

# Adjournment debate 23<sup>rd</sup> October – The Sexual and Criminal exploitation of children missing from care

**Ann Coffey MP**

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I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Sexual and Criminal Exploitation of missing looked after children.

In 2012 an Expert Working Group was set up by the DFE by the then children's minister the hon member for East Worthing and Shoreham to look at amongst other issues out of area placements of children because of the high numbers of looked after children in children's homes going missing and concerns about their vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

This was partly in response to the 2012 inquiry by the APPG on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, supported by the Childrens Society and Missing People.

The Expert Group had, as one of its objectives, to make recommendations that would improve the care system so that children – and I quote - “are safer and better cared for in residential care, not disproportionately at risk of exploitation because of their vulnerability”.

The Group stated that placements should be “close to home unless it is in the best interests of the child to be placed out of area”.

A market analysis of the children's homes market was commissioned.

At that time more than 50% of homes were concentrated in 3 regions – the North West, West Midlands and the South East - with 25% of all children's homes in the North West and just 6% in London.

This meant that there was an under supply of places in some areas and an oversupply in others and the consequence was an unnecessary level of out of area placements. One of the issues identified with children placed out of area was the difficulty in social workers being able to provide necessary levels of support.

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In short, children with high levels of need were left isolated in children's homes miles away from family, friends and social workers and targets for paedophiles and criminal County Lines gangs.

In September 2012 of the children's homes registered with Ofsted 26% were run by local authorities and 65 per cent were run by private companies.

The report expressed concern about the market being taken over by larger providers. They said that if the concern about the under and oversupply in the market was not addressed then children would continue to be placed at a distance from their home communities. They recommended a reduction in the number of out of area placements and added that those which result in children being placed at very long distances should be exceptional and always justified explicitly in terms of the best interest of the child.

**The Expert group recommended that national and regional information on the structure of the children's residential care market needs to be improved. This should be used to determine a medium-term market strategy at regional and national levels.**

**This report is now 7 years old.**

Over the intervening years there have been commitments from successive ministers to reduce the level of out of area placements and yet the numbers continue to soar.

Our most recent report "No Place at Home" was published last month.

We found 77 % increase in the number of children placed in out of area placements since 2012 – numbers are now at an all-time high.

The majority of the 41 police forces who gave evidence to our inquiry were adamant that placing children out of area increased their risks of exploitation and very often resulted in them going missing.

75 per cent of all children's homes are run by private companies – a 23 per cent increase since 2012. Local authorities now run 19 per cent of children's homes - a decrease of 26 per cent since 2012. According to Ofsted there were 47 local authorities – one third - who did not run any children's homes in 2019.

Given the increasing dominance of the private sector, the APPG recommended that Ofsted should have the same powers in relation to children's homes as the CQC has for nursing and care homes.

The North West, West Midlands and South East remain the three largest regions – accounting for 55 per cent of all children's homes. There continues to be issues of over and under supply. 80% of local authorities now place children outside their area.

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There has been an increase in the number of children coming into care and an increase in the numbers of children's homes.

However, it is not clear that this means in practice that there are actually more places to meet the needs of children. Many of the children being placed in homes would previously have been placed in mental health provision or secure accommodation if that had been available. Homes may manage children with increasingly complex needs by reducing bed occupancy.

This also means providers can pick and choose. We took evidence in our latest 'No Place at Home' inquiry that one local authority had to try 150 providers for suitable accommodation for a vulnerable 15-year-old boy.

We have also heard that up to 25 children can be competing for a place at any one time. The children go on a waiting list and they often end up in crisis and short-term placements because none of the registered providers are willing or able to offer places. These can be children with the greatest needs.

In the future more children are likely to be placed in unregulated and registered short term accommodation placements because of the pressure on children's homes places. Lets be clear that means that those children's care needs will not be being met.

I entirely accept that some children need to be placed out of their area because it is in their best interests but evidence to our inquiry suggested that the overwhelming reason that children are placed out of area is because it is the only place that can be found for that child.

When I announced I was doing this debate I received many comments on Twitter from practitioners who said the system was broken.

