive agenda by encouraging recognition and referral of young people thought to be at risk of sexual exploitation.

The Safeguarding Unit convened Strategy meetings from time to time on allegations involving taxi drivers. We read some of the most serious, from 2010, and were struck by the sense of exasperation, even hopelessness, recorded as the professionals in attendance tried to find ways of disrupting the suspected activity. Strategy meetings about one specific taxi firm had been held on four occasions in a seven week period. The minutes of one meeting record a total of ten girls and young women, three of whom were involved in three separate incidents of alleged attempted abduction by taxi drivers. The seven other girls had alleged that they were being sexually exploited in exchange for free taxi rides and goods. Two of the girls involved were looked after children. The Licensing Enforcement Officer took the step of formally writing to the Police following the incidents of alleged attempted abductions by

drivers, complaining about the Police failure to act. In one incident, a driver accosted a 13-year-old girl. She refused to do what he asked and reported this to her parents who followed the taxi through the town, where they managed to identify the driver and dialled 999 for assistance. According to the Licensing Enforcement Officer, the Police did not attend until later and took no action. In his email to the Police he stated that 'a simple check would have revealed that the driver had been arrested a week previously in Bradford for a successful kidnapping of a lone female.' He concluded by acknowledging that police priorities were not the same as Licensing, but he 'should not be holding this together on his own'.

A further issue of safeguarding concerned those taxi firms which had a contract with the Council to transport some of the most vulnerable children to various resources within the authority. Some of the Council's difficulty was that they did not always have the drivers' names when allegations were made. Nor did they have a list of the drivers who transported children as part of the Council contract.

Following a review undertaken in 2012, the Council's Housing and Neighbourhood Services developed a formal procedure for the referral and communication of concerns about the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults. This replaced a more informal arrangement. A plan for child safeguarding training for taxi drivers has also been put together with Sheffield City Council. Once finalised, it is intended that the training package will be delivered to all new applicants in Rotherham. This will be mandatory as part of the application process, and the existing drivers will be targeted in a phased way. The Council has also produced a 'Taxi Driver's Handbook', which includes CSE and safeguarding issues.

We were advised that four CSE related cases of taxi drivers had resulted in revocation of licence since 2009. They worked for four different companies. In one instance, the driver was arrested for sexual offences and supplying a controlled drug to a 15 year old girl. The CPS decided not to charge him, due to the perceived unreliability of one of the prosecution witnesses and the driver requested that the immediate suspension of his licence be lifted. However, the Licensing Board fully revoked the suspended driver licence. Council licensing staff described their relations with the taxi trade as being 'very difficult' on occasions, but they had always taken the right course of action on safeguarding issues. They worked closely with the Police, mostly on 'soft' intelligence, since written information tended to be much blander.

In a number of different meetings, the Inquiry talked to 24 young people, aged 14-25, who lived in the Council area. One of the main items for discussion with them was safe transport. When asked about taxis, there was an immediate and consistent response from the young women and men on every occasion. All avoided the use of taxis if at all possible. Their parents and partners strongly discouraged, even forbade, them from being on their own at night in a taxi, unless it was a company they personally knew. The girls described how on occasions they would be taken on the longest, darkest route home. One said the driver's

first question would be 'How old are you, love?'. All talked about the content of their conversation quickly turning flirtatious or suggestive, including references to sex.

All the young people we met preferred to use the bus, despite their nervousness and dislike of the Rotherham Interchange, which they described as attracting drug dealers, addicts and people involved in a range of criminal activity. Many of these people congregated outside the Bus Station. The young people described their sense of intimidation and 'running the gauntlet' to get to their buses.

The use of limousines for purposes of sexual exploitation was raised by a number of people as a historic and current issue. It was also discussed at the Safeguarding Board in 2011. Such vehicles with more than 8 seats are nationally regulated by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency. In Rotherham, they have recently been seen waiting for young girls outside school gates. The Police have targeted limousine companies as part of organised operations to prevent sexual exploitation.