One from the National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers said: "It'll need money, more importantly a whole sale rethink of the care system, trying to find residential placements for young people is often 'any port in a storm.'"

The fact that distribution has not changed, together with pressure on places, explains the inevitable rise in out of area placements.

### **Missing**

Our No Place at Home report focused on the risks faced by children who go missing from care.

There has been a 97% rise in the number of reported missing incidents of children from children's homes since 2015. The number of children missing from out of area placements has more than doubled since 2015 and about a third of children in unregulated provision went missing in 2018.

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We heard that record numbers of ‘out of area’ children are repeatedly going missing. The inquiry heard evidence about the trauma and emotional impact that being sent away can have on children who have already suffered neglect and trauma. Moving children to unknown and unfamiliar placements, particularly at short notice, causes anxiety, distress, fear and anger and causes further trauma to children with short- and long-term impact. The reaction of many is to go missing enticed by those who have targeted them for exploitation.

Research by Missing People in June, which looked at nearly 600 missing episodes involving more than 200 missing children, found that one in seven of the children had been sexually exploited and one in ten had been a victim of criminal or other forms of exploitation while missing.

There is an issue about the take up of return home interviews which can be an invaluable source of information about further risk to that child and other children when they go missing.

Research by The Children’s Society, found on average just 50% of missing episodes resulted in return home interviews taking place, despite it being a statutory requirement on local authorities to offer them each time a child goes missing. This meant the opportunities to safeguard children were being missed.

70 per cent of the 42 police forces who gave evidence to our inquiry were adamant that placing children out of area increased their chances of exploitation and the likelihood of going missing.

The Howard League told our inquiry that children are sometimes being placed out-of-area to protect them from exploiters. Whilst this is often being done with the best of intentions and, sometimes, successfully there are considerable concerns around this practice.

The Howard League said: “For example, criminals are increasingly controlling children using social media, whose reach extends wherever children go; criminals are controlling children through threats to family members and siblings, which means removing the child from a location isn’t resolving the problem and could be making it worse; children who are being exploited may be used to groom and exploit children in their new location; children who are in an out-of-area placements are separated from their families and support networks and therefore more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.”

We received evidence that county lines gangs have been sent to areas where young people are predominantly placed out of area to scout new ‘opportunities’ where they can develop ‘business’ and recruit new members.

The individual experiences recounted by children to the inquiry were a salutary reminder of the misery experienced by some children in care. One girl told the

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inquiry she had run away 100 times since being moved out of her home area. Another boy tried to hang himself on Christmas day and another girl walked ten miles home to see her mum. This is the reality behind the statistics.

The increasing numbers of children going missing is a protest by those children who feel that the social care system does not care for them. It's the only protest they can make.

### **UNREGULATED**

One area of increasing concern we raised in our report was the rise in numbers of older children, aged 16 plus, being sent to live in unregulated semi-independent accommodation – a shady twilight world.

Eighty per cent of the 41 police forces who gave evidence to our inquiry expressed concern about the increasing numbers in these unregulated establishments. They are 'off radar' because, unlike children's homes they are not registered or inspected.

More than 5,000 looked after children in England are living in unregulated accommodation, up 70 per cent from ten years ago. This is accommodation that is not registered by Ofsted because it does not provide care, although it is difficult to imagine under what circumstances a vulnerable 16 or 17-year-old would not require care as well as support.

The police gave us many examples of inappropriate and dangerous placements in unregulated homes.

They included a young person bailed for murder being placed into the same semi-independent accommodation as a child victim of trafficking, who was immediately recruited to sell drugs in County Lines gangs.

Also, a boy sent to live more than 50 miles from his home area where he began drug running and committing crime. He was returned to his home area and he took children from his new area back home to involve them in County Lines because they were unknown to the police.

Other examples included, a girl who had been sexually exploited who was housed alongside a perpetrator of sexual exploitation and another a young girl victim of CSE who was moved some distance from home and was then targeted by a local Organised Crime Group.

We should also not forget the impact that unregulated accommodation, in which young people are not properly supervised and become involved in criminal activity, can have on the surrounding neighbourhood.

After our report was published, I was contacted by a mother in Greater Manchester who said she had had "devastating experience" of the consequences of unregulated accommodation.

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Her two daughters were attacked as they walked home by a group of older boys who were living in an unregulated home in their neighbourhood. This was a very serious attack. Local residents had been reporting incidents of anti-social behaviour sexual harassment criminal activity and drug taking in and around the accommodation for about six months.

If the home had been regulated there would have been a process by which it could have been closed down by Ofsted - but it continues to operate today.

There are some very good providers but equally there are some very poor providers who should not be let anywhere near a vulnerable young person.

One police force told us: “Where there are areas of high deprivation these will always present opportunities for potential unscrupulous organisations to set up ‘pop up’ children’s homes with little or no regulation, where the housing market is much cheaper heightening the risk of the most vulnerable of children being exploited.”

I have been made aware recently that there may be connections between organised crime gangs and providers of unregulated accommodation. It would be a logical extension of their business model, gaining profit on the one hand from providing accommodation and at the same time having access to young people who they can exploit to sell drugs.

Our report called for a regulatory framework that could ensure national standards including checks on the suitability of providers and the qualifications of staff supporting young people.

This is becoming urgent as children under 16 are being placed in unregulated accommodation.

There are of course extremely good providers and very diligent social workers, but unregulated care is wide open to abuse, and all the evidence is that that abuse is happening.

### **Conclusion**

Over the years there have been many improvements in data sharing, guidance, notifications, multi –agency partnership work, in understanding child sexual and criminal exploitation and the grooming process itself.

Attitudes to children have changed and the term ‘child prostitute’ has been replaced in law with sexually exploited child and there is increasing understanding that young people can be groomed into criminal and County Lines gangs. This is reflected in the increase in the numbers of children accepted onto the National Referral Mechanism as victims of criminal exploitation.

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I would like to say that there is some excellent provision in both the private and voluntary sector and local authority children's homes and pay tribute to the people who work in residential care homes with the most challenging young people.

The impact of government cuts has had a devastating effect on children's social care, and we are asking social workers to safeguard children in the most difficult of circumstances often without the resources they need. An important part of providing resources is ensuring that there is sufficient residential provision to meet the needs of children we take into our care. That is not happening.

We talk a lot about the voice of the child and how that should be at the heart of what we do. But you cannot have the voice of the child at the heart of decisions when you have no options to offer that child.

The children's homes market is not providing a sufficiency of placements to meet the needs of children we take into care. There is widespread agreement and evidence that this is the case. It is a failing, broken market.

Until that is sorted out, then we will continue to have care provision that is unsafe for some children and fail in our responsibilities to the children who need us most.

Urgent action is now needed.

The main recommendation of our new APPG report echoed the recommendation made by the Expert Working Group in 2012.

We recommended that the Department for Education should develop an Emergency Action Plan to significantly reduce the number of out of area placements. The Government must take responsibility for ensuring that there are sufficient local placements to meet the needs of looked after children. This plan should address the supply and the distribution of children's homes nationally, and the use of unregulated semi-independent provision. It should be backed by funding.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure a sufficiency of school places to meet the needs of children in their area. The DFE provides capital funding and investment so that they can meet their statutory responsibility.

The DFE could equally provide the investment and capital funding to ensure that there is a sufficiency of local places to meet children's needs, working with local authorities and private and voluntary providers.

Section 22G of the Children Act 1989 places a duty on local authorities to take strategic action by requiring them to secure sufficient accommodation within their area which meets the needs of their looked after children, so far as reasonably practicable (the sufficiency duty).

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Where private providers are unwilling, as they have been in the past, to run children's homes in certain regions of the country then local authorities should be encouraged to develop their own direct provision.

There is no way forward without the DFE taking leadership and responsibility for this.

We do not need more working parties, we do not need more reports. There is a wide consensus among practitioners, professionals and children with experience of the care system, that the children's home market is failing children and that urgent action is needed.

Warm words are not enough; better data sharing is not enough; more awareness is not enough

None of this is enough if we cannot provide sufficient good care placements to meet the needs of children, who have been failed by close adults in their life and are now being failed by a care system that cannot keep them safe and leaves them wide open to criminal and sexual exploitation